“What Rough Beast”: The Evolution of Cormac McCarthy’s “Prophet of Destruction”

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The character finally named as the “prophet of destruction” in *No Country for Old Men*, is present from the very beginning of Cormac McCarthy’s writing, and his malevolent presence, in a variety of forms and strengths, recruits men to destructive acts and leads them to self-destruction over and over again as the novels progress. McCarthy’s myth-making is on a cosmic scale, conjuring an entire world presided over by a god of destruction for whom good is not a concept. His ten novels each present some aspect of the prophet and the determinist universe he represents, and tests that universe against a variety of potential heroes. In the end, for there to be any hope at all, the prophet must be victorious and burn the world down. Only from its ashes can a new prophet, one of creation, rise.

McCarthy is not only a member of long and richly varied literary history, but also a singular phenomenon with his own history of ideas, a claim that both his biography and his work thus far corroborate. Echoes of Yeats’ beast “slouching toward Bethlehem” inform the McCarthy canon from its inception, birthing the prophet of destruction in the process and envisioning an arc of destruction that begins with the *Orchard Keeper* and ends with *The Road*. For McCarthy, temporality is not just a helix, but a widening gyre, a spiral rapidly losing coherence.

For McCarthy, we begin with destruction, witnessing its prophet’s slow rise, recognizing its culmination in the superhuman giant of Judge Holden, and watching it subside again into humanity, to eventually end in apocalypse. If there is hope in McCarthy, it is most often felt by its marked absence, but as Steven Frye insists, it is there nonetheless, and in the final pages of
McCarthy’s tenth novel do we finally feel the ascendancy of the prophet of creation, the second half of the cycle beginning. Hope paired with despair, a sense of human worth and dignity in the face of nearly unimaginable depravity, all roped into a system slowly losing its integrity, is pure McCarthy.
This dissertation by Erica Brown Steakley fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in English approved by Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., as Director, and by Glen Johnson, Ph.D., and Pamela Ward, Ph.D. as Readers.

Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., Director

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For Clay and Dot, with gratitude and love. Thank you for your encouragement, patience, and unflagging faith in me. I couldn’t have done it without you.
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Introduction: The Widening Gyre

Very quickly into a first reading of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, it becomes clear that we have walked into something momentous. We feel the cosmological weight of the book long before we can begin to articulate it, and perhaps that is what prompts us to keep reading past its horrors, and figuring out just what is at work in this text that has kept scholars writing and puzzling for more than 25 years. The book is about America, yes, and the Vietnam War, and the myth of Manifest Destiny and its requisite injustices of appropriation and genocide, but it is much more than even these huge ideas. It questions our beliefs about what it means to be human and about why the universe itself is here at all, much less with us in it. It is myth-making writ large, and bloody, across the page. As McCarthy’s first major success and most critically acclaimed novel, it makes sense to root our investigation here, where a uniquely McCarthy villain is at the height of his power. From this vantage point, we can look down and back to McCarthy’s first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, and then down and forward to his most recent novel, *The Road*, and witness an evolutionary arc tracing the rise and fall of this prophet figure, named as the “prophet of destruction” in *No Country for Old Men*, and with him the rise and fall of McCarthy’s particular deterministic universe.

The prophet of destruction is present from the very beginning of McCarthy’s writing, and his malevolent presence, in a variety of forms and strengths, recruits men to destructive acts and leads them to self-destruction over and over again as the novels progress. McCarthy’s myth-making is on a cosmic scale, conjuring an entire world presided over by a god for whom good is not a concept. McCarthy’s readers watch this world evolve and consume itself as they move through his canon. Many scholars have traced various thematic, religious, social, political and
generic threads through McCarthy’s works, but none has yet tackled the novels as a structural whole, a grand experiment testing the merit of the human enterprise.

To build the structure of McCarthy’s universe, we turn to McCarthy’s interest in the work of W.B. Yeats. His poem “The Second Coming” resonates throughout McCarthy’s work, the “rough beast” “moving its slow thighs” out of a “waste of desert sand” “toward Bethlehem to be born” an apt metaphor for the prophet of destruction (13-22). If ever such a beast took literary form, surely it is Judge Holden of Blood Meridian, and looking back down his trail through the desert, we see McCarthy’s prophet rising from his earliest works to the judge’s zenith. In that “widening gyre” (1) of the same poem we can also find a shape for McCarthy’s conception of cosmogony and eschatology. Underpinning McCarthy’s universe is an understanding of time as neither linear nor circular, but rather a helical temporality, each circuit of which carves a version of the universe, before cycling around again for a broader, looser historical revision.

Germanic mythology has a similar understanding of time, explained metaphorically by Yggdrasil, the tree of the world, which soaks up life-giving water (comprised of the actions of men and gods) through its roots and rains the water down upon all life forms to maintain the life force of the universe. Each cycle of water to root to branch to rain is the same, and yet each time the water is distributed in a slightly different pattern. This gives time both circular and linear components, so that it can be imagined as a helix, or coil (Bauschatz 122-3). The only difference between this and the concept of the gyre is that the spiral’s shape changes from cylinder to cone, so that each revolution spreads wider, with the implication that at some critical moment internal coherence will be compromised (see Figure 1).
Once the structure of time is compromised, “the center cannot hold,” (3) and Yggdrasil’s water will run dry, perhaps as dry as a Western desert. When this happens, “the end of the created worlds,” in Germanic myth called Ragnarok, begins (Bauschatz 142).

Dennis Sansom, Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Samford University, reads *Blood Meridian* as critique of divine determinism, showing the folly in belief in a God who is “absolutely sovereign over everything” and therefore the “omni-causal agent of everything” (4). Such a view, Sansom argues, negates the possibility of moral action and renders the concept of good and evil irrelevant, for everything that happens, including war, is the divine will of God. In such a universe, the judge would be a holy man, a concept we recoil from instinctively. And yet this is the world of *Blood Meridian*. As the judge himself says, “…war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that
larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (Blood Meridian 249). In the determinist universe of the novel, Sansom says, the “highest expression of human evolution…is the bloodshed of war—hence blood meridian” (7). And at this highest point sits Judge Holden: war’s perfect executor, destruction’s most powerful lieutenant, prophet, and recruiter. Good and evil have no meaning, but contention between opposite sides is still required.

We can return to Yggdrasil for help here and look at the three maidens that maintain the wells at its roots: Urth (what was), Verthandi (what is) and Skuld (what shall be) (Bauschatz 8). We oversimplify if we read McCarthy’s divine determinism as simple fate, ourselves locked into a path of destruction from which we cannot stray. A richer, more apt analogy is the Germanic “wyrd” as represented by the never-ending, ever-changing cycle of the tree. The three maidens write man’s destiny, but he is required to make choices along the way. The end destination is the same, but the protagonist’s participation in his own destruction is required. This is active, rather than passive, fate, and it marks the protagonist as architect of, and therefore guilty of, his own destruction. McCarthy does not put men into a maze like rats; he makes his characters design and construct their own maze, and then burn it down. It is battle for its own sake, revealed here as the most sacred act, the purpose and action of life everywhere. Anton Chigurh illustrates this point quite clearly near the end of No Country for Old Men: “Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased” (259). This reveals humans as the artists of the shape of their lives. In no way can we avoid our eventual end, and yet paradoxically, we voluntarily build the path that brings us to it.
At this point, several ideas coalesce: Yeats' gyre and “rough beast,” the active moral negation that is McCarthy determinism, and the prophet of destruction. Imagine an arc, one half of one circuit of that mythical gyre that traces McCarthy’s universe, at the pinnacle, or meridian, of which is the glory of Judge Holden as the prophet in his fullest expression of physical, spiritual, and supernatural power. This arc describes the evolution of the prophet himself through the McCarthy canon, illustrated like this:

![Figure 2: Arc of Destruction](image)

What happens at the end of the arc, at the end of the world? Ragnarok. Armageddon. What happens after Armageddon? *The Road*. Where Christian theology fails us is the word “postapocalyptic.” The end of the world should also result in the end of time, there should be no possibility of “post,” of time after the final apocalypse, but for McCarthy, there is. Like the Norse, his gods rise again. If we as readers can stick with McCarthy through his nine pre-*Road*
novels, with *Blood Meridian* at their center, he will finally give us some hope. That hope has to come after the end of Western civilization foretold in *Blood Meridian*, but once the prophet of destruction has completed his work in the hearts of men, the prophet of creation, the child of *The Road*, can begin his ascent.

The danger of reading McCarthy’s extant novels as a whole is clear, as we risk imposing our own wishes on the canon, and yet scholars continue to make a case for the coherence of the novels thematically. To some, it may seem a stretch to pair Yeats with Germanic myth in search of a suitable definition of McCarthy, but such reaches and pairings are part and parcel of the McCarthy literary enterprise. McCarthy has gratified and frustrated scholars, sometimes in the same sentence, by simultaneously embracing and rejecting the tenets of just about any literary genre you can throw at him.

McCarthy’s fiction functions outside traditional modes of human understanding and in many respects, McCarthy’s work is as resistant to literary classification as it is to literary interpretation. His early work was claimed by critics as Southern Gothic, with McCarthy himself as the heir apparent to William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor. When his setting shifted to the American Southwest and Mexico in *Blood Meridian* and the *Border Trilogy*, critics tagged him as a Western writer, and Dana Phillips goes so far as to expand “Western” to include “not just the Wild West but Western culture as a whole, especially its philosophical heritage” and adds Dostoevsky and Conrad to his progenitors (435). David Holloway claims McCarthy as a late Modernist and many critics have recognized his affinities with postmodern writers as well. Influences range from early Christian allegory through to contemporary dystopian fiction, with
McCarthy borrowing what’s useful and upending what’s not from Shakespeare, de Troyes, Melville, London, and Orville, just to name a few.

Perhaps one of the most promising critical arguments for McCarthy’s antecedents comes from Barclay Owens, who claims McCarthy, at least in his western novels, as a literary naturalist following a line directly from Crane, Dreiser, and London through to postmodernists such as DeLillo, Bellow, and Mailer (45). Owens’ theory is seductive, because it seems to provide a box that we can put McCarthy in. He offers a series of characteristics of both turn-of-the-century and contemporary naturalism: “A Darwinian worldview emphasizing ... random acts in an uncaring universe.” Check. “Regionally and historically accurate speech and details.” Check. “Amoral, arrogant characters ... in ironic, absurd circumstances.” Check. “Comic, grotesque images of wounded or misshapen humanity.” Check. “Pessimistic determination in nineteenth-century ... [or] pessimistic uncertainty in contemporary naturalism” (45-46). Here’s where we get unexpectedly stumped. The experience of reading McCarthy, despite all its horror, is not pessimistic. It’s strangely satisfying, even euphoric. It has the shape of naturalism only, not the verdict. McCarthy doesn’t appear to like boxes.

What are we to make of all these conflicting, complementary, and overlapping classifications? The problem here is not that McCarthy doesn’t fit neatly into any one literary genre or movement, but rather that he fits quite easily into all of them. Examining McCarthy against the history of ideas and literary history specifically is a daunting task, because we can find him everywhere, and risk overlooking the essential McCarthy in the process. I argue here for an examination of McCarthy not only as a member of long and richly varied literary history, but also as a singular phenomenon with his own history of ideas, a claim that both his biography
and his work thus far corroborate. In some ways, viewing McCarthy as his own genre, sidestepping other camps, will put him in the perspective that will sit best with critics and readers alike.

The McCarthy canon is a product of its own evolution, informed by a fundamental need to question the assumptions of Western civilization in particular and humanity’s assumption of its own superiority in general. From the beginning looking forward, all is deterministic darkness, but from the tenth novel looking back, shape emerges.

As McCarthy’s novels march westward over their publication history, so does Western civilization, rapidly consuming itself, goaded on by the prophet of destruction. If the arc of destruction’s direction is westward, then the cycle of rebirth should travel east, as do the man and boy of *The Road*. Geographically, McCarthy returns to his starting point in Tennessee and then travels east.¹ Will a new world rise from the ashes? The prospects look dim, certainly, but perhaps the gyre will hold just a little longer.

It is not only possible, but likely, that echoes of that beast “slouching toward Bethlehem” inform the McCarthy canon from its inception, birthing the prophet of destruction in the process and envisioning an arc of destruction that begins with the *Orchard Keeper* and ends with *The Road*. For McCarthy, temporality is not just a helix, but a widening gyre, a spiral rapidly losing coherence. In any number of religious dualities we can find paired opposites: yin/yang, light/dark, sun/moon, earth/heaven, god/devil. These pairs, yoked painfully together, make the two halves of a cycle representing creation and destruction. For McCarthy, we begin with destruction, witnessing its prophet’s slow rise, recognizing its culmination in the superhuman

¹ Ryan J. Coleman’s “Flex Map of The Road” suggests that the endpoint of the pair’s journey is actually Hilton Head Island: http://www.flexiblemaps.com/TheRoad.html
giant of Judge Holden, and watching it subside again into humanity, to eventually end in
apocalypse. If there is hope in McCarthy, it is most often felt by its marked absence, but as
Steven Frye insists, it is there nonetheless, and in the final pages of McCarthy’s tenth novel do
we finally feel the ascendancy of the prophet of creation, the second half of the cycle beginning.
Hope paired with despair, a sense of human worth and dignity in the face of nearly unimaginable
depravity, all roped into a system slowly losing its integrity, is pure McCarthy.
Chapter One: *The Orchard Keeper*, or
“Not knowin a thing aint never made it not so.”

Vereen M. Bell’s *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988) still provides some of the most insightful criticism of McCarthy’s early work, primarily because the discussion is not yet filtered through the stark and violent Western world of McCarthy’s later novels. While recognition of the prophet of destruction character would likely not have been possible without the introduction of *Blood Meridian*’s Judge Holden, the fact is that McCarthy’s Appalachian works tend to be eclipsed by the stunning brutality of the later book. The shockwave that is *Blood Meridian* requires us to go back in time before it took center stage to Bell’s seminal work in order to see the first novels clearly. In his analysis of *The Orchard Keeper*, Bell identifies an intellectual construct essential to understanding McCarthy’s fiction: “By Jamesian standards, *The Orchard Keeper* is a shambles. There is no ruling point of view, since there are not, by modernist standards, any thinking characters” (11). The only qualification that needs to be made is that there are no thinking protagonists; the antagonist is a different story altogether.

One of Bell’s most useful observations precedes his book-length study in his 1983 article “The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy.” He describes the nature of McCarthy’s world, in which “we are required to … rediscover some primal state of consciousness prior to its becoming identified with thinking only” (31). Thinking, and the making and processing of meaning, are not privileged activities for McCarthy’s protagonists, who are generally incapable of or willfully choose to avoid active thought. The three protagonists in *The Orchard Keeper* are loners, functioning outside traditional constructs with limited skill in or need for sophisticated intellectual maneuvers. McCarthy’s antagonist prophet figure, on the other hand, often shows high intelligence, but shields those internal processes from us. McCarthy’s first prophet, Kenneth
Rattner, begins to establish the patterns later prophets will take up, augment, and extend to their furthest possibilities. McCarthy’s first novel also test drives three different models of protagonist – the noble but removed old man, the debauched and amoral middle-aged man, and the determined yet ignorant young boy. Aspects of all of these protagonists resurface in the canon, with the prophet in his various incarnations there to ruin every one of them. While recognizably more human, Rattner is similar in many ways to the shadowy triune that haunts McCarthy’s second novel, *Outer Dark*. Rattner determines how to be in the right place at the right time, and guides his three unwitting acolytes downward through their own acts of useless violence into their eventual ruin. This first novel introduces several attributes shared by the various prophets: the ability to appear suddenly and without logical explanation, to exhibit inaccessible and inhuman behaviors, to perform acts of unmotivated cruelty, and to manipulate those in their company.

The first of Rattner’s recognizably prophetic traits is his ability to outmaneuver the protagonists in eerie and super-natural ways. While he provokes his own murder in the first 40 pages, he also skillfully manipulates his murderer prior to his death, and tangentially stays connected with him for the remainder of the man’s life. The deck is clearly stacked against the protagonist, a point McCarthy makes clear. Rattner is the first character introduced in the novel, and we see right away that he is volatile, as he curses the cars which refuse to stop as he attempts to hitchhike. He is also a skillful liar: when he’s nearly caught shoplifting in a wayside grocery store, he deflects attention from his true actions by pretending to be looking for a particular kind of tire pump that he invents for the purpose. And he is brutal: leaving the store, he bums a ride with a kindly stranger, hoping to get a ride to Atlanta to visit a fictional daughter in the hospital.
When the driver says he’s going as far as Austell, a town 17 miles short of Atlanta, readers familiar with *No Country for Old Men* may recognize a sickening similarity to Anton Chigurh in what happens next. After a break in the text, the next line begins “Coming into Atlanta” (10), which gives the reader the distinct feeling that something bad has happened to the man who picked Rattner up. We also circuitously learn the antagonist’s identity: “Had he been asked his name he might have given any but Kenneth Rattner, which was his name” (10). We later see him scatter the contents of a wallet not his own as he makes his way to a roadside bar, discarding the remaining unusable bits of the luckless good Samaritan.

Rattner is a schemer who uses other people’s misfortune for his own gain and, in the process, abandons his family. At the beginning of the book we meet him on the road a year after an unexpected windfall had enabled him to leave his new home of Red Branch, to which he has recently moved from Maryville, Tennessee, with his wife and son. In an unforgettable scene at the Green Fly Inn, the derelict bar’s porch detaches itself and falls into the gorge below it. Rattner, himself a victim, plunders the pockets of pants ripped off of the desperately hanging drunks by their neighbors as they fall into the pit. Wily enough to see an opportunity when it presents itself, and unencumbered by the morals that would prevent better men from such an action, Rattner makes off with the money and uses it to skip town.

**The Unwitting Murderer: Marion Sylder**

Not only does Rattner think in complex ways, he also understands how his society functions. David Paul Ragan points out the shrewd way in which Rattner chooses which car to climb into outside the Atlanta barroom:

> Though Rattner does not participate in the social structure, he understands its values and exploits them for his benefit alone. Indeed, he relies on the ties of the
locale – the assumption that anyone from “back home” will be glad to offer him assistance – to wheedle his ride in Sylder’s car. (20)

Rattner chooses Marion Sylder, the first of the novel’s protagonists and a fellow resident of Red Branch, who has lost his job and taken a long drive to work off his anger. While we are allowed some foreknowledge of Rattner before he meets up with Sylder, his appearance is a shock to Sylder himself. Rattner seems to simply materialize behind the wheel of the car:

By the phosphorous glow, more like an emanation from the man’s face than from the domelight, Sylder froze, his hand batting at the air stirred by the outflung door. The face stared at him with an expression bland and meaningless and Syder groped for some, not cause or explanation, but mere association with rational experience by which he could comprehend a man sitting in his car as if conjured there simultaneously with the flick of light by the very act of opening the door. (33)

Like Rattner, McCarthy’s prophets typically appear out of nowhere, unexplained, thereby unsettling their victims. And their relationship to those they come in contact with, as Sylder senses here, has no “cause or explanation,” but rather is associative. Sylder simply happens to be momentarily useful to Rattner; deeper level connections are unnecessary. McCarthy’s plots often unfold in this way, as do the stories of the three protagonists in The Orchard Keeper.

Sylder essentially functions outside the boundaries of society, in that “primal state of consciousness” Bell identifies. He’s a schemer, rather than a thinker, and is driven primarily by his survival instincts, rather than social mores or a moral code. His mental processes are rooted in self-preservation and gain, regarding introspection or philosophical questions as unprofitable. He does not adapt to society’s expectations, a fact that has caused him to be fired from his job for starting a fight, but will also allow him later to build a successful career for himself as a whiskey runner. Sylder’s reaction to Rattner is naturally pre-rational and gut-level, prompted by something more akin to the instincts of a cornered animal than the workings of intellect: “It was
not presentiment that warned Sylder to get shed of his guest but a profound and unshakable knowledge of the presence of evil, of being for a certainty called upon to defend at least his property from the man already installed beneath his steering wheel” (33). Sylder’s certainty is absolute, and absolutely at odds with the outward appearance of Rattner, who calls him “old buddy” and in a “tone cloying,” wheedles a ride from a fellow hometown boy (33). Sylder’s “unshakable knowledge” comes from the same non-rational place that guides him in all things. He doesn’t truly process or value anything Rattner says. All he hears is talk: “He’ll be a talker, this bastard. He’ll have plenty to say” (34).

Rattner disturbs us precisely because we have no access to his mind; we can judge him only by what he does and says, and what he says is often quite obviously at odds with what he is. This is characteristic of the prophet figure in general. We are granted access only to Rattner’s actions and utterances, not his internal workings. He is grotesque, due partly to his physical appearance and partly to the fact that he projects no sense of any personality. His parts are independent of any self, as if they have volition of their own: “The mouth stretched across the lower face in a slow cheesy rictus” (33), “I knowed you wouldn’t turn down nobody from home, the voice said,” “he could see the knee out of the corner of his eye” (34, emphasis mine).

In a deliberate misinterpretation of Sylder’s command to “Scoot your ass out of there” (33), Rattner moves from the driver’s to the passenger’s seat “without apparent use of any locomotor appendages but like something on runners tilted downhill” (33-34). As with most of McCarthy’s prophets, there is a distinct sense of inhumanity to Rattner, one that chills Sylder and gives him, rightly, a sense of impending doom. During the short drive they make together, Rattner deftly avoids both Sylder’s attempt to hit him in the knee with the gearshift and direct
eye contact. The steady “droning” stream of talk Rattner keeps up consists entirely of fabrications, giving the scene a sense of unreality in which Sylder begins to feel that “he had driven clear to Atlanta for the sole purpose of picking this man up and driving him back to Maryville” (35). That this fate seems predetermined and inescapable to him is reinforced by the bet he makes with himself: “I’ll bet I don’t make it, he wagered, don’t reach it” (35).

Later, Sylder watches Rattner light a cigarette (which he’s bummed), his face reflected in the dark windshield: “Sylder meditated in the windshield the face of the man cast in orange and black above the spurt of flame like the downlidded face of some copper ikon\(^2\), a mask, not ambiguous or inscrutable but merely discountenanced of meaning, expression” (36). McCarthy’s choice of “discountenanced” reemphasizes the inhuman quality of Rattner, who has been “de-faced,” unable to form expression, to the extent that he has no meaning other than his actions. As the embodiment of the “presence of evil,” Rattner exists to destroys things. While he often benefits personally from his violent acts, the act itself is his core motivation, with profit merely a bonus. In the same way that Sylder was destined to provide the car in Atlanta, Rattner was destined to be in it. This is another characteristic of the prophet, one at the root of the word “prophet” itself; he is merely the agent of something larger.

While events in McCarthy’s world often have a sense of inevitability, at the same time there is almost no actual causality. Rattner tries, but does not succeed, in killing Sylder, nor does Rattner’s murder cause Sylder any permanent harm. Even though Sylder feels a sense of doom

\(^2\)The language here prefigures the “icon” of Blood Meridian’s Judge Holden: “He was sat before the fire naked save for his breeches and his hands rested palm down upon his knees. His eyes were empty slots. None among the company harbored any notion as to what this attitude implied, yet so like an icon was he in his sitting that they grew cautious and spoke with circumspection among themselves as if they would not waken something that had better been left sleeping.” (147)
coming from his new passenger, he does little to prevent the man from attempting to kill him. When the car blows a tire at dawn the next day, Sylder makes no connection between his bet with himself and the danger of allowing Rattner to handle a car jack. It’s not that he’s irrational or stupid; he just functions outside reason. The tortured fight between the two ends with a broken-shouldered Sylder pinning Rattner to the ground. McCarthy returns here to the decaying image conjured by Rattner’s earlier “cheesy rictus.” As Sylder chokes Rattner, “the jaw kept coming down not on any detectable hinges but like a mass of offal, some obscene waste matter uncongealing.” (39). The man seems to be decomposing even before death, his flesh already compromised and coming loose. Sylder finishes him off by crushing his windpipe.

When a pickup looms in the distance, placing Sylder in danger of being discovered with the body, he slides Rattner under the car, and tries to summon a plausible explanation for the scene in order to save his own skin. As the father and son in the pickup look him over, Sylder tries to talk his way out of the jam, and “even as he said We³ he thought: They can’t see him. Yet he couldn’t get his mind that far ahead, and even afterwards could not trace the possibilities on their separate courses” (41). Natalie Grant explains Sylder’s survival instincts as “shaped by violent determinism” (79). Thus, with the same inevitability that deposited Rattner in his car, Sylder feels his course linked with Rattner’s, no less a burden dead than he was alive. He accepts this even as he curses it, and after getting rid of the pickup, brings Rattner’s body back to Red Branch and dumps it in the insecticide pit of an abandoned peach orchard on the mountain. Sylder is never charged with this murder, and yet the corpse in the pit is still the herald of his eventual downfall. This is McCarthy’s method of manufacturing meaning by association, events

³ All italics in quotations are original to the text, except where otherwise noted. Quotations entirely in italics indicate a memory separate from the events taking place in the extended scene.
that fail to line up in patterns of traditional meaning but rather suggest connections not causal
in nature but nonetheless essential.

**The Unwitting Vigil Keeper: Arthur Ownby**

While this is the last Sylder sees of the body, Rattner continues to function throughout the
novel as a prophet of destruction for him and for the other characters. As a corpse, he moves into
the custody of McCarthy’s second protagonist, the orchard keeper himself, Arthur Ownby, an
octogenarian hermit who lives in the mountains above Red Branch. Much has been written about
Ownby and his relationship with the natural world, and the Ownby sections of *The Orchard
Keeper* have a strong, if corrupted, tie to the Southern Gothic tradition. *The Orchard Keeper* sets
the stage for several recurring patterns in McCarthy’s oeuvre: the western road, the young
wanderer, colors of blood and flame in the sky, and the intransience of people, place and
memory. While prefiguring the road both McCarthy and his novels will tread in the future, this
first novel is also firmly rooted in the Appalachian South, and in the literature that is integral to
the region’s historical identity. One stark analogue to Ownby and young Rattner, who befriends
him, is Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away*, with its hermitic and prophetic old man
and the young boy he trains up in his image.

Natalie Grant calls Ownby a “druidic figure,” and an “agricultural barometer, observing
weather patterns and reading the changing seasons by natural signs” (76, 77). For David Paul
Ragan, he is “the old man whose traditional lifestyle enables an almost mystical connection to
the cycles of nature” (18). Bell also reminds us this lifestyle is a chosen one, for Ownby has
“tried the conventional human way and failed” in his early manhood, when his young wife left
him for a bible salesman (23). His life follows the changes of the natural world, a refuge for
which he is self-appointed steward, and he views the appearance of the corpse in the orchard spray pit as a sign that he has been chosen to watch over the body until such time as “by his understanding the spirit of both killer and killed are free from accountability” (Ragan 23). His recognition that the “killed” is also accountable implies Ownby’s understanding that the man in the pit was a bad man.

With his undignified death and improper cremation, O’Connor’s old Mason Tarwater bears similarities to both Arthur Ownby and Kenneth Rattner. Like the off-kilter Ownby, the half-crazed Tarwater chooses to live far off the beaten track, as independent of civilization as possible, and he also has a sustaining religion. But where Uncle Ather’s singular faith is pantheistic and tied to the natural cycles of the woods and its creatures, Mason Tarwater’s is a violent kind of Christianity, set apart from civilization to sustain its purity, with himself in the role of bloody prophet:

He had been called in his early youth and had set out for the city to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Saviour. He proclaimed from the midst of his fury that the world would see the sun burst in blood and fire and while he raged and waited, it rose every morning, calm and contained in itself, as if not only the world, but the Lord Himself had failed to hear the prophet’s message. It rose and set, rose and set on a world that turned from green to white and green to white and green to white again. It rose and set and he despaired of the Lord’s listening. Then one morning he saw to his joy a finger of fire coming out of it and before he could turn, before he could shout, the finger had touched him and the destruction he had been waiting for had fallen in his own brain and his own body. His own blood had been burned dry and not the blood of the world. (332)

Here we see language that McCarthy clearly echoes in his own writing: long clauses, paratactic construction, descriptors of blood and fire and rage and calm. Here too is perhaps the small seed of his deterministic view of the universe, with a world that seems unconcerned with the will and desires of one man, except perhaps when it comes to his destruction. But the language of the
“Lord,” of God, is still here as well, still in control of what’s happening. For McCarthy, we see God only in the utterances of characters, not in the voice of the narrator. We have no such implicit assurance that he is indeed there and in charge.

In the face of such uncertainty, Ownby readily takes on the task of watching over the corpse, but it is a heavy burden for him. He feels the presence of the body in his woods. He knows it is a victim of murder, and therefore tries to watch over it and avoid it at the same time. He discovers the body after he encounters two hysterical children in the road and follows their path back to the pit. He doesn’t see it at first glance, but then “The thing seemed to leap at him, the green face leering and coming up through the lucent rotting water with eyeless sockets and green fleshless grin, the hair dark and ebbing like seaweed” (54). Though obviously a dead “thing,” to Ownby the corpse appears animate, malevolent, and threatening. Rather than turning responsibility for it over to the authorities, however, which would bring unwanted civilization into his oasis, he takes it on himself, coming back three days later and covering the corpse with a cedar branch, a ritual he repeats every winter for seven years: “Each winter he came and cut a cedar to serve for wreath and covering….” (90) Like Sylder before him, he feels his story is now chained to that of this body.

In the seventh year, Ownby chooses to visit the pit earlier than his regular Christmas-time cutting of the cedar. He links this unscheduled nighttime visit with a childhood memory of walking with friends at night and passing a house where a woman was undressing:

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4 It is worth noting the necessity of the body having a traditional funeral wreath, which hearkens back to Ancient Greece, and that the placing of the wreath coincides with the Christmas season. While buried, the symbolism of Rattner as some kind of corrupt Christ figure is undeniably there.
The others had gone back for a second look but he would not go and they laughed at him. The old man remembered it now with dim regret, and remembers such nights when the air was warm as a breath and the moon no dead thing. He started down the road to the orchard path and to the pit for this second look. (89)

It’s a boyhood dare he’s given himself, to go to the pit and try to see the skeleton in the dark. This is a curious thing to do for a man who has chosen to live his adult life out of the company of his peers and more curious in that he connects this cold, dead body with the very alive naked woman⁵. But for Ownby, this is an opportunity to overcome what he views as a weakness in his younger self. Not surprisingly, there’s nothing to see, the pit too dark to make out even the old cedars lying on top of the body, and Ownby even feels brave enough to sit on the edge of the pit, until there is a sound from the water, “a small, almost tentative slosh,” and he swiftly exits with an almost Shakespearean “queer, shambling gait … waving his cane about curiously” (91). Like his first look at the body, this sound indicates an unnaturalness, something alive in death that Ownby fears.

His inability to do anything about this particular unnaturalness prompts him to take action against another unnatural phenomenon, the appearance of a mysterious government tank on the top of his mountain. After his incident with the pit at night, he goes home, gets his gun and methodically shoots a letter “X” onto the side of tank. As many critics have described, the firing on the government tank marks Ownby’s protest against the changing face of his world, which is rapidly being civilized. For Ownby, Rattner’s appearance functions as the herald of this unavoidable change, which for the old man is not just the end of a way of life, but the end of life itself.

⁵ There is an uncomfortable resemblance between Ownby and Outer Dark’s necrophiliac Lester Ballard here.
The end of the seven-year watch comes unexpectedly for Ownby. Two young neighbor boys visit the old man on a winter afternoon for homemade wine and tales of “painters” (panthers) in the woods, and the next day, Ownby follows the tracks of the two boys to the pit after he realizes that the smoke he smells isn’t firewood, but cedar. With “a presentiment of ruin” Ownby sees the pit in flames and his mixed reaction “of joy, of anguish – something primitive and half hidden” hints at the complex relationship he has with the corpse (158). The “soul [that] rose in the ashes forever unknown” is no longer his responsibility, a fact he faces with relief and with dread (158). The reason for the dread, as with most things McCarthy, is not causal – the release of the burden does not signal a particular event – but associative. The grief that belongs here is not a product of Ownby’s own life, but because he is the only human available to feel it, he thereby owns its connections to history.

Once the inevitable government agents incarcerate the old man for first defacing the tank and then shooting the men who come to arrest him, Ownby is relegated to a state mental hospital. For a man who has spent his life almost entirely independent of other people, hunting and trading ginseng roots for the few things he needs, life among other people is alien, almost incomprehensible: “The ways of these people is strange to me” (230). While he knows hiding the corpse is not what brought him to this pass, it nevertheless returns to haunt him as the herald of this, his end. Our last image of the corpse in the novel appears after the old man is institutionalized, although it is a memory of some earlier moment during his vigil. He remembers “the green cadaver grin sealed in the murky waters of the peach pit, slimegreen skull with newts coiled in the eyesockets and a wig of moss” (224). The corpse’s sockets are no longer eyeless, as they were at Ownby’s first look, but have been filled by a toxic and reptilian presence. It is as if
the dead Rattner, in Ownby’s memory, can see the old man and the pass he has come to. His placement here, in a government mental ward, is associatively connected to the interwoven alien presences in his life, the mysterious corpse and the government tank, which have no connection to each other, except by their connection to Ownby. The narrative by which he explains his actions reveals the self-generated myth he lives by:

But I never done it to benefit myself. Shot that thing. Like I kept peace for seven year sake of a man I never knowed nor seen his face and like I seen them fellers never had no business there and if I couldn’t run em off I could anyway let em know they was one man would let on that he knowed what they was up to. But I knowed if they could build it they could build it back and I done it anyway. Ever man loves peace and a old man best of all. (229)

His keeping “peace” for the body is part of his understanding of the passage of time. The “seven year” refers to Ownby’s shamanistic understanding of time’s passage in seven-year cycles, “a lean year and a year of plenty every seven years” (226), which Ragan connects to the biblical story of Joseph (note 7, 27), but for Ownby is also connected with his homespun natural ontology in which the souls of the departed can stay with the body for the seven years or even take up residence in other bodies, especially the cats of which Ownby has a particular fear. The burning of the body takes place just after Ownby has placed his seventh cedar, so at the beginning the seventh year, which means it interrupts his understanding of the natural cycle. The burning, an “irrevocable act” (158) is not part of his plan, and while he tells himself to believe that the soul of the dead man departed in the flames, part of him also suspects that the body

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6 Christian theology and superstition are both present in this novel, neither taking a dominant place. The Bible is represented positively here, in the connection to the story of Joseph, but negatively in the “goddamned bibledrummer” that steals Ownby’s wife (156). Traditional images of witchcraft such as cats and newts have their place as well, in addition to more specific references to “witch covens” (31) and “a congress of fiends and warlocks” (66). Bell finds the “tone and values” of the novel to be “of distant Anglo-Saxon origin,” which seems to indicate a possible alternative origin for Ownby’s seven-year theory (Achievement 10).
“ought not to of got burnt, that ought not to of happent and maybe I done wrong in that way to of let that happen” (228). In the associative way that is as close as McCarthy ever gets to psychologizing, we see the prophetic resonance between the man’s suspicion of his own failure to protect the corpse and his own state of incarceration. The truth of McCarthy’s naturalistic universe is beginning to come clear for the reader. It is highly likely that his characters travel predetermined, unchangeable paths, steered by the prophet and free of the troublesome component of true free will. Human agency is an illusion.

**The Unwitting Heir: John Wesley Rattner**

Ownby imparts his knowledge of the seven-year cycle to a visitor to the mental hospital, young John Wesley Rattner, son of Kenneth Rattner and the third protagonist of the novel. John Wesley is also one of the two boys who visited the old man’s home and later set the fire in the spray pit. His is the final fate signaled by the corpse in the spray pit, despite the fact we only have hints that he even knows it is there and he never learns that the corpse is his father. On the night that Ownby fires the circumcised shotgun shells at the government tank, Marion Sylder, who has witnessed the event, crashes his car into a creek, where John Wesley has been checking his muskrat traps. Thus McCarthy forges a connection among the three protagonists, a series of events not causal, but proximate. John Wesley becomes the friend of the whiskey runner, and Sylder becomes a surrogate father for the boy whose father he has killed, although he does not learn of the connection. Ownby also befriends the boy, although the two mentors never meet each other. After Ownby’s attack on the tank, Sylder lies in bed with his wife, wondering why the old man has done it. The “bile-sharp foretaste of disaster” that comes on him in this moment is a subconscious recognition of the connection between himself and Ownby.
Finding the prophet’s associative presence in the boy’s life must be done through the other characters, since McCarthy never directly confirms that John Wesley knows about the body. At the hospital, the old man tells the boy that “Lots of times…a body dies and their soul takes up in a cat for a spell. Specially somebody drowned or something like that where they don’t get buried proper” (227). If John Wesley did know of the presence of the body in the pit when he and his friend set the fire, then the old man might expect some recognition in the boy from a statement like this. Later in this same conversation, he says “Seems like an old man’d be allowed his rest but then he comes to find they’s things you have to do on account of nobody else wants to attend to em. Like that would make em go away” (229). As he assumed responsibility for mourning the body when there was no else to do it, Ownby acknowledges that his doing so was by default because someone else shirked the responsibility. By McCarthy’s associative logic, Ownby’s interlocutor is the shirker whose place he has taken all this time. The original responsibility now rests on the only other person present, John Wesley, despite the fact that neither man nor boy know the connection between the boy and the corpse in question.

In fact, the dramatic irony of this situation only deepens the reader’s dismay, because the same responsibility for his father’s remains is also placed on John Wesley earlier in the book by his mother. She charges him with avenging his father, for whom she has concocted a heroically revised history:

You goin to hunt him out. When you’re old enough. Goin to find the man that took away your daddy. (Remember: fierce and already aging face downthrust into his, sweetsour smell …)

How can I? He had begun to cry.

Your daddy’d of knowed how. He was a Godfearin man if he never took much to church meetin … The Lord’ll show you, boy. He will not forsake them what believe. Pray and the way will be made known to ye. He … You swear it, boy.
His arm was growing numb with pain...could feel her tremble through the clutched hand ... I swear, he said.
You won't never forget.
No.
Never long as you live.
Long as I live.
Yes, she said.
Long as I...
I won’t forget neither, she said, tightening once more on his arm for a moment, leaning her huge face at him. And, she hissed, he won’t forget neither.
I live...
He never forgot. (66-67)

The “he” who “won’t forget neither” could be God, but is more likely Kenneth Rattner. Mildred Rattner invokes her dead husband, in effect charging him with making sure their son avenges his death. And, in an appropriately macabre McCarthian fashion, he does watch from the pit, although the boy, who also “never forgot,” still fails to make good on his oath. We readers combine the emotional charge of this scene with our knowledge of Rattner’s corpse, but we never get to see their actual intersection. If this were a traditional novel, it would be constructed to convey meaning, providing for the eventual discovery by the boy that his friend Sylder killed his father, and that Ownby has been keeping a deathwatch over the corpse for seven years, along with an appropriate sense of betrayal that his heroes are not what they seem, and retribution on both for their parts in the chain of events. But this does not come to pass, which is McCarthy’s point. We have connections merely, events that only have communal significance in the mind of the reader, who is powerless to enlighten the characters involved.

Marion Sylder provides another such resonance for the boy. When Gifford and Legwater, the constable and humane officer, try to strong-arm the boy into revealing what he knows of the car full of contraband whiskey that appears in the creek, Sylder calms John Wesley’s fears by reminding him that Gifford “knowed you didn’t have no daddy, nobody to take up for you in the
first place is the reason he figured he could jump on you” (161). We are the only ones aware of the irony of this situation, as Sylder steps in to take the place of the boy’s father, whom he killed with his bare hands. The scene also reminds the boy of his fatherless state and that Sylder is now “tak[ing] up for” him.

Another irony appears for us later in the book, when Sylder is idly speculating on his own ability to eat green apples without getting sick and that he “Didn’t take poison ivy either. The boy John Wesley, he was bad about poison ivy. Bad blood” (183). These thoughts come as Sylder is picking up a batch of whiskey. He, who by logical deduction doesn’t have “bad blood,” is a criminal by profession, while John Wesley is a child and a pretty well-behaved one at that. While Sylder remains unaware of the child’s parentage, his recognition of his “bad blood,” however off the cuff, hearkens back to his instinctual understanding of the world, aware at some unconscious level that the boy is, at the very least, of a different and inferior stock than himself. And he’s right; “bad blood” has to come from somewhere. While the similarities between Marion Tarwater and Arthur Ownby are stronger, we do see some parallels between John Wesley Rattner and Francis Tarwater. Both boys are fatherless, both mentored by two very different men, one old and hermetic and one younger and more traditionally tied to home and family. But where Francis does eventually find his (albeit twisted) path as a prophet in his grandfather’s image, John Wesley simply wanders aimlessly away in the end.

So much of this novel, and McCarthy’s work in general, is based on the negation of traditional interpretive avenues, things that are not, don’t happen, and remain undiscovered. The abhorrent Kenneth Rattner forces Marion Sylder to kill him and then return his body to his hometown, where it lurks with open eyes at the bottom of an orchard spray pit. The only other
person who knows he is there is the ancient Arthur Ownby, who for his own reasons keeps
this knowledge to himself. Sylder does not know that Ownby knows about the corpse. John
Wesley does not know that his new mentor is also his father’s murderer. Sylder knows neither
the identity of the man he killed nor that his new young friend is the corpse’s son. Neither does
Ownby know the identity of the corpse or its connection to young Rattner. John Wesley does not
know that “Uncle Ather” has been keeping watch over his father’s corpse for years. And yet all
three are connected to the dead man, and the ties that bind them are unbreakable, if
unrecognized. As Uncle Ather tells the young social worker who visits him in jail, “not knowin a
thing ain’t never made it not so” (221).

There is a lot of “not knowin” that takes place in The Orchard Keeper, and as Bell points
out, “moral considerations seem not to affect outcomes” (“Ambiguous” 32). Morality and reality
follow parallel courses, each unfolding along their separate paths, without the rightful
intersection required by a happy ending. John Wesley learns what seem to be useful moral
lessons from the old man and from the bootlegger, but they don’t do him any good. Early in the
novel, he turns a young hawk in for a government bounty, imagining that the county preserved
them for “some worthy purpose” (Bell, Achievement 26). When he becomes disillusioned by the
incarceration of the two older men, he tries to retrieve his hawk, not wanting to do business with
the same institution that has taken his friends away. His gesture is a relatively empty one,
however, because he finds out that the county simply burns the dead birds: “They burn em? ...
And thow people in jail and beat up on em … And old men in the crazy house” (233). After this
three-fold condemnation of the county’s doings, John Wesley gives back the dollar bounty he
received for the hawk, saying “I cain’t take no dollar. I made a mistake, he wadn’t for sale”
Following McCarthy’s process of association, the “he” here is not just the hawk, but Sylder and Ownby as well. John Wesley, the last one standing, receives responsibility for the fate of all three protagonists by default.

At the end of the story, his mother is dead, Ownby remains in the mental hospital, and Sylder is in prison for running whiskey. His two mentors are useless to him: “They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone” (246). John Wesley himself, the only one of the three protagonists remaining, is himself “no avatar, no scion” of the people from whom he learned how to live. He too is “undone,” not by the prophet, but by his own inaction. The prophet is the herald of, catalyst for, and witness to the inevitable destruction of these people. As John Wesley moves “out to the western road” at the end of the novel, he is exiting his own story. The air is one of finality, rather than promise, as the names of those whom he remembers, and he himself, become “myth, legend, dust” (246).

With a methodical precision we will learn to recognize in Blood Meridian’s Judge Holden and No Country for Old Men’s Anton Chigurh, Rattner’s corpse even signals the undoing of ancillary characters. The humane officer Legwater, believing the rumors that Rattner had a platinum plate in his head, returns to the orchard pit after the bones are removed and sifts the ashes with a windowscreen, becoming in the process “grimly apparitional” as he is covered with the dust of the makeshift grave (241). When Constable Gifford finally breaks the news that there never was any such plate, Legwater’s response is “a dumb look, the incredulous and empty expression common to victims of tragedy, disaster and loss” (241). He takes out his ensuing rage over being duped on Scout, the ancient and decrepit dog that once belonged to Ownby and who has been roaming the woods aimlessly near his old home since his owner was taken away.
Legwater shoots the dog, who becomes the yet another victim whose fate was in the prophet’s hands.

Despite the trials all characters must undergo in a Southern Gothic novel, they usually find redemption, or at least closure, in the end. In *The Violent Bear it Away*, Young Francis Tarwater fulfills his prophetic destiny, Mason Tarwater’s body is rescued and properly buried by his neighbor Buford, Rayber is ultimately relieved at the death of his young son, Bishop, who is saved by baptism before being drowned by Francis. The feverish Christianity of the novel holds, ultimately bringing Francis home to continue his uncle’s mission. While we might argue with the merit of such a religion, we cannot deny that the traditional dichotomy of good and evil are still standing at the end of the story.

The parallels between *The Orchard Keeper* and *The Violent Bear It Away* are many, and we can support the claim that McCarthy is a solid member of the Southern Gothic canon, and yet we can also see how he frustrates the genre’s defining characteristics at nearly every turn. Arthur Ownby’s pantheistic religion fails him, Kenneth Rattner’s corpse never receives proper burial, Marion Sylder ends his days in prison, and Wesley Rattner neither avenges his father’s death nor rises to meet a noble destiny. The underpinnings of the legacy of land, the strength of family, the permanence of faith, even the redeeming power of violence, are all brought to naught at the end of the book.

This pattern of fulfilling the form but not the function of a traditional literary genre is one that McCarthy repeats throughout his works, and it echoes both his biography and his character development. So what do we take away from a novel like *The Orchard Keeper*? Ragan sees the episodic nature of the novel as “reveal[ing] a fully controlled, deliberately structured
examination of the intrinsic human need to order, or at least interpret, the world of nature and to understand the motivations of men” (18). No one in the novel shows a need to order his existence, so the humans in need in Ragan’s analysis must by default be us, the readers. Add to this the figure of the prophet with his newt-filled eye sockets, and we get confirmation that we can’t rationalize our way out of the unreasoning world, much less out of death. Like Kenneth Rattner, from dust we are made, and to dust, devoid of valuable platinum skull plates, we shall return.
Chapter Two: *Outer Dark*, or
“I hate knowin they is such people, don’t you?”

McCarthy’s second novel, *Outer Dark*, begins with a trio of mysterious figures moving through a nameless landscape, making camp, rising, and continuing their westward progress, all in silence, the bearded leader standing “*spraddleged before the fire and clos[ing] the other two in a foul white plume of smoke*” as they prepare to move on (3). Decidedly sinister and preferring to move in “*shadow altogether which suited them very well,*” these are obviously villains, with the central bearded figure seeming the archetypal prophet of destruction (3).

Immediately following this scene, we are introduced to Culla Holme, whose sister is waking him from a nightmare. In his dream, a prophet proclaims to a “delegation of human ruin,” a crowd of the maimed and afflicted, that the pending solar eclipse will cure them all of their afflictions. Holme, the only whole figure in the multitude, calls out: “Me, he cried. Can I be cured? The prophet looked down as if surprised to see him there amidst such pariahs. The sun paused. He said: Yes, I think perhaps you will be cured. Then the sun buckled and dark fell like a shout” (5). When the sun does not return, the crowd turns upon Holme, rather than the prophet. As he tries to “hide among them,” “they knew him even in that pit of hopeless dark” (6). Thus McCarthy sets up the world of this novel, in which the prophet of destruction is now seen as a recruiter, actively seeking followers among the dregs of humanity. Despite his waking ignorance of the fact, Holme is actually Cormac McCarthy’s first actively pursued prophet recruit.

7 McCarthy sets most of his description of this trio off from the rest of the novel in six one-page italicized chapters dispersed throughout the book.
While there are certainly distinct parallels to be made between *Outer Dark* and other Southern writing (“A Good Man is Hard to Find” and *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* come quickly to mind), there is a uniqueness to this novel among McCarthy’s larger canon that begs comparisons further back in literary time, to fundamental works such as Dante’s *Inferno* and Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. The dreamy otherworldliness of the landscape feels similar to Christian allegory.

In contrast to Kenneth Rattner of McCarthy’s first novel, Culla Holme is not a willfully evil man, but rather a painfully ignorant one. If we allow ignorance to function as synonym with innocence, we can see a warped version of Bunyan’s Christian in Culla. As far as we know, Culla has committed only one major sin before the beginning of the novel, but that one is a whopper. He has impregnated his sister, Rinthy, and the guilt he feels over his action causes him to abandon the resulting baby boy in the woods. Edwin T. Arnold reveals Holme as “a tormented man, haunted by the ‘nameless weight’ (5) in his sister Rinthy’s womb. He is a man who wishes to be cured, forgiven, but who can cry out only in his sleep. Awake, he tries to conceal his guilt” (“McCarthy’s Moral Parables” 47). Positioned as protagonist against the frightfully keen-eyed man in black, Holme is nonetheless difficult for the reader to champion. This morally stunted, semi-verbal man is the first of a series of such protagonists.

As Holme sets out to track his sister, who is in turn in search of her “chap,” whom her brother has left to die, we follow along, watching helplessly as each sibling stumbles half-blindly through a landscape they only barely see. Filtered through their nearly infantile consciousnesses, the landscape seems otherworldly, menacing, and troublingly devoid of detail. The stories of Holme’s and Rinthy’s separate paths through the surrounding countryside are interwoven with the exploits of the evil band of three.
A staple of Christian literature, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, informs the archetypal landscape through which Culla and Rinthy\(^8\) travel. McCarthy follows the form, but not the function, of this biblical allegory by having his “hero” Culla travel a path recognizably similar to that traveled by Christian, who leaves home without his wife and children to find the Celestial City. Culla, who also travels alone, follows his “wife” and sister Rinthy, who is herself in search of their child. This reversal of the order of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* echoes the backwards and back-woods way Culla approaches his life. From the opening lines, we can readily see language echoed in McCarthy:

I dreamed, and behold, *I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden on his back.* I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein, and as he read he wept and trembled, and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, *What shall I do?* (11)

In our only real glimpse into the inner life of Culla Holme, he similarly dreams and similarly cries out, although his pre-literate state precludes reading any book, much less the Bible, and his burden is not the sins of humanity, but only his own.

Holme’s position as unwilling acolyte to the prophet is foretold in his dream, but doesn’t become apparent to the reader until a pattern of events is established. In effect, McCarthy transfers responsibility from the dream prophet onto him, making him responsible for the death of the sun and subject to the retribution of the “beggared multitude” (5). As we’ve seen in *The Orchard Keeper*, guilt by proximity is a frequent sentence, and one many characters suffer from.

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\(^8\) When heard together, the hard “C” of Culla and the “Rinth” of Rinthy even bear homophonic resonance to Christian and Christiana, the protagonists of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. 
Through this dream transference, McCarthy forges a link, unknown to Holme but nonetheless strong, between the prophet and his unwitting disciple. In this novel, we largely see protagonist as puppet, manipulated by the leader of the trio. In this scenario, the prophet retains many characteristics, such as unexplained and sudden appearances and the ability to manipulate people, while sharing his destructive power with Holme, who becomes an unaware and unrecognized signal of disaster – his own and those he meets along the way.

In the second appearance of what William C. Spencer calls the “ unholy trinity ” (“ Cormac McCarthy’s Unholy Trinity ” 83), we see the three figures enter a barn, collect farm implements, and emerge from the other end “ marvelously armed with crude agrarian weapons, spade and brush-hook, emerging in an explosion of guineafowl and one screaming sow ” (35). Holme registers the upheaval of the farm animals from this event as he stands in the kitchen of the squire to whom the barn belongs and from whom he is seeking work. After Holme works for one day and then makes off with the squire’s boots during the night, the irate squire sets off after him. Before he can track Holme down, however, the loathsome trio reappear, riding up behind the squire and killing him with his own brush-hook:

[T]he first of them reaching the horse and seizing the reins and turning up to the driver a mindless smile, clutching the horse’s withers and clinging there like some small and vicious anthroparian and the driver rising in remonstration from the wagon box so that when the next one came up behind him sideways in a sort of dance and swung the brush-hook it missed his neck and took him in the small of his back severing his spine and when he fell he fell unhinged sideways and without a cry. (51)

The silence and precision with which the three commit this execution lends the scene an air of sickening elegance, the dance of the man with the brush-hook hearkening back to the “ nameless black ballet ” the three shadows create in their first scene. Paratactic sentence construction lends
the scene a dreamlike inevitability as well, as if these actions are not just premeditated, but predetermined. Holme’s appearance at the squire’s house has not caused, but heralded, the squire’s grisly end. The method of association we first witnessed in *The Orchard Keeper* reappears in *Outer Dark*, as Holme and the trio follow resonating but distanced paths through the landscape. Holme is used by the trio to draw the squire out, essentially forcing him to function as a fourth member of the band, even before he comes face to face with them.

Holme’s second association with the trio occurs in the next town down the road, as he lounges in the dry goods store waiting on the townspeople to return from an unexplained emergency at the local church. As the crowd returns with the weathered coffins that have been grave-robbed by the evil triumvirate, Holme becomes the primary suspect of the crime simply by being a stranger in their midst. In this way, Holme becomes both the signal of and the suspect for the violence committed by the three. The bystander who says to Holme, “I hate knowin they is such people, don’t you?” (88), will soon believe Holme himself is one of “such people.” The guilt lays on him just as heavily as if he had indeed committed the crime, and he becomes a fugitive, forced to flee not just this town but also the next place where he finds work. McCarthy makes a point to tell us Holme happened to be in the right place at the right time to avoid his captors. He is painting a barn roof and, “if they had come the day before or even that morning he would not have seen them” (92). Something is looking out for Holme, sending him out on the road again. He cannot be caught at this point because, as Arnold puts it, “Holme’s destiny has not yet worked itself out” (“McCarthy’s Moral Parables” 50). He must continue his role as unwitting recruit.
In contrast with the unearned guilt Holme can’t shake, the bearded leader of the death-dealing trio is able to deflect his own guilt to the extent of leading the fearful and angry townspeople in a lynch party for a crime he himself has committed. In the “shapeless and dusty suit of black linen” he has robbed from Salter’s own grave, he enters the crowd surrounding the body of “old man Salter” and with “nothing about his hulking dusty figure other than its size to offer why these townspeople should follow him,” nonetheless leads them to hang two “itinerant millhands” in retribution for the murder (95). The bearded man, the embodiment of destruction, has a super-human ability to read people and bend them to his will, characteristics regularly identified with the prophet.

Holme’s third inadvertent heralding of the trio brings him to the house of an old snake trapper who lives alone in the woods with his two hounds. When Holme asks the man for water, he responds, “Wouldn’t turn Satan away for a drink,” a statement truer than he knows and coming faster than he would believe (117). The very next scene in the novel reveals the three murderous figures at the man’s door. The instinct for recognizing evil that the man apparently lacks is all too evident in the hounds, who “rose howling from the porch with boar’s hackles and walled eyes and descended into the outer dark” at the trio’s approach, abandoning their master to fate in the face of such malevolence (129). The trapper himself, with a dreadful irony, mistakes the black-suited leader as a minister, uncomprehending even as the “minister” disembowels him:

*Light went in a long bright wink upon the knifeblade as it sank with a faint breath of gas into his belly. He felt suddenly very cold. The dogs had gone and there was no sound in the night anywhere. Minister? he said. Minister? His assassin smiled*

9 These same hounds, not recognizing Holme’s connected significance, had merely watched at his approach. This scene also marks one of two references to the novel’s title; here the “outer dark” is preferable to the nearer darkness of the trio (Forbis, Morgan, and Sepich).
upon him with bright teeth, the faces of the other two peering from either shoulder in consubstantial monstrosity, a grim triune that watched wordless, affable. (129)

The smiling faces and “consubstantial” nature of the trio invokes Spencer’s analysis of them as an inversion of the biblical trinity. The clear echoes between the dark triune and the holy trinity are obvious enough, but there is another tripartite structure from biblical literature that also suits the novel quite well. As a fundamentally Catholic image, the use of “consubstantial” here is a subtle reinforcement of the corruption of the trio. In Catholic tradition, the bread and wine of communion are transubstantiated, or transformed literally into the body and blood of Christ, rather than consubstantiated, in which the communion is merely symbolic of body and blood. Rather than a true inversion of the trio, these figures use the illusion as a symbol. It is entirely possible they are something else altogether, a non-God evil. We see McCarthy here beginning to build a darker worldview, one constructed outside a traditional good vs. evil dichotomy.

In such a worldview, images from both sides of the larger world of literary Catholicism are fair game. Compare the same scene from above to this scene from Cocytus, the lowest level of Dante’s *Inferno*:

> I found he had three faces on his head,  
> Which was something I had seen before!  
> One was in front, and that one was bright-red;  
> The other two were joined onto the first  
> At just about the mid-point of each shoulder;  
> And all were joined together at the crest: (Canto XXXIV, ll. 37-42)

The teeth and the faces above each shoulder bear striking resemblances to Dante’s imagined Satan, as does the trio’s silence. The Satan of Dante gnaws ceaselessly on the body of Judas Iscariot and does not speak to Dante or Virgil. The faces on either shoulder chew Brutus and Cassius, all three faces weeping ceaselessly. The menace of the original image is echoed in
McCarthy’s novel, but not the impotence. This silent, conjoined trio is not imprisoned in ice, but very much at loose in the world. There is no crawling to freedom through them, either, as there is in Dante’s classic. Wherever we find them, there is only death.

Holme is now essentially in the position of a proselytizer, one that comes before the main act to advertise its imminent approach. His next stop places a third body in the blackhaw tree where the millhands spin. Turning up in yet another small town on the nameless road, Holme seeks work at the local store from a man named Clark, the richest and therefore most powerful man in town. He is described as “a man dressed in a filthy white suit and so huge that the mule and the wagon which carried him looked absurd, like a toy rig in a circus bearing some soiled and monolithic clown” (139). Clark gives Holme the job of digging graves for the two hanged millhands, an ironic chain of events in which Holme prepares the graves for two scapegoats for the dark trio’s crimes, graves that might as easily have been for himself, a third scapegoat for the same group. The time between prophecy and destruction seems to be collapsing as we move through the novel, because when Holme returns to Clark’s store at the end of the day to turn in his tools, he finds the place empty and “nobody about.” (145). Sleeping that night in the “lee of a hayrick,” he realizes that “there was something fearful about” (145). His path and that of the three cross in the night and in the morning, Clark is dead: “He went along toward the town and as he topped a rise in the road two buzzards labored up out of a dead tree in a field from which hung the bodies of three men. One was dressed in a dirty white suit. Nothing moved” (146). This anti-Golgotha scene marks the first time Holme senses a real connection between himself and the

10 Readers of Blood Meridian may recognize a prototype for Judge Holden in Mr. Clark.
mysterious crimes being committed in the area. His reaction is to flee, as if he were actually guilty; “He was walking very fast and after a while we was running again” (146).

At this point in the novel, the trio moves ahead of Holme, setting up the chain of events that will bring him directly to them. Having driven him before them like a fear-mad sheep, they now draw the circle tight and lead him home. The road Holme travels leads to a swollen river, only crossable by means of a ferry attached to cables running overhead. Holme boards the ferry at night, along with the ferryman and a rider with his horse. The cable holding the ferry snaps, sending the boat adrift and pitching the ferryman and the rider overboard, leaving Holme with the panicking horse. For a few harrowing minutes, himself as much livestock as the horse, he’s forced to dodge flailing hooves in the dark, before the horse falls overboard as well. As Holme drifts helplessly in the current, he sees a light on the riverbank and calls for help, only to be rescued by the fearsome trio. It is at this point that we get our first true look at the “unholy trinity.” As Spencer argues, the bearded leader is the corollary to God the Father, the omnipotent authority of the group, leading others effortlessly, as he did with the lynch party. The second figure is the rifle-toting Harmon, the inverse of Christ: “In contrast to Christ, the bringer of peace (John 14:27), Harmon is a bringer of violence” (Spencer 89). The third figure, the “anthroparian,” nameless mute with his “slavering smile” (169) is a parody of the Holy Spirit: “Whereas the Holy Spirit emphasizes the transcendent, nonphysical fact of God, this unnamed dolt is little or no more than a beast of earth” (Spencer 90). He is little more than his grotesque physicality.

Holme’s entrance into this evil presence is equivalent to an initiation ceremony, one fittingly begun by Holme “squatt[ing] before the fire and extend[ing] his palms over it like some
stormy and ruinous prophet” (170). As so many critics have already mentioned, the “black and
mummified” meat Holme is forced to eat serves as a sick kind of communion, almost
immediately problematized by the leader’s unclear status as fellow communicant:

| Holme chewed. I don’t believe I ever et no meat of this kind, he said. |
| I ain’t sure I ever did either, the man said. |
| He stopped. You ain’t et none of this? he said. |
| The man didn’t answer for a minute. Then he said: They’s different kinds. |
| Oh, Holme said. |
| The one with the rifle across his squatting thighs giggled. Ain’t they, he said. |
| Shitepoke, pole\textsuperscript{11} …(172-73) |

The possibility that the meat in question, “warped and run with unassailable fibers,” is human
flesh is too strong to ignore here, and yet it remains only an implication, unsettling both Holme
and the reader.

As the bearded figure proceeds to interrogate Holme about the events that led him to their
fire, it becomes apparent that he is a capable reader of people, another common characteristic of
the prophet. When Holme recounts his experience with the horse on the boat, the bearded one
implies that he should have taken the horse, but “was afraid to take it” (173). He follows this
statement up with “That makes sense,” implying that he understands that Holme is weak, and
that he is not telling the whole truth of his story. The man in black is a judge, and Holme comes
up short. He also seems to know Holme’s past sins, as is implied when he gestures to the
unnamed man and says, “That’n ain’t got a name, he said. He wanted me to give him one but I
wouldn’t do it. He don’t need nary…Everthing don’t need a name, does it?” (174). The

\textsuperscript{11} There is ambiguity in these references: “shitepoke” is a kind of heron that defecates when
flushed out of hiding, where “pole” could be a person of Polish descent, the beginning of
“polecat,” or possibly a variant of “poulet” or chicken.
connection here is with Holme’s unnamed and abandoned child, a corollary for this cannibalistic, murderous humanoid who is very nearly, as Spencer tells us, the personification of ignorance. And the connection between Holme and the idiot goes both ways, as it is he who commits the act that brings Holme to them: “He’s the one set the skiff adrift this morning, he said. Even if it just drifted off he still done it. I knowed they’s a good reason. We waited all day and half the night. I kept up a good fire. You seen it didn’t ye?” (178). The nameless one, not the leader, caused the accident in the river that sent Holme directly to them. As Arnold sees it, “the unnamed companion has, just by being, directed Holme to them to confront his guilt” of incest and attempted murder, the very crimes which have qualified him as recruit (“McCarthy’s Moral Parables” 50).

The leader claims Holme next, very nearly identifying Holme’s role in their midst. He forces Holme to give up his good boots, which he stole from the squire later killed by Harmon. Holme is in turn given the stinking and dilapidated boots of the idiot after the other members trade up. This is where Holme begins to truly register the connection between himself and this group, even if only at gut level, and tries to prevent the bearded man from taking his boots:

> You know, I would think them there big boots would chafe on a feller’s heels, the man said.
> They all right, Holme said.
> I don’t believe they are, the man said.
> Are what?
> All right. I don’t believe they are.
> Well, it don’t make no difference.
> When I believe something it makes a difference.
> Holme watched the fire. In his unfocused vision the coals beaded up in pins of light and drifted like hot spores. Blood had come up in his ears and they were warm and half deaf with it. I don’t care, he said.
> You will care mister. I think maybe you are somebody else. Because you don’t seem to understand me very much. Now get them boots off. (178-79)
The leader claims Holme physically, by taking his boots, but also psychologically, by inferring that not only does he know who Holme is, but that Holme should also know him. The statement “I think maybe you are somebody else” has the phrase “other than I thought you were” built into it and the tone is of an authority chastising a subordinate. The bearded man is acting as if Holme has already been an initiate of the group and is being willfully ignorant of what his commander wants him to do. We recognize the leader’s assumption as a true one. As the prophet’s chosen one, Holme has been a servant of evil for some time now, whether he knows it or not. Not only does his ignorance not save him from guilt, it becomes yet another charge of which he is guilty.

The image of the leader immediately following this exchange is Luciferian: “the man seemed to be seated in the fire itself, cradling the flames to his body as if there were something there beyond all warming” (179). William Spencer rightly calls this man “evil incarnate,” a figure we will see again in Blood Meridian, but one usually hidden behind the scenes in McCarthy’s work (83). This is an inverse trinity bringing in a new acolyte, a broken and sinful man whose actions have made him one with his masters. And the master knows his own, as he probes Holme about his sister. Holme had mentioned earlier that he was on the road searching for his sister, who had most likely run off with a tinker, but the bearded man does not accept this at face value. Returning to the sister after acquiring Holme’s boots, the man says, “Have you got

12 Again we see a precursor to Blood Meridian’s Judge.

13 Interestingly, the word “threatful” is used to describe both Holme (p. 33) and the bearded man (p. 182). The only other time this word is used in this novel by McCarthy is on p. 167 of Outer Dark, to describe the river, the vehicle that brings Holme to the trio (Forbis, Morgan, and Sepich).
a sister sure enough?” (181). When Holme replies that he has and confirms that she’s “run off with some tinker” (181), the bearded man replies, “She ain’t here to tell it her way. Is she?” (182), implying that if she were, she might have a different version of the story. Holme is left exposed by this, lamely saying “I ain’t studied it” when the man asks where Rinthy and the tinker are now (182). Before leaving him, the bearded man makes Holme all too aware that he knows something is amiss in his story.

Bell calls the “embodiment of evil in Outer Dark … both convincing and inexplicable, of human form but resistant to being human, beyond and opposed to civilization” (The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy 34). These dark figures, appearing without explanation and rampaging unchecked through the countryside, know unknowable things about Holme and seem unavoidably linked to his fate, something he recoils from at the same time that he accepts its certainty. The reason why Holme accepts it is perhaps connected to Christopher Metress’ theory that a form of “apophatic theology” underlies Outer Dark. As he explains it,” McCarthy has fashioned the novel in such a way as to make it a kind of via negativa, a road down which we travel as readers as we learn to unlearn our assumptions about God and embrace unknowing as ‘the most goodly knowing’ of the metaphysical” (149). While Metress applies the theory strictly to ideas of God, we can similarly apply them to God’s mirror image, the darksome trio, and their recruit, Culla Holme. As Metress explains, “The best way to think about God is to think about what He is not, and if we do this, God becomes, in the words of one theologian, ‘a nothingness, a mystery, a darkness, which [exists but] lies above our rational understanding’” (148). The three are inexplicable, and yet there they stand. Holme cannot fathom where they’ve come from or how the connection between them and himself was forged, and yet he does not deny it or fight
against it. If we imagine the leader and his acolytes as “a nothingness, a mystery, a darkness,”
there but beyond understanding, perhaps we can begin to understand what Holme seems to grasp
intuitively. How they came to be there does not matter. That they are there is the only thing that
matters. McCarthy’s regular substitution of “that” for “how” is at the core of the guilt by
association. Causality is immaterial. Proximity is all that is necessary.

Out of character for the group, but in keeping with Holme’s unfinished destiny, the leader
allows Holme to live, leaving him alone in the glade. Clearly shaken, he sits for a long while by
the fire, and sound returns quite slowly. Silence is a characteristic Holme and the three have
begun to share. Sounds of life and movement cease in their presence, perhaps in defense, like the
old snake man’s dogs, who fled when the three approached.

Moving on from his forced initiation, Holme finds himself once again on the wrong end of
the law, this time for sleeping in what he thought was an abandoned cabin. The squire who
sentences him to ten days labor on his property recognizes Holme for what he is: “I don’t believe
you’re no bad feller Holme, he said. I don’t believe you’re no lucky feller neither. My daddy
always claimed a man made his own luck. But that’s disputable, I reckon” (206-07). The squire’s
assessment of Holme is more apt than he knows, since the boy has been regularly charged with
other people’s crimes. But perhaps another way of looking at it is to see Holme as responsible for
everything that befalls him because of his true guilt, procreation with his sister. In a sign that he
is starting to understand this, Holme decisively responds “I ain’t got sign one of kin on this
earth” when the squire asks if he has family (207). This is the first time Holme has denied his
sister. Rinthy is no longer safe, no longer his alone, after the leader of the three has insinuated
knowledge of Holme’s sin with her. Instinctively recoiling from homeless, kin-less Holme, the
squire refuses to allow Holme to stay any longer than it will take to complete his sentence, even when, or perhaps because, he offers to stay on without pay:

I’ll stay on just for board if you can use me.

It was very quiet in the kitchen. The squire was standing with one hand on the door. The woman had stopped her puttering with dishes and pots. They were watching him.

I don’t believe I can use ye, Holme, the squire said. Holler when you get done.

(208)

The suspension of everyday activity highlights the abnormality of this request. Holme, now a bringer of silence like his prophet, is not natural, and needs pushing away.

From the squire’s house, Holme moves on down the road into a scene of biblical proportions, eventually coming upon the extraordinary sight of swineherds driving an “entire valley … filled with hogs, a weltering sea of them” (213). As he climbs up a slope to get out of the herd’s way, one of the drovers stops for a friendly chat, telling Holme where they’re headed with the hogs and that some of them are “mulefoot” hogs, meaning they don’t have the typical split hoof (214). The ensuing conversation about the devil and his alleged hog’s feet echoes back to Holme’s experience at the campfire of the three, when one of the leader’s boots is described as “cleft from tongue to toe like a hoof” (176). This scene also reveals Holme’s absolute ignorance

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In a typically McCarthian twist, what could easily have been a sea of devil-hogs bent blindly on destruction instead becomes a meditation on the nature of good and evil. The mulefoot hogs are blended in with their cloven-hoofed peers and are equally caught up in the tide of cliff-jumpers. A logical extension of this observation is to question the nature of the hog, and of man. Does “goodness” matter when it is swept up in a tide of “evil”? Or are the categories of “good” and “evil” ultimately pointless? We’ll see a much fuller examination of this idea, as well as more cloven-hoofed animals careening over cliffs, in later novels.
of theology. The drover aims for casual conversation, only to be confronted with an interlocutor that is equally as baffled by the idea of a jew as he is by the vision of a split-hoofed devil.

After the drover leaves Holme, the hogs pick up speed, and several fall over a bluff and into the river below. As the drovers try to turn the herd away from the cliff, they lose control of the animals, who panic and begin falling off the cliff “row on row wailing and squealing” (217). Scrambling for higher ground, Holme watches as Vernon, the same drover he has just been talking with, is carried like a “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” (218). Of the many deaths heralded in this book by Holme, this is the first not caused directly or indirectly by the three. As an initiate, Holme is now causing the destruction himself. As Spencer notes, the reader has already been led to link the leader of the evil trio with the devil because of his cloven boot, and that image is amplified a thousandfold here by the hogs and the biblical conversation shared by Holme and Vernon. As the newly initiated member of the murderous group, Holme now conjures his own omens. The biblically impure animals are the weapon used to kill the drover, as Holme watches, motionless.

In a pattern now all too familiar, the remaining drovers accuse Holme, the stranger in their midst, of frightening the hogs into the stampede, egged on by the parson who appears on the scene, gleefully using blatant reverse psychology to push the drovers towards either hanging Holme or flinging him off the cliff. When the preacher asks Holme, “What place of devilment you hail from, mister?” Holme’s response is to look at him “wearily” (224). He is unsurprised at the accusation and the sentence and, while angry, moves cooperatively along with the group,
ignoring the preacher as best he can, until he can jump into the river and escape. As the prophet’s newest initiate, his lot is to be the scapegoat for all deaths he witnesses.

Again, the river takes Holme directly to the three. In the intervening chapter between the hog scene and this one, the three men have come upon the sleeping tinker, hanged him, and taken Rinthy and Holme’s child. As Holme comes upon this group, they are just as inexplicable as before, and McCarthy echoes the atmosphere of Holme’s prophet nightmare in describing them:

> They wore the same clothes, sat in the same attitudes, endowed with a dream’s redundancy. Like revenants\(^{15}\) that reoccur in lands laid waste with fever: spectral, palpable as stone. He looked at the child. It had a healed burn all down one side of it and the skin was papery and wrinkled like an old man’s. It was naked and half coated with dust so that it seemed lightly furred and when it turned to look up at him he saw one eyeless and angry red socket like a stokehole to a brain in flames. (232)

And so the recruit returns to his own, with his own child as one of the “delegation of human ruin” from his dream. The responsibility transferred on him in that dream is here repeated, but this time not simply through association. He has brought this child into the world, and he is directly responsible for the pitiful state in which he finds it. The bearded leader greets Holme familiarly: “We ain’t seen ye for a while” (231), “Set and rest a spell” (232). When Holme asks, “Whose youngern?,” the bearded one “guffawed and slapped his thigh” as if sharing a good joke with Holme (232). The sense of the three as “revenants” is further enhanced by the glade itself, which, as Arnold says, “recalls the glade in which Holme originally abandoned the child, may in fact (given the circular journeys in the novel) be the same glade” (52). In this sense, Holme and the child are also returning to the scene where Holme first abandoned the baby. His question about the child’s parentage is a repeated denial of his own position as the baby’s father, a denial

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\(^{15}\) This is the only use of the word “revenant” in this novel, which strengthens this scene’s connection with the earlier dream through a syntactic bond (Forbis, Morgan, and Sepich).
the leader finds laughable. The man treats Holme as if his journey’s destination has been this

glade all along:

Well, I see ye didn’t have no trouble finding us.
I wasn’t huntin ye.
You got here all right for somebody bound elsewhere.
I wasn’t bound nowhere. I just seen the fire.
I like to keep a good fire. A man never knows what all might chance along.
Does he?
No.
No. Anything’s liable to warsh up. From nowheres nowhere bound.
Where are you bound? Holme said.
I ain’t, the man said. By nothin. He looked up at Holme. We ain’t hard to find.
Oncet you’ve found us. (232-33)

The man refuses to accept Holme’s denial of him, and of his unwilling allegiance to the triune.
At this, Holme stops denying his involvement with them all. His next question, “Where’s she
at?” signals his acceptance that this child is his and that the leader knows his story (233). When
the bearded man accuses him of getting “this thing here in her belly your own self and then
la[ying] it off on the tinker,” Holme’s only response is to correct the untruth, that he didn’t give
the child to the tinker, but only told Rinhthy he did (233). While Holme does feebly protest that he
doesn’t know where Rinhthy is and that the leader doesn’t need the child, Holme nonetheless
complies when the bearded one tells him to hand the child over and watches motionlessly as the
man cuts the child’s throat. Thus Holme completes the act he began in the opening pages of the
novel, the death of his own son, albeit by a more sinister method than exposure. Bell points out
that it’s even Holme’s boot from which the leader takes the knife that kills the child, reinforcing
his connection to the group and to the crime. The communion of the first meeting is continued;
where the body was shared the first time around, the blood is shared here, as the bearded man
gives the child’s body to the nameless idiot, who “burie[s] his moaning face in its throat” (236).
Another biblical parallel to be considered here is the conflation of the Christ child and crucifixion in one grotesque distortion, and the “witless” acolyte drinking the child’s blood as a stomach-turning bastardization of the sinner saved by the blood of Christ (236).

The significance of names, or the lack of them, forges a further connection between Holme and the idiot. The child dies unnamed, a sick corollary for the man who consumes his body, and who was refused a name by the leader of the triune. In the earlier scene, the leader had explained his reason for refusing to name his follower: “I wouldn’t name him because if you cain’t name something you cain’t claim it. You cain’t talk about it even. You cain’t say what it is” (177). To recall Metress’s theory of the via negativa, the nameless man is virtually nonexistent, inaccessible, a non-person. In practical terms, this enables him to commit heinous crimes and go undetected, but in existential terms it raises deep questions about the nature of identity. If the leader is the anti-Yahweh and similarly known only by what he isn’t, then so is this man identified principally through negation. The other nameless figure in this tableau is the child; he too can’t be claimed and he too lives with regular violence, although on the other side of it from the idiot. When Holme suggests that perhaps the tinker named the child, the man replies, “It wasn’t his to name” (236). By being nameless, the child defaults to the ownership of the bearded man, who then turns him over to his own kind.

Russell M. Hillier has compared Outer Dark and The Pilgrim’s Progress in detail and finds a connection between “Culla” and “cully,” which “in Early Modern slang … signified a "fool," "dupe," and "ignoramus" (“‘In a Dark Parody’”). Hillier points out that, as such a “fool,” Culla is most similar in fact to Ignorance, the character thrown into Hell from the Gates of Heaven at the end of The Pilgrim’s Progress, so the conflation of Christian and Ignorance into
one character is a man who successfully completes his pilgrimage only to find that his actual destination is hell. This sublimation of negative into positive character frustrates any expectations we can have of *Outer Dark* as either a reproduction or parody of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Instead, what we have is something new, a story that echoes the “progress” in form only, but fails to deliver the same function.

Hillier shows us other parallels to Bunyan’s story: the ferryman, the journeyman tinker, the herdsmen, all converted from helpful to harmful renditions of themselves, snarling Culla repeatedly in crime and death as he makes his way to his final meeting with the bearded man (“In a Dark Parody”). Indeed, if we were to go so gar as to consider *Outer Dark* an inversion of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, then the subtitle, “From This World, To That Which is to Come” reveals a sinister path from the Celestial City to the City of Destruction.

Holme survives this second meeting with the three, if only to continue punishment for his crimes. While Rint hy finds the glade and the “little calcined ribcage” of her child in the ashes of the fire, she doesn’t “know what to make of it,” and she presumably never sees her brother again. Still homeless, still kinless, Holme continues his aimless wandering.

The final pages of the novel find Holme “in later years” still on the road. A blind man he regularly sees stops him one day for a smoke, and tells Holme the story of a preacher he’d heard one time, “a healin preacher wanted to cure everybody and … they was a bunch of us there all cripple folks … and they was a feller leapt up and hollered out that nobody knowed what was wrong with. And they said it caused that preacher to go away. But they’s darksome ways afoot in this world and it may be he weren’t no true preacher” (241). An obvious parallel here to Holme’s dream, the preacher story places Holme in the position of the man with nothing apparent wrong
with him, presumably wanting to be healed of some internal deformity. The blind man tells Holme that he wanted to find that man and tell him the preacher was a sham, because “if somebody don’t tell him he never will have no rest” (241). For Holme, however, it is too late, because sham or no, he’d found the preacher and been appropriated by him. He “never will have no rest.”

As Holme passes the blind man and continues on, he walks through a landscape that foreshadows that of The Road: “for miles there were only the charred shapes of trees in a dead land where nothing moved save windy rifts of ash that rose dolorous and died again down the blackened corridors” (242). The road simply ends, in a swamp. As Holme wonders “why a road should come to such a place,” we realize that this is the only place his road can lead. We expect some sort of closure, whether Holme’s death or salvation, or the capture or explanation of the three. But instead we receive nothingness, ash blowing in the wind. Bell recognizes our very human discomfort with such an ending: “McCarthy seems most concerned to deny the world of the grids of understanding we habitually impose upon it – ethical, psychoanalytical, cultural – in order to force us to renew our acquaintance with it as, in this case, an incoherent and unrationalized gestalt of mass and process, without design or purpose, unless it is that some demented and unapproachable God invisibly presides” (38).

16 In this scene, the sun is described as “high afternoon,” which puts it in the western sky. Holme’s shadow “be-wander[s]” “before him,” which means he is moving east, a counterproductive direction for McCarthy, who nearly always has his characters move west. This is another indicator of Holme’s status as lost in every sense.
As the property of the prophet, Holme, himself arguably demented and purposeless in any recognizably human way, must continually roam, spreading the gospel of death along the way in the “faintly smoking garden of the dead” that is his kingdom (242). In the end, it seems that our protagonist has followed a torturous path from one kind of hell to another, cajoled along the way by an “unholy trinity” with no intention of saving him. In such a world, there is no room for a celestial city, and so the allegory itself is ultimately hollow.
Chapter Three: *Child of God* and *Suttree*, or “Mirror image. Gauche carbon.”

The presence of the prophet figure in McCarthy’s work is sometimes fully realized as a single character, as in Judge Holden or Anton Chigurh, whom we will meet all too soon, and sometimes more fragmentary, surfacing in partial portrait or in specific character traits. This is the case in McCarthy’s third and fourth novels, *Child of God* and *Suttree*, whose protagonists fulfill the role of both prophet and recruit. Both Lester Ballard and Cornelius Suttree are dispossessed men living hand to mouth at the outskirts of their communities. Both feel the presence of the past as a threat to be held at bay by whatever desperate means are necessary. This, however, is where comparisons end, for why and how the two men tread their solitary paths differs enough to be opposite sides of the same coin. Lester Ballard, though a “child of God much like yourself perhaps,” (4) is nonetheless a mentally damaged individual pushed to fugitive status by the community who cannot stomach him. Suttree, on the other hand, is a sensitive and intelligent member of a well-off and well-respected family who chooses to turn his back on that life and take up residence in Knoxville’s gutters instead. As prophets, the two men are again opposites, as Ballard functions as prophet for the community that ousted him, while Suttree is plagued internally by the prophetic memory of his dead twin.

*Child of God*

In his third novel, Cormac McCarthy introduces us to interior darkness and its prophet, Lester Ballard. The prophet himself is a direct agent of death, although it can reasonably be argued that he did not start out that way. In ways immediately recognizable to the reader, Ballard represents the depravity within the human that, given the right set of circumstances and
inclinations, can take over. Of the major characteristics of the prophet, Ballard most significantly embodies the prophet’s status as the unnatural other. He also plays the prophetic role of equalizer, showing humanity that the privilege of rational thought does not elevate them above their fellow creatures, including less fortunate humans. If McCarthy claims Ballard as one of us, then we cannot easily dismiss him as something we are not. What series of unfortunate events would have to befall each of us to turn us to the desperate paths Ballard treads? Vereen Bell claims Ballard as “something like the spirit of the place, a bizarre aberration certainly, but not so totally dissociated from the people of that place that he doesn’t seem somehow like their collective nightmare” (Achievement 54). As prophet, Ballard upends the dream of civilization as a just and ordered place rightfully dominated by rational beings. He represents irrationality and the “nightmare” of a world irreducible to logical organization.

One way to understand the prophet’s function in McCarthy’s world is to recognize that the prophet embodies that which cannot be reasoned away. The novel’s rural Tennessee community is given voice by members of the “Sevier County pocketknife society,” which convenes daily on the benches in front of the Sevierville courthouse and keeps a watchful eye on the town (48). Through intermittent tales of Lester Ballard’s childhood and adolescence, we begin to piece together a portrait of a boy who was “off” to begin with and who is then dealt a series of cruel blows by family, community, and fate. The first anecdote shows a young Ballard trying to bully a younger boy into retrieving a lost softball. When the “Finney boy” refuses, Ballard punches him in the face: “The Finney boy just looked at Lester Ballard and went on up the road. I felt, I felt … I don’t know what it was. We just felt real bad. I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that. He never done nothing to me” (18).
This is evidence for Ballard’s “wrongness” from day one. Ballard’s mistreatment of the Finney boy does not cause the speaker’s dislike for him, but rather confirms it. Ballard is also shown here as weak, incapable, even through violence, of forcing the younger boy to do his bidding.

The “nine or ten year old” Ballard is already a pariah among his peers when the event occurs that further destabilizes his mental state and feeds his later pathology: “I don’t know. They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself. They was just the one boy. The mother had run off, I don’t know where to nor who with. Me and Cecil Edwards was the ones cut him down. He come in the store and told it like you’d tell it was rainin out” (21). The young Ballard, likely in a state of shock from which he never fully recovers, is simultaneously abandoned by his one remaining parent and subjected to the grotesqueness of the dead human: “The old man’s eyes was run out on stems like a crawfish and his tongue blacker’n a chow dog’s” (21). While remarking on Ballard’s lack of affect in reporting his father’s suicide, the storyteller seems to attribute it to Ballard’s innate “wrongness,” rather than the shock of finding his hanged father in the barn.

The speaker’s lack of sympathy for the young Ballard prompts the reader to recognize his or her own sympathetic view of Ballard as in contrast with it. We begin to wonder why the omniscient narrator, who makes a point of telling us that Ballard is a human being, is at such odds with the community voices that tell the stories of Ballard’s youth. Scholars find parallels between Lester Ballard and Mary Shelley's monster in Frankenstein, and while the sub- or extra-human qualities of the protagonist readily lend themselves to such a comparison, McCarthy refuses to allow his reader to cast Ballard as “other.” Instead, he claims Ballard as a “child of God, much like yourself perhaps,” nudging us toward more sympathetic parallels of the
grotesque, these unnatural variants of humanity that nevertheless have emotion and drive, however twisted they may be. Another ostracized and abused humanoid monster is Shakespeare's Caliban, who has also been pushed to the fringes of his world by his society. Both grotesque figures are abandoned by mothers and fathers, raise themselves in primitive circumstances, and are ultimately unhoused by figures more powerful than themselves. In Lester Ballard’s case, the role of Prospero is played collectively by the town, voiced by the pocketknife society and Sheriff Fate. With the former banned from the rest of the island by Prospero and the latter evicted from his family home by the authorities, both Caliban and Ballard eventually shelter in caves. Both prowl the landscape, swearing and spying on the humans around them. Both seek to force themselves on young women, unsuccessfully in Caliban's case and only post-mortem for Ballard.

Jay Ellis point outs that “Ballard seems to have been on his own, living alone in the house that his mother had already abandoned, well after his father hangs himself in the barn. That no one seems to have raised him is alarming” (79). For what appears to be a decade or more, Ballard has been living within a community that ignores him. No social services department steps in to foster him; no school system wonders where he is. What information we are given of the adolescent Ballard testifies to his aberrant behavior. Again, a nameless voice of the community relates the story of Ballard breaking the neck of a balking cow by trying to move her with a tractor and a rope around her neck. Even animals refuse to obey Ballard.

In these early scenes, McCarthy establishes the bare bones of Ballard’s history of both violence and powerlessness, but he also makes us sympathize with Ballard by showing how his family and surrounding community repeatedly push him out. He is serially abandoned, first by his mother, then by his peers, then by his father and the community at large. He is established as
“not right” and it is not difficult to imagine that this might have been a contributing factor in the mother’s desertion and the depression that led to his father’s suicide. The community given voice by the pocketknife society would explain Ballard away by claiming that he was never right and therefore never capable of being one of them. As Robert L. Jarrett explains, “the community’s judgment of Ballard seems to arbitrarily precede the actions cited to justify his social exile” (36). What appears to be causal is actually not; Ballard is exiled because of his strangeness, not his actions, which are often caused by his alienation. Rejecting him is an act of self-preservation given credence by his subsequent violent acts. In a vicious cycle that refuses to have a stable cause and effect, Ballard’s psychosis is both reason for and product of his community’s treatment of him.

The opening scene of the novel shows us the adult Ballard on the verge of being evicted from the family home. We see the loneliness of the man even as we recognize in him what began the cycle of desertion:

To watch these things issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning is a man at the barn door. He is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps. (4)

There is something ancient, untamable, unchangeable in Ballard that civilization cannot accept. Even in this scene, where he still inhabits the family home, he is outside the house proper, skulking in the barn. Even with access to the comforts of a house, he is dirty and disheveled. And yet, and even within the uncivilized, barbaric person he inhabits, McCarthy marks him as one of us. As the novel’s later testimonials corroborate, Ballard’s response to what he sees as an invasion of his property (which actually belongs to the state) is to threaten violence to the auctioneer, only to fail miserably and get hit on the head with the blunt side of an axe. This
scene moves Ballard physically outside the boundaries of the community. His house is auctioned to Mr. Greer and Ballard takes up temporary residence in an abandoned cabin on the property of Mr. Waldrop. Following the lead of the people in his life, the houses in Ballard’s life repeatedly expel him, first by eviction, then by fire, and eventually by shotgun blast.

Where other mainstays of the grotesque – Frankenstein’s monster, Grendel, Mr. Hyde – remain devoid enough of sympathetic characteristics for the reader to safely classify them as “other,” Caliban and Ballard are frustratingly familiar in their needs and desires. Caliban, described as “a savage and deformed native of the island,” curses his master Prospero directly for taking the island away from him:

This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak’st from me. When thou cam’st first…  
…All the charms  
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats light on you;  
For I am all the subjects that you have,  
Which first was mine own king, and here you sty me  
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me  
The rest o’th’ island. (The Tempest, 1.2.334-47)

As punishment for his insolence and his attempt to rape Miranda, Prospero afflicts Caliban with spirits that, he says, “sometimes like apes, that mow and chatter at me” (2.2.9). While his evil spirits are chiefly internal, Ballard too is observed to be a “misplaced and loveless simian shape” (20).

A member of the pocketknife society claims that the axe blow Ballard suffered has permanently changed Ballard’s alignment, both physical and mental: “Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that. It must of thowed his neck out someway or another” (9). Note the community’s need to provide a logical reason for Ballard’s behavior. Both finding his dead father and getting hit with an axe are positioned as events after which he was “not right.” By
doing this, the speakers remove the possibility of Ballard, and by extension possibly themselves, being “not right” from birth. They also remove the possibility that his attack on the auctioneer is justified in any way. They must be entirely in the right, which leaves no room for gray area, and positions Ballard as entirely wrong. When Ballard is pushed out to the woods, his innate wrongness is amplified and given wilderness to grow in, compounding his loneliness and otherness. Every time he’s pushed out, he becomes more and more wrong, and every time he tries to make human contact, he is repelled more and more vehemently.

McCarthy, who is meticulously sparing with his words, rarely using any one more than three times in a novel, uses the words “curse,” “cursed,” “curses” and “cursing” in direct description of Ballard no less than 16 times, in addition to the myriad expletives we hear Ballard say directly (Forbis and Sepich). Ballard’s curses are in direct response to what he deems personal affronts, including his own charge for rape from a woman he finds sitting in a nightgown by the side of the road. From his encounter with the woman, we can imagine he might have tried to rape her had he been brave enough, but her clear dominance over him prevents it. She throws a rock at him, after which he snatches her nightgown off her and runs away (41-43).

This is where Ballard’s role as prophet begins to make itself known. Even as a boy, the will to violence was as apparent as his virtually complete inability to make valuable connections with other people. Once reduced to his fugitive state, Ballard begins to plague the woods and hills surrounding the town as a being more recognizable as apelike than human, “gibbering” and making sounds like “the mutterings of a bank of sympathetic apes” (159). McCarthy’s prophets are all marked with an inhuman quality, though the precise nature of that quality shifts along a spectrum from ignorant subhuman to brutal superhuman intelligence. For Ballard, it is a feral
quality linking him more closely to primitive rather than modern man. He scavenges, he gibbers, he shelters in caves. He hides and watches others rather than interacting directly with them, and his rare attempts to mingle with his fellow humans are marked by an alienating awkwardness.

In his retreat from the community, Ballard takes up residence in a filthy tumbledown cabin, long abandoned. He is reduced to eating from a “coathanger skewered with sliced potatoes over the lampchimney” and reading old newspaper accounts of “folks long dead, events forgotten” for company (15). He curses the potato and “mutter[s] over” the words of the paper, exhibiting even at this early stage of his exile a permanent anger and primitive behavior. It is important to return here to McCarthy’s emphasis that Ballard is as human as we are, a “child of God” and deserving of our pity as much as he earns our disgust. Going to bed thirsty, he “dreamt streams of ice black mountain water, lying there on his back with his mouth open like a dead man” (16). We recognize that Ballard’s most basic needs are not being met, and we see him alone and vulnerable in the dark. Like Culla Holme, Ballard is marked as evil through sins of his own, in his case inherent sins, but unlike Holme, the community also has a role in ousting him. McCarthy doesn’t give us the easy out of blaming Ballard as a sinner or a mental deficient, because he lumps us in the same primordial pool as Ballard; we are made of the same stuff. As Vereen Bell phrases it, it comes down to basic human wiring: “Ballard has all of these same wires, but he is wired differently, so he turns out dangerously wrong” (Achievement 55). It’s simply a matter of luck, then, that we are wired correctly.

From the establishment of Ballard in his cabin, we follow him through a series of events marked by his characteristic bad luck. He gets caught masturbating outside the car of a trysting couple on the Frog Mountain turnaround, the local Lovers’ Lane. His cabin is overrun with
foxhounds in the middle of the night; they take out the window frame as they escape. He shoots at a cow in annoyance and actually hits it. And he stumbles across a half-naked woman by the side of the road early one morning and is unjustly accused by her of rape. Obviously ill-treated and waking from a night of heavy drinking, the woman opens her eyes to find Ballard standing there and the first thing she does is call him a “son of a bitch” (42). After a minute or two of verbal abuse and rock-throwing from the woman, Ballard rips away her nightgown and walks off, leaving her “stark naked on the ground” and “calling various names after him, none his” (43). While it’s arguable that Ballard is indeed a son of a bitch, and while it’s none too clear what his intentions with the woman may have been, the fact is that Ballard does not actually rape her, but is arrested for it anyway.

The appropriately named Sheriff Fate is a man confident in his ability to judge people, and he has Ballard's number. In a brief side story just before he arrests Ballard, Fate recalls a hunting trip with a hunting dog that was no good: “I said: Suzie was sick yesterday. Suzie has always been sick. Suzie will always be sick. Suzie is a sick dog” (49). For the sheriff, Ballard and Suzie are two of a kind: Ballard has always been and will always be a sick puppy, and the legal requirement of “innocent until proven guilty” seems not to apply. In a rare moment of good luck for Ballard, he is freed after the woman fails to show up in court, and as he leaves the courthouse, the sheriff follows him out and predicts Ballard’s next crime: “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” (56). Ballard’s claim that “You just got it in for me” isn’t a false one, but another way to view this scene is

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17 One might wonder if being called by his own name would make a difference. His tendency to be unnamed, uncounted, is reminiscent of the apelike idiot of Outer Dark’s triune.
Fate/fate giving Ballard/prophet a directive: you’ve worked your way up this far; now it’s time to up the ante. And so Ballard does.

Ballard is a creature who functions by an impulse more primal than the civilized people of the town, who witness his removal from them as they pass him by:

A man much for himself. Drinkers gone to Kirby’s would see him on the road by night, slouched and solitary, the rifle hanging in his hand as if it were a thing he could not get shut of.
He’d grown lean and bitter.
Some said mad.
A malign star kept him. (41)

The “malign star” that guides Ballard’s behavior could be explained as a metaphor for mental illness, but from Ballard’s perspective it is much more. He feels driven through his existence, both in the sense of being driven out by his community and in the sense of being driven on by a need for human contact and security. He is a “man much for himself,” but it is as much through necessity as it is choice, or perhaps even more. He himself recognizes a connection with the stars: “…he watched the hordes of cold stars sprawled across the smokehole and wondered what stuff they were made of, or himself” (141). The obvious parallel here is between the stars as cold and alien and himself as ostracized, but we reach a more poignant level of understanding when we realize that the self-raised, unschooled Ballard has never learned what stars are. He literally does not know “what stuff they [are] made of,” and his loneliness there in the mountain cave is the loneliness of primitive man wondering for the first time about the makeup of the world around him. The dramatic irony of the reader’s physical knowledge that men and stars are made of the same “stuff” is torturously sad.

18 We may be tempted to predict McCarthy’s future status as a Santa Fe Institute Fellow in this observation.
The only connection Ballard has with life before his father’s suicide is his rifle, which he bought as a boy. His fanatical attachment to the weapon indicates the depth of the hole in his life that should be filled with people. One day he leaves the rifle hidden beneath a bridge while getting supplies, and he has trouble finding it on his return:

There for a moment he flailed wildly, his hand scrambling along the concrete, his eye to the river and the tracks there which already he was trailing to the end of his life. Then his hand closed upon the stock of the rifle. He fetched it down, cursing, his heart hammering. You’d try it, wouldn’t ye? He wailed at the tracks in the snow” (132).

Upon seeing another person’s tracks nearby, Ballard reveals the desperation with which he hangs on to the weapon, and his fear that it, too, will leave him and in the process, kill him. The intensity of his loneliness builds a great reservoir of emotion in him that is only released as rage or, in the rarest of moments, as sorrow. As is too often true, mental illness is twisted into violence, the sentient and malicious world casting Ballard as destroyer.

His rare moments of introspection are connected with the stars and the natural world, and his regular, almost ritual, cursing places him in an antagonistic relationship with the more civilized God of the good folks of Sevier County. When he decides to visit “Six-mile Church” one day, “Ballard had a cold and snuffled loudly through the service but nobody expected he would stop if God himself looked back askance so no one looked” (32). The congregation behaves according to their innate knowledge that their God, the traditional Christian God, has no bearing on Ballard.

Ballard’s relationship with the world of spirit is pantheistic in nature, albeit a twisted version of pantheism to match his own twisted spirit. The streams and caverns he frequents are
personified, sometimes as malicious spirits set doggedly against him, as in this scene in which he believes the stream has tried to drown 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. (156-157)

Ballard clearly feels that, in this instance, nature has evil intent against him, and rails at it. In turn, his shouts are cascaded back at him, compounded in their intensity and revealing the mental instability of their author back to him. In Ballard’s eyes, the flooded creek has tried to kill him, adding insult to injury by committing the act with only shallow water. His rage is as impotent and unheard as it is pervasive and echoing.

As a creature whose life has been mandated by the actions of others, he is one to believe in fate, and a world that dictates the actions of men, however pointlessly. This deterministic worldview is a relentless thread throughout McCarthy’s fiction.

It is appropriate that Ballard be placed in relation to Fate personified in the sheriff as an agent, taking his direction from the more powerful force. As with McCarthy’s other prophets, Ballard is not the originator of his own actions, and responsibility for the death that he brings to the county can in part be laid at the feet of the sheriff and the community. The lines here between prophet and force of destruction are necessarily blurred by the internal damage Ballard suffers from mental illness and repeated blows to the head, but it is clear that Ballard feels compelled forward, his movements determined by something other than his rational mind. What little insight we get into Ballard’s internal self comes either through observed actions, such as when he hangs his head and cries after witnessing the first signs of spring in the valley from his perch
high above, or through his dreams. One night after moving into the cave system, Ballard dreams of moving through woods on the back of a mule:

Each leaf that brushed his face deepened his sadness and dread. Each leaf he passed he’d never pass 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 himself to ride on for he could not turn back and the world that day was as lovely as any that ever was and he was riding to his death. (170-171)

The waking Ballard does not process image and meaning at this level of clarity, but this brief glimpse reveals to us what he knows only subconsciously. He feels driven on his course of action to the point that the only thing that will end it is his death. Also, part of his commitment to his course is the sense that he can go no other way, he “could not turn back.” Despite his own dim awareness that he is somehow “wrong” and that his actions are evil, Ballard cannot do anything other than continue.

The things the sheriff “ain’t found out yet” first involve his voyeurism and quickly escalate to necrophilia. Another early morning trip to the Frog Mountain turnaround, the same place where he’d first watched the couple having sex and later found the half-dressed woman, Ballard comes across the corpses of a young couple asphyxiated mid-coitus. Ballard has stumbled upon the solution to his solitude, a companion who cannot run away, as his mother did, or kill herself, as his father did, or turn against him, as his community did. He pulls the young man to one side, and in a sad and sick parody of the act of love, mounts the young woman: “A crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured into that waxen ear everything he’d ever thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she did not hear him? (89). As Jay Ellis notes, “The words here make it clear that he has never been with a living woman, and that he is full of what he wants to say” (87). While we are certainly better off not knowing the specifics of Ballard’s
endearments, we can feel pity for a man reduced to his state, homeless and scavenging for survival. After he finishes, he walks away, only to return to the car three times to take cash, whiskey, the dead girl’s makeup, and finally, the girl herself. This is how Lester Ballard becomes a necrophile, but not yet a murderer. The scene of death reveals his fate to him here in the same way that soon his appearance will mean the deaths of others.

As to be expected with Ballard, his luck cannot hold. He returns with the girl to his squatter’s cabin, stowing her in the attic to preserve her in the frigid winter weather, and pulling her out and thawing her by the fire when he wants to play house. Which he does, grotesquely dressing her up and going outside to watch her through the windows. In an effort to keep the weather away and warm the room enough to keep the girl pliable, Ballard overtaxes the chimney and ends up burning the house down:

He woke in the night with some premonition of ill fate. He sat up. The fire had diminished to a single tongue of flame that stood near motionless from the ashes. He lit the lamp and turned up the wick. A shifting mantle of smoke overhung the room. Thick ribbons of white smoke were seeping down between the boards in the ceiling and he could hear a light crackling noise overhead like something feeding. Oh shit, he said. (104)

The fire feeds not just on the house, but on the girl hidden in the attic. Like every other person and place in Ballard’s life, these pitiful approximations of shelter and companionship abandon him as well. This sight also strikes him dumb, which is a rarity: “Ballard crossed the soggy ground and climbed onto the hearth and sat there like an owl. For the warmth of it. He’d long been given to talking to himself but he didn’t say a word” (105). He was also speechless, even failing to curse, at the discovery of the girl in the car. Like she was a great gift, Ballard accepted her with dumbstruck awe and mourns her departure with the same silence.
If discovery of this girl made Ballard a necrophile, it is her loss that makes him a murderer. He has discovered the kind of woman he wants, and after being pushed out of even a rudimentary home to a cave, whatever small scraps Ballard retained of morality fall away. He is now fully a prophet and an agent of destruction.

Ballard’s first victim is a girl we meet earlier in the narrative when Ballard delivers a “half froze robin” as a “playpretty”(77) for the girl’s illegitimate and deformed son, described as “a hugeheaded bald and slobbering primate…perennially benastied and afflicted with a nameless crud” (77). This gesture is a grotesque approximation of courting that, predictably, fails for Ballard. The girl rejects his advances and the child chews the bird’s legs off. “He wanted it to where it couldn’t run off,” Ballard says, revealing his identification with the child’s desires (79). The two are alike in his eyes: alone, unwanted, reviled. The girl’s response to Ballard, “If I didn’t have no better sense than that I’d quit,” could just as easily be applied to Ballard as to the child (79). Unfortunately for her, Ballard is just getting started.

After the revelation provided by the dead girl’s discovery, Ballard returns to the first girl’s house. In his first fully prophetic action, he knocks on the door and makes small talk with her. The banter between them, consisting of insults on her side and innuendo on his, unintentionally uncovers truths about Ballard: “You ain’t even a man. You’re just a crazy thing,” the girl says, to which Ballard replies, “I might be more than you think” (117). After she rejects his advances, which he fully expects, he replies, “All right … If that’s the way you want it” (118). While these comments are easy to overlook simply for their banality, they nonetheless reveal a change in the way Ballard views the world. Before his discovery of the dead girl, his only recourse after rejection was to retreat further into the wilderness, but now he has acquired a
newfound alternative to traditional courtship and an avenue to power over the women he covets. The girl, while utterly unaware of it, has chosen the “way she wants it” through her rejection of Ballard. If he can’t have her cooperative and living, he’ll simply take her cooperative and dead. If the unnamed wrongness in Ballard has brought him to this pass, here is where he embraces that force of destruction and willingly becomes its agent.

Ballard retreats from the house, goes around back, and shoots the girl through the window. He then sets the house on fire to cover his tracks, with the deformed child inside “watching him, berryyed filthy and frightless among the painted flames” (120). Could it be that in killing the child, Ballard is destroying the image of his former helpless self? Up to this point on, he has been pushed further and further away by the town, so that his only choice now is to go, like Caliban, underground:

He followed this course for perhaps a mile down all its turnings and through narrows that fetched him sideways advancing like a fencer and through a tunnel that brought him to his belly, the smell of the water beside him in the trough rich with minerals and past the chalken dung of he knew not what animals until he climbed up a chimney to a corridor above the stream and entered into a tall and bellshaped cavern. Here the walls with their softlooking convolutions, slavered over as they were with wet and bloodred mud, had an organic look to them, like the innards of some great beast. Here in the bowels of the mountain Ballard turned his light on ledges or pallets of stone where dead people lay like saints. (134-35)

Unlike his brother grotesque Caliban, Ballard does not have a clear memory of his mother, finding some maternal comfort instead in the womb-like cave where he has set up his menagerie of the dead. Ballard begins a new life, building an underground community for himself from the bodies of the young women (and, when necessary, men) whom he kills at the mountain trysting ground.
After the sheriff again brings him in, this time for burning down Mr. Waldrop’s cabin, a crime Ballard has committed but denies, Fate tells him, “You are either going to have to find some other way to live or some other place in the world to do it in” (123). Again taking his directive from Fate, Ballard chooses a new way of life, although not one intended by the sheriff. Having already become a murderer, perhaps even by the sheriff’s unintended suggestion, he continues to populate his underground society of the dead. The pace quickens at this point, rendering a scene in the local store where Ballard sells three men’s watches, which means that he has added three couples to his community, for a total body count now of seven. As is to be expected of Ballard’s interactions with other people, he fails miserably in his attempt to sell the watches, in the end selling all three for eight dollars when his asking price had been five apiece.

Immediately juxtaposed to this is the description of the cave where Ballard keeps his grotesque family: “a tall and bellshaped cavern…the walls with their softlooking convolutions, slavered over as they were with wet and bloodred mud, had an organic look to them… (135). Here, in the stony underground, McCarthy presents us with an analogy to life. The stone is more welcoming, more maternal, to Ballard than any man-made home has ever been, and at the same time, it is described as bloody and beastlike. Shown to be literally in the belly of the beast now, Ballard has at last found a modicum of home. Jarrett explains that “both mud and corpses depict his attraction to violence, his misanthropy, his ambivalent craving for companionship” (41). Only here with his corpses can Ballard feel any protection from the desertion and failure that has plagued his twenty-seven years on earth thus far. But this sanctuary is impermanent, subject within to decay and without to detection.

19 Or eight when we include the girl that burned.
Ballard’s plans begin to fall apart. The sheriff begins to piece things together. Ballard fails to kill the male of a couple he assaults on the mountain, and the man escapes. The spring thaw reveals his tracks to and fro across his patch of woods, and Ballard realizes that he has to relocate or be tracked down. In the middle of a spring flood, he hauls his corpses one by one through a spring that has escaped its banks and McCarthy uncharacteristically addresses the reader directly, shifting into present tense to do so:

He could not swim, but how would you drown him? His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to work here. See him. You could say that he’s sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. But they want this man’s life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with lanterns and cries of execration. How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him?” (156)

In this remarkable passage we can detect the relationship between this man, this prophet, and the destruction he serves as agent. Living inside the whole and healthy, predictable and orderly world, is another variant of humanity, one that “gives suck to the maimed and crazed” and has its own history. That history, of violence, of disorder, of “wrongness,” has spawned Ballard. These two forces push forever against one another, in a balancing act that must eventually shift toward victory for one side or the other. Sheriff Fate and the citizens of Sevier County can cry out for justice and seek those like Ballard, even find them and try them and kill them, and yet that dark world will continue to nurture its own. If truth and goodness are supposed to win, if the good guys are to prevail, then the waters should take Ballard. The “halt in the way of things” is the fact that the “wrong blood” seems to take the day here; Ballard’s wrath brings him through the flood, powering his determination to keep what he has taken. McCarthy asks us here to pause
and truly see this world, to consciously acknowledge its existence, to accept Ballard, this “maimed and crazed” man, as a child of God much like ourselves.

In town, the flood has prompted rescue operations, and as Sheriff Fate and his deputy ferry Mr. Wade to the courthouse, the old man tells stories of the county’s past, when the White Caps plagued the countryside. The deputy asks, “You think people was meaner then than they are now?” and Mr. Wade responds, “I think people are the same from the day God first made one” (168). The young representative of the law wants to believe that people can improve, that they can be kinder than they used to be, but the old man sees humanity as repeating the same cycle over and over, continually breeding the right and the wrong to set in strife against one another. The wrong is a permanent category, a foil to the right, and will not be eradicated as our collective dream wishes. Mr. Wade seems to recognize what McCarthy wants us all to see in Ballard’s creek crossing.

In the new cave, an exhausted and frostbit Ballard experiences a rare moment of clarity: “He had not stopped cursing. Whatever voice spoke to 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” (158). McCarthy here has provided us with a roadmap to the force of destruction driving Ballard. It is not, as in other books, an external force guiding his actions and prompting his prophetic behavior, but rather an internal force fueled by Ballard’s explosive wrath, an anger that has been with him from his youth, as we witnessed in the tale of the Finney boy. It is his wrongness taking over, tempered more and more rarely by a measure of sanity that recognizes the monstrosity he has become. It is perhaps only his physical exhaustion that allows that voice to creep forward at this moment, but even in his weakened state Ballard is too much
for it. He sees to his most basic needs and gives in to his primitive side, “soaking his feet and
gibbering, a sound not quite like crying that echoed from the walls of the grotto like the
mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes (159).

The coming of spring marks the end of Ballard’s necrophilic murder spree, as the ice and
snow he has relied on for cover begins to fade away. As he witnesses the mating of hawks, we
are reminded again of how ill-informed Ballard is about the ways of the world. The violence of
the airborne mating appeals to him, and even as he misreads it, he uncovers a truth of his
existence: “He did not know how hawks mated but he knew that all things fought” (169). In
Ballard’s experience, all interactions between humans are negative: they fight, they reject, they
leave, they die. His ignorance of the procreative act in hawks reflects his own failure to
experience the procreative act in humans. The spring awakening resonates in his own emptiness,
and he reacts to what he can feel but cannot understand: “he let his head drop between his knees
and he began to cry” (170).

So we see that Ballard is not a man incapable of reflection, but one whose capacities for it
are severely, irreparably damaged. This interpretive opacity is common among McCarthy’s
prophets, but while his antagonist prophets actively generate and use it, his protagonist prophets
have it by default. They rarely use their active minds, and moments of clarity like the ones
Ballard experiences are generally pushed away. But they do dream. As we saw with Culla
Holme, and as we will see with Cornelius Suttree, McCarthy occasionally gives us a glimpse into
a prophet’s subconscious mind through dreams. In his cave, Ballard hears whistling that reminds
him of his father, and he dreams himself in a pastoral scene riding a mile along a ridge in the
woods, and “he had resolved himself to ride on for he could not turn back and the world that day
was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death” (171). Despite his internal recognition of his own wrongness, Ballard is compelled to continue along his path to its end, which will necessitate his death. But it gives him a moment of beauty, which is more than waking life has ever given him.

Throughout the novel, Ballard regularly visits his old homestead, watching its new owner, Mr. Greer, about his daily chores. Pushed to the limits of his sanity, Ballard attempts to reclaim his original home. Emerging in the clothes and even the hair of his victims, he attacks Greer, shooting him twice and chasing him into the house, which violently rejects him:

He looked like something come against the end of a springloaded tether or some slapstick contrivance of the filmcutter’s art, swallowed up in the door and discharged from it again almost instantaneously, ejected in an immense concussion backwards, spinning, one arm flying out in a peculiar limber gesture, a faint pink cloud of blood and shredded clothing and the rifle clattering soundless on the porchboards amid the uproar and Ballard sitting hard on the floor for a moment before he pitched off into the yard. (173)

The imagery of the house swallowing and then vomiting a broken and dismembered Ballard back out seems a decisive, if not final, rejection of him. Having been removed by degrees from the community from this house, to the squatter’s cabin, to a series of caves, Ballard’s forced entry here requires his expulsion at a new level of vehemence. His appearance “in frightwig and skirts,” as Greer experiences it, is not human: “the man looked at whatever it was standing there cursing to itself while it worked the lever of the rifle, an apparition created whole out of nothing and set upon him with such dire intent” (173).

Greer’s removal of Ballard’s arm by shotgun places Ballard in the county hospital, where McCarthy describes him as “Ballard in a thin white gown in a thin white room, false acolyte or antiseptic felon, a practitioner of ghastliness, a part-time ghoul” (174). The language here is
especially rich, as Ballard is not just a true acolyte to a false God, the force of destruction he follows in his murderous course through the woods, but it turns out that he is false, wrong, even there. By attempting to return home, he has failed his own plans, gotten caught.

The newly one-armed Ballard is pulled from his hospital bed by a group of vigilantes significantly unaccompanied by Sheriff Fate. As the posse interrogates him, Ballard claims ignorance of the bodies and their location. He only gives in when they put a steel cable around his neck. It is worth noting here that Ballard does not want to die, despite all he’s been through and the predicament that he is currently in. Never in all his travails has he given any indication of wanting to give up. The fire that fuels that wrath we witnessed at his creek crossing is still burning strong, even as his physical body is broken. We must also acknowledge here that he has seen a hanged man’s face, since he’s the one who found his father, and that knowledge must inform his decision to relent here as well. The absence of Sheriff Fate in this scene also points to a “halt in the way of things”; Ballard’s path further and further into mental illness and depravity has been marked by the presence of the Sheriff, who has, unbeknownst to himself, told Ballard how to proceed. Now Ballard has been hijacked by those who do not follow the law but rather occupy some territory between right and wrong. They make a mess of things for Ballard, and for the Sheriff. Ballard must admit his guilt in order to get into the caves where he can make his escape, and by losing Ballard, the posse loses the Sheriff’s path to recovering the bodies.

As Ballard leads the men into the cave that had recently been his home, he easily eludes them and vanishes ahead through paths familiar only to him. As it dawns on the men that Ballard has “played [them] for a bunch of fools,” they also realize the larger implications of this act:
You know what we’ve done, don’t ye?’”
Yeah, I know what we’ve done. We’ve rescued the little fucker from jail and turned him loose where he can murder folks again. That’s what we’ve done.
That’s exactly right. (186)

Through their misappropriation of the legal system, the vigilantes have allowed Ballard to return to the landscape that is familiar to him, but foreign to them. In their liminal state between justice and crime, they have allowed the criminal to take the upper hand.

But Ballard has reached the end of his path. Now that he’s admitted to the killings, he’s forged a link between himself and the community, and the same group that has pushed him relentlessly away for his whole life now wants him, albeit not in a way Ballard would prefer. After escaping the vigilantes he becomes lost in the caves and wanders for three days. After finding a chink of light in the ceiling of a cavern, he digs at it for two days in an attempt to free himself. On the morning of the day before he breaks free, McCarthy describes Ballard: “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” (189). The wrath that has kept Ballard going for so long has finally worn itself out, and the universe has won the case he has brought against it. For his time, Ballard as prophet served the force of darkness and caused discomfort and fear in the town, but now his usefulness has come to its end.

Only now, after his energy is spent and he can no longer perform his prescribed duty, can Ballard reenter society. He wishes for some “brute midwife to spald him from his rocky keep” (189) and following this final expulsion, he emerges into a world he does not know. “He cast about among the stars for some kind of guidance but the heavens wore a different look that Ballard did not trust” (190). The universe that he had been a part of, that he had fought with and cursed, and in the end found some measure of companionship in, is now gone, and he is restored
to the ordinary world, starving and hunted. From this painful rebirth, Ballard drags himself back
to the hospital, “a weedshaped onearmed human swaddled up in outsized overalls and covered
all over with red mud. His eyes were caved and smoking. I’m supposed to be here, he said”
(192). The narrator at this point identifies Ballard directly as a “swaddled” “human,” deserving,
however pitifully, to belong somewhere. Caliban is similarly defeated in the end, railing
unsuccessfully against the more powerful humans who hold him in bondage. Once defeated,
Caliban grasps gratefully at Prospero’s statement “This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge
mine,” saying “…I’ll be wise hereafter, / And seek for grace” (5.1.277-78, 5.1.298-99). Unable
to free themselves from their external and internal tormentors, in the end both monsters simply
want to be men, and to belong.

With his death in the sterile confines of a hospital bed, Ballard is used up, spent as an
insect husk or shell casing. He has done his violent work to the best of his ability, and now the
force of destruction is finished with him. As the old man safely predicted, however, this death is
not a victory; there is no truth or justice or closure here. Ballard’s corpse is relegated to the state
medical school for a training cadaver, the students examining his entrails “like those haruspices
of old” who “perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations” (194). Ballard is
clearly not the last of his kind.

_Suttree_

There is no difference between the internal and external worlds of McCarthy’s universe:
the void which houses the human in turn is housed by the human. In this same symbiosis is also
housed the god of war who sends his prophet of destruction into the world. For Lester Ballard,
the prophet is internal, and victorious. Out of the eyes of what once may have been a viable
human looks a monster bent on violating death itself. Cornelius Suttree is Ballard’s near brother in torment, facing his own internal prophet of destruction. His background in an upper middle class family and his innate intelligence make Suttree a new kind of protagonist for McCarthy. Unlike the boy John Wesley Rattinger, the imbecile Culla Holme, and the warped Lester Ballard of the first three novels, Suttree is both intelligent and mature, an especially good candidate for recruitment. While he has the same potential for violence as his predecessors, he also has something they have all lacked: he is smart enough not only to join the darkness, but also to preach it. The prophet hunting him is merciless because he sees Suttree as an extension of himself. He recognizes Suttree’s potential and is bent on bringing Suttree home to the gospel of destruction. Using his own body as test subject, Suttree has already learned the ways of destruction intimately, and as its agent he would be a daunting adversary. The trouble, however, is that no matter how much Suttree would like to leave it behind, he has a true moral compass. The task of the prophet is to destroy it, and the jury is still out on whether or not he succeeds.

While other protagonists, like Culla Holme of *Outer Dark* and the kid of *Blood Meridian*, are pursued by an external destructive force, Ballard and Suttree flee self-destruction, the prophet’s chosen tool for them, with only the latter achieving a small and temporary victory. Suttree is a man who has never been whole; his twin and genetic other half was stillborn and lingers as Suttree’s doppelganger, the voice from the dead that speaks to him of his failures. In an effort to distance himself from his self-perceived failure as son, brother, and father, Suttree deliberately chooses the lowest company he can find in order to deny his birthright. He is a man who thinks, but does not want to. In a universe denied a god of mercy, the only real good a man can do is resist the temptation to end it all through violence. Suttree is sorely tempted,
positioning himself in the most precarious and volatile of Knoxville neighborhoods. While he walks right up to death many times, at his own hands or those of others, in the end he is too self-aware not to survive.

Explicitly mentioned as one of only four books20 admired by McCarthy, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is undoubtedly the inspiration for *Suttree*. Suttree is as much a native and intimate of his Knoxville as Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus are of their Dublin. And *Suttree* does for Knoxville what Joyce’s novel did for its city; maps bear out the exact locations of businesses and homes, with historical names showing up as characters in the narratives. But where Dublin is essentially a solid and prosperous city and Bloom and Dedalus ultimately men at home in their skins, Suttree’s Knoxville is perched on the edge of demolition and the protagonist himself is a soul tortured almost beyond bearing.

The inverse parallels between Bloom and Suttree are many: Bloom has a beautiful (albeit unfaithful) wife whom he loves dearly and a daughter who is grown and prospering. Suttree has abandoned his own (faithful) wife and his son dies in the course of the novel. Bloom is a relatively successful advertising salesman while Suttree hovers on the brink of starvation, subsisting on the questionable Cumberland River fish he sells at the local market. Bloom is mild mannered and rarely drinks to excess while Suttree regularly gets blinding drunk and ends up in bar fights. Bloom revels in his imagination and intellectual leanings while Suttree deliberately tries to avoid thinking as much as possible. Both characters have faced grievous loss: Bloom with the earlier death of a son and the current realization of his wife’s infidelity, Suttree with

20 *Ulysses, Moby-Dick, The Sound and the Fury*, and *The Brothers Karamozov* (Kushner)
nearly every aspect of his existence. Bloom, however, is able to come to terms with his emotions while Suttree is faced with either denying them completely or being consumed by them.

The inversion is not complete however. Bloom has a despondent streak in him that materializes on occasion, as when he imagines his city as transient, impermanent:

Cityful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too: other coming on, passing on. Houses, lines of houses, streets, miles of pavements, piledup bricks, stones. Changing hands. This owner, that. Landlord never dies they say. Other steps into his shoes when he gets his notice to quit. They buy the place up with gold and still they have all the gold. Swindle in it somewhere. Piled up in cities, worn away age after age. Pyramids in sands … No one is anything. (167)

Bloom’s musings, although bleak, seem keyed into a permanent flow of change, an assumption that Dublin will continue to morph and change, but not disappear. While the corrupt have always had the power, the fact that the “[l]andlord never dies” is also reassuring in its way.

Suttree’s city, however, is irrevocably altered, ruined:

He watched the bland workman in the pilothouse of the crane shifting levers. The long tethered wreckingball swung through the side of a wall and small boys applauded … Gnostic workmen who would have down this shabby shapeshow that masks the higher world of form … Until nothing stood save rows of doors, some bearing numbers, all nailed to. Beyond lay fields of rubble, twisted steel and pipes and old conduits reared out of the ground in clusters of agonized ganglia among the broken slabs of masonry. Where small black hominids scurried over the waste and sheets of newsprint rose in the wind and died again. (464)

While there will be new roads through this twisted landscape, they will not be of Suttree’s city. That world is gone for good, claimed by creatures reminiscent of Mother She. Where Dublin remains Dublin, Knoxville is no more.

The resonances between Suttree and Dedalus, however, are many. In Dedalus’ consciousness we find some precursors to Suttree’s angst. Both are highly intelligent, even
intellectual; both are poor. Both tend to find the negative as they contemplate the world. In an early scene, we see Dedalus morosely contemplate his own birth:

Wombed in sin darkness was I too, made not begotten. By them, the man with my voice and my eyes and a ghostwoman with ashes on her breath. They clapped and sundered, did the coupler’s will. From before the ages He willed me and now may not will me away or ever. A *lex eternal* stays about Him. Is that then the divine substance wherein Father and Son are consubstantial? (40)

The suspicion of fathers, absence of mothers and suspect nature of native Catholicism are all reminiscent of Suttree’s own origins, as is the inherent assumption that the self is corrupt and undeserving from its first breath. An echo of the same thought arrives later in *Ulysses*, when Stephen imagines that “through the ghost of the unquiet father the image of the unliving son looks forth” (197).

**Survivor’s Guilt**

Suttree’s relationship with his brother doppelganger makes itself known in the prologue, through narrative sleight of hand and oblique references to stillbirth, as “now and again the beached and stinking forms of foetal humans bloated like young birds mooneyed and bluish or stale gray” wash up beside the Lethian Tennessee River (4). Diane Luce explores this prologue’s puzzling narrator, who uses both first- and second-person address in phrases such as “we are come into a world within the world” (4) through which “no soul shall walk save you” (3). With infrequent first-person exceptions, the rest of the novel is clearly from Suttree’s third-person perspective, making this deliberate aberration in the first pages both obvious and ominous. Who is this narrator, and who is the “you” addressed here? The “soul” we watch walk through the valley of the damned that is the Knoxville riverbank is Suttree himself, which removes him as a

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21 This quotation also prefigures the Judge’s declaration in *Blood Meridian* that “it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods” (145).
possible narrator. Or does it? Luce suggests that “Suttree’s and the narrator’s voices simultaneously invest one another or coexist, one in palimpsest under the other—are in fact twins or different manifestations of the same narrative consciousness, one contemporaneous with the action of the novel and one more retrospective” (“Prisoner in Babylon” 205). To rephrase, there is Suttree himself in the midst of the action and the “Anti-Suttree,” (28) “othersuttree” (287) persona of the dead twin simultaneously observing both the action and Suttree in it. Layered over the persona of the twin is the image of the prophet, sometimes indistinguishable, sometimes distinct. If the dead twin is the text over which the live Suttree is written, then the second-person prologue and the first-person breaks in the main text have context. Whether we think of this disembodied narrator as Suttree’s literal dead twin, or as some manifestation of him in Suttree’s consciousness, what we are left with is a man broken, divided within his being, and attempting to narrate his story through multiple consciousnesses. Louis H. Palmer III’s conception of Suttree is useful: “a Charon of sorts, a communicant and interpreter between Knoxville’s underworld…and that of the world above, from whence he came, and from where we watch” (154). As a carrier of souls, Suttree is attempting either to settle his brother irreversibly into death or to convey himself there to join him.

We are directly introduced to the twin as Suttree imagines him: a visitor of dreams with a half-moon birthmark on his right temple. With his own birthmark on the left side, Suttree is his brother’s “Mirror image. Gauche carbon” (14). As second son, he sees himself as failing in all of the ways his brother should have succeeded, including living while his twin died. He feels himself punished for his brother’s death, living in a “terrestrial hell” while his twin has escaped into the “limbo of the Christless righteous” (14). Himself a breech birth, Suttree feels kinship
with whales and bats, “life forms meant for other mediums than the earth and having no affinity for it” (14). From his first breath, Suttree has felt the need to be somewhere else.

In order to satisfy his genetic need for flight, Suttree constructs an intricate web of escape mechanisms, the most prominent of which are alcohol, separation from his family, and denial of his upper middle-class background and education. As with all self-destructive habits, of course, alcohol is only a temporary fix, and it is in one of his morning-after stupors that we see that the twin, now grown, continues to haunt Suttree. The fact that this vision is in the first person indicates that the distance normally maintained by the third-person Suttree persona has been temporarily weakened:

“They bore a dead child in a glass bier. Sinister \(^2\) abscission, did I see with my seed eyes his thin blue shape lifeless in the world before me? Who comes in dreams, mansized at times and how so? Do shades nurture? As I have seen my image twinned and blown in the smoked glass of a blind man’s spectacles I am, I am” (80).

The irony of seeing himself in the glasses of a blind man who cannot in turn see him is not lost on the reader or on Suttree, who is trying to disappear, but the double affirmation of “I am, I am” reinforces the pervasive presence of the dead twin in Suttree’s life, and Suttree’s tendency to think of the twin as a variant of himself. The “sinister abscission” itself is ambiguous, either an address to the dead twin as cut off from Suttree, or as Suttree cut off prematurely from the child who should have shared his life. The twinning image also occurs three other times in the text: in the eyes of his opponent in jail fight (52), in Suttree’s own eyes after a blow in a bar fight (187), and in the eyes of the waterbearer in the novel’s last scene (471). In the fourfold repetition of

\(^2\) The original meaning of “sinister” as left-handed seems relevant here, matching Suttree’s left-temple birthmark.
Suttree as two, it is only in the last instance, as he is leaving Knoxville for good, that the twinning is not paired with violence or death.

Drinking one night at Ab Jones’ place, Suttree contemplates zygotes, wondering “If a cell can be lefthanded may it not have a will? And a gauche will?” (113). Worrying over his own offhanded existence, a wrong to every right he crosses, Suttree sleeps fitfully, disturbed by “[h]is subtle obsession with uniqueness” (113). Time and again, the alcohol he uses to dull his consciousness ends up betraying him in dreams by conjuring the very ghosts he wants to escape. As he struggles to be one man, an entity with one true identity, his genetic link with his dead brother continually drags him back into duality, indecision, and fragmentation.

Doubling and alcohol continue to be linked as the novel progresses. At the Indian Rock roadhouse, in Suttree’s closest alcoholic brush with death, a bar fight gone wrong ends with a man bringing a floor buffer down on Suttree’s head, immediately after which “[h]e distinctly heard his mother say his name” (187). As he falls, he is assaulted by a vision of death in which neither “the black of nothing” nor a “Madonna of desire or mother of eternal attendance” awaits, but rather “a foul hag with naked gums smiling” (187). Fighting this image, Suttree attempts to remain standing, asking himself “What man is such a coward that he would not rather fall once than remain forever tottering?” (187). Suttree himself is that coward, his mind betraying his body’s desire to end everything, the ethical core of him knowing that this is a cheap way out. Waking later in the hospital, he is told he has cracked his skull, broken fingers and ribs, and knocked several teeth loose. He is very broken, but not dead. A lingering effect of his injury is that he sees double, splitting his world into multiple options, none of which offers respite.
Relief does not come through the altered consciousness of drunkenness, nor through the escape of sleep, for Suttree is a dreamer. He is perpetually plagued by visions of death and of surreal figures creeping in on him: spiders, eels, hags, ghosts, monks, hounds and hunters. One in particular is a premonition of his story’s end. Suttree dreams of a grand hall and a feast, with warriors dining on meat and water alone. During the meal, a hound bays, indicating a hunt is in the offing. In response “The master wipes his fingers in his hair and his rising says that the feast is done. Outside darkness has begun and the hounds’ voices are chimes in the distance that toll seven and cease. They wait for the waterbearer to come but he does not come, and does not come” (136). This moment of suspended animation is waiting to be set free for the hunt through darkness, after a very specific prey.

Like Suttree, all of McCarthy’s protagonists are dreamers. The dreams show them the world that is to be, the one finally secured by the prophet, appropriately guided by death and destruction, the only truly reliable forces in the void. As doppelganger, the dead twin weighs heavily on Suttree’s mind in these dreams, conjuring survivor’s guilt and fear, which reappear with increased intensity when Suttree must encounter his past.

Family is Suttree’s emotional Achilles’ heel. When left alone to wallow in his self-imposed spectral existence in his seedy houseboat, Suttree can sometimes imagine himself unattached, free of the memories of his wife, son, and parents, all of whom he has abandoned. Early in the novel, a particularly telling scene illustrates Suttree’s self-image. As he approaches the door of a diner, he sees his reflection “come up from life’s other side like an autoscopic hallucination, Suttree and Antisuttree, hand reaching to the hand” (28). This delusion of wholeness, he and his twin rejoined, informs the hollowness of his real life. Without the two
halves to make the whole, the Antisuttree works instead to cancel the Suttree out. His visions come upon him waking as well as asleep, and plague him constantly.

In a rare visit to his Aunt Martha, we see Suttree encounter his ancestors as he makes his way through an old photo album. The experience leaves him sickened: the album “seemed to reek of the vault, turning up one by one these dead faces with their wan and loveless gaze out toward the spinning world…. I am, I am. An artifact of prior races” (129). Suttree’s sense of self in this moment is of a dead thing, an artifact left over from time past, useless in the now. Family is nothing but “foxed and crumbling paper” and “old distaff coughed up out of the vortex, thin and cracked and macled and a bit redundant” (129). As the “redundant” and therefore unnecessary son, Suttree is a non-participant in family, merely watching it from a distance, but incapable of exiting completely.

When word comes that his only son has died, however, the past rises up to face him head-on, placing him partially back in a life he sought to leave permanently. By leaving the safety of Knoxville’s slums for the burial, Suttree temporarily enters a place between his present life and his past. By being fully present in neither his literal family nor his chosen one, he effectively does not exist. On the train heading to the funeral, Suttree remembers himself as a boy:

Child of darkness and familiar of small dooms. He himself used to wake in terror to find whole congregations of the uninvited attending his bed, protean figures slouched among the room’s corners in all multiplicity of shapes, gibbons and gargoyles, arachnoids of outrageous size, a bat-shaped creature hung by some cunning in a high corner from whence clicked and winked like bone chimes its incandescent teeth. (149)

Himself doomed from childhood, Suttree has now extended his taint to his own son, who has inexplicably but unsurprisingly died ahead of him. Unable to reach out into death to join his brother and his son, Suttree instead does everything in his power, short of suicide, to turn himself
into a cipher. He is neither father nor son, a detached mourner uncomforted by anyone. It is in this state, separated from all that connects him to the world and to life, that he is the most vulnerable to conversion to darkness and violence. Recognized by the local sheriff, who names him a “fourteen carat gold-plated son of a bitch,” Suttree is unceremoniously run out of town, only to be joined on the road by a “big meanlooking kid” who ends up trying to beat and rob him (156, 160). Literally pursued, Suttree flees back to Knoxville, away from anyone who knew him before his fall and back into the embrace of his lowlife family in McAnally Flats.

The son’s death serves as the final cut in a series of Suttree’s deliberate removals from his family and his own history. His memories remain intricately tied with his family’s Catholic foundation, and mothers and fathers for him maintain a creepily religious connection. The church of his childhood has failed him. Drunk and tired, Suttree wanders one night to the Church of the Immaculate Conception and is swamped by childhood memories (“viceridden child, heart rotten with fear” (253)). Later, he is woken by a priest who asks him “Do I know you?” (255). As Peter does with Christ, Suttree denies his association and flees the church, proclaiming it “not God’s house” (255). Following his sojourn in the woods, he visits the schoolhouse “where he’d been taught a sort of christian witchcraft” and is watched silently by a priest, whom Suttree sees as a “catatonic shaman who spoke no word at all…a paper priest in a pulpit or a prophet sealed in glass” (304-305). Traditional Catholicism, bound up in his past, has been sucked dry of all of its meaning, left behind as a shell of its former self. The fruitless priests of the old religion watch him, hovering disapproving and silent in the background of his life, much as his own father does.

What we know of Suttree’s father comes to us secondhand, in a letter translated by Suttree, and through conversations with his uncle and with an old friend of the family, Dr. Neal.
The only direct advice from father to son comes in what Suttree calls “my father’s last letter,” and is an admonition to leave his chosen life on the streets, which his father calls “[n]othing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and impotent” (14). Citing Suttree’s apparent potential, the older man tells him “the world is run by those willing to take the responsibility for the running of it” (13). The choice of “last letter” is telling, as it could mean “most recent” but more clearly means “final,” although by whose choice is not clear. Suttree’s father is a shadow, a voice echoed in others, delivering platitudes and very little more. He is a patriarch, but not a father.

The interchange with Dr. Neal is particularly telling, however, because Suttree clearly lies about his relationship with his father, not willing to allow a third party from the past to witness his self-imposed isolation. When Neal asks how his father is, Suttree replies “He is well. I see him seldom” (366). From what we can tell, he sees him never, and yet he deliberately continues the ruse of putting on a good face for this old friend of his father’s. Dr. Neal is a lawyer, a “lifelong friend of doomed defendants” and his “ragged” and “tattered” appearance in the book puts him in the same category as traditional religion: still there but worn out, no longer a viable way of doing things (366).

Another significant father in the text belongs to Leonard. After Suttree had helped Leonard sink his dead father, wrapped in chains, in the river to avoid social security fraud charges, the father comes back up “Draggin all them chains with him” (417). What is literary farce of the best kind also bears a symbolism not lost on Suttree, whose comment “Fathers will do that” says as much about his relationship with his own father as it does about Leonard’s conundrum (417).
The final priest/father figure for Suttree is the one who comes to give him last rites while he is in the hospital with typhoid fever near the end of the book. Still delirious as the priest anoints his face, Suttree has vision of himself as Japheth, eldest son of Noah. On board the ark with his wife, Japheth survived the flood and had seven sons. Working with Shem to cover his father as he lay drunk, Japheth was rewarded by Noah with the blessing that his descendants would cover the earth. In Suttree’s mind, he is told he is Japheth, who “spoke too lightly of the winter in your father’s heart” (460). As Noah himself goes astray in planting grapes for wine and subsequently becoming drunk, so has Suttree’s father failed in his role as guide and preserver of his children (“Japheth”). But the son has also failed. In this second-person address, the detached observer Suttree persona returns, judging the dying Suttree as a failure, “unprepared for such weathers” as he saw after leaving his father’s house. He has reached his ostensible end without reconciling with his family. After this vision, Suttree, awake and aware of himself, tells the priest, “I am familiar with burial rites of the nameless and the unclaimed” (460). His ability to speak renders the priest’s actions impotent, at least in part, as Suttree takes ownership of himself. The irony of self-identifying as “nameless” and “unclaimed” is all too clear. No one knows who he is in this place, and he refuses to name himself.

After his miraculous survival, the same priest returns to visit the recuperating Suttree, blessing him as lucky for having such a close call: “God must have been watching over you. You very nearly died” (461). When Suttree counters with “You would not believe what watches…He is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving,” we are left with a disturbed and disturbing vision of

23 While considered the eldest, Japheth is often listed after Shem because traditional listing is by order of importance. There is an echo here of Suttree as second son, less important than his stillborn brother. Despite the fact that he assists Shem in covering his father, Japheth receives the lesser blessing of the two.
an afterlife of unrest and tumult, very much different from the reassuring visions of heaven espoused by priests just like this man (461). From this vision, however, Suttree returns with some certainty for the first time in his life: “I learned that there is one Suttree and one Suttree only” (461). What he does not clarify for us is whether that Suttree is himself, his brother, or his father. The earlier vision of Japheth, however, leans toward the last, which would make his son truly nameless.

Mothers are also a perpetual spiritual problem for Suttree; he unfailingly betrays them. While in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Suttree sees an image of Mary ambiguously as “his mother. Mater alchimia in skyblue robes, she treads a snake with her chipped and naked feet” (253). When he is in prison, his mother visits him; her hand is that which “nursed the serpent,” her “[h]opes wrecked, love sundered…See the mother sorrowing” (61). As both the Christ-child meant to save her and the serpent beneath her feet, Suttree is unable to face her, so he flees. Early in the novel, a visit from his alcoholic maternal uncle reveals Suttree’s belief that his father sees his mother as tainted goods, having come from weak stock, and that Suttree himself, therefore, “was expected to turn out badly” (19). Doubly damned as a genetically suspect second son, Suttree feels he has been a disappointment to his mother since day one.

Similarly, he watches the mother of his son from a distance at his son’s funeral: “The mother cried out and sank to the ground and was lifted up and helped away wailing. Stabat Mater Dolorosa…Suttree went to his knees in the grass, his hands cupped over his ears” (153). Unable to bear his son’s mother’s grief, he hides from it. After Wanda’s death in the cave-in, Suttree sees her mother as a “baroque pieta, the woman gibbering and kneeling in the rain clutching at sheared limbs and rags of meat among the slabs of rock” (362). Suttree helps to dig out Wanda’s
body, but flees after hearing Reese cry out, “Oh God I caint take no more. Please lift this burden from me for I caint bear it” (363). Suttree too cannot take any more, but the God of his childhood has failed him, so he has no one to cry out to. In constant flight from his failure as son, husband, father, and lover, Suttree tries to block out the voices of the mothers, the ones who stay and bear up under the detritus he leaves behind.

**Mother She**

In many ways, Mary is what separates Catholicism from other variants of Christianity, and the image of the sorrowing mother, combined with the impotent and silent father/priest, drives Suttree to find a brand of spirituality better suited to the darkness within him. What he finds is Mother She. While the Catholic Church, to Suttree, is “not the house of God,” Mother She is presence in absence, the palpable embodiment of darkness, nothingness. As Suttree looks at one of her family photographs, Mother She reveals that she “was there when it was took but [she] never come out” (279). The only photographic evidence of the woman is the “grayed-out patch” that did not develop with the rest of the picture. And like her portrait, she hovers on the edge of her community, a black figure living in darkness.

Mother She calls Suttree to her, crossing his path three times before they meet, twice on the street and once in the vision after he is hit with the floor buffer; he will later recognize that the “hag” waiting for him after death was Mother She herself. Only after this near-death experience does Ab Jones send Suttree to “Miss Mother” (227), who rejects his request to visit Ab. Suttree’s aversion to Mother She is apparent in his descriptions of her: “black witch” (65), “female dwarf”, “house ape” (228), “hookbacked crone”, “gimpen grandam” (278), “ogress” (281), “lank harridan” (282), “Graymalkin” (282). The sheer volume of references to her,
however, reveals his fascination with her. When Ab finally recovers enough to make it to Mother She’s house, she reads the bones for Ab, but the message comes out for Suttree instead. When she tells him he should have come alone, Suttree bolts, and continues fleeing her every time he sees her. Mother She bears many resemblances to the leader of Outer Dark’s triune, and her blackness seems to have much less to do with her race than it does the darkness she represents. Where traditional Catholicism has dried up, there is a rich and mysterious dark religion ready to take its place, and happy to do so: “Something moved her mouth very like a smile. The antique teeth like seedcorn. An odor of violated graves” (282). If there is a tangible physical external embodiment of the prophet of destruction in this novel, it is Mother She, and Suttree knows it, and knows that she knows him. How easy it would be for him to fall into that, and lose himself in the darkness. If he were to give in to her, he would acknowledge the prophet’s power over him, and his own status as recruit.

But despite all his self-destructive tendencies, he is not ready to give himself up to her. After continual sightings of her throughout that summer and into fall, Suttree takes to the mountains in October, attempting to flee her, even though he knows there are also “horsemen on the road with horns of fire and withy roods” (282). If there is any escape from his self-generated misery, he knows it will be tenuous and likely to cost him something irretrievable. It would be all too easy to view Suttree’s exit to the wilderness as akin to a vision quest, a journey to something. Realistically, however, it is a two-fold flight, not just from the darkness embodied by Mother She, but also from the “horsemen” who have dogged him from his earliest memories.

If, as Richard Marius puts it, “McCarthy posits a world where the promise of heavenly redemption has evaporated, death is final, and men and women exist between the choice to
commit suicide or to preserve life by continuing it day by day,” (125) then one way to understand the purpose of Suttree’s two-month stay in the mountains is an attempt to split the difference between the two choices: he cannot, or will not, kill himself, but what would happen if he stopped deliberately “preserving” his own life? Equipped with only a blanket, a few meager foodstuffs, and a fruitless fishing line, Suttree devolves within a week to “a hermetic figure, already gaunted and sunken at the eyes” (284) and contemplating mushrooms: “He wondered could you eat the mushrooms, would you die, do you care” (285). A consistent linguistic feature of McCarthy’s prose is the phrasing of questions as statements, lending them a finality that renders their answers irrelevant. Suttree does not know whether he cares, but the question alone is enough to unhinge him. By asking it, he opens the door to the possibility of real, permanent death.

For a time, Suttree’s identity shifts: “Suttree in the woods was surprised to find small flowers still” (284). His narrative persona becomes a Suttree of this particular place and no other. For the duration of his stay in the woods, he will be someone other than his quotidian self. One affinity this sojourn as “Suttree in the woods” has with a true vision quest is hallucination. Hunger, fatigue, and solitude combine over time: “He had begun to become accompanied” (285). Haunted by the quiet and left with only his own disordered thoughts, Suttree feels the presence of “some doublegoer, some othersuttree” going ahead him just out of sight (287). Having been paradoxically twinned and alone for his entire life, the thought of meeting this other self terrifies him: “were he therefore to come to himself in this obscure wood he’d be neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling with his ghosty clone from sun to sun across a hostile hemisphere forever” (287). Unlike the earlier “Antisuttree,” this “othersuttree” is
denied capitalization, and therefore formal existence. Something formless and fearful prevents Suttree from seeking it, perhaps because he fears recognizing it as a part of himself.

It is the nature of the prophet of destruction to both precede and follow his recruits, simultaneously carving the path they tread and ensuring that they stay on it. In this way Mother She has predicted Suttree’s wooded breakdown, prefiguring as the “house ape” the unhoused Suttree who “crouches like an ape in the dark” of the woods, choosing even to forego a fire. At this point in the narrative, Suttree, like Ballard, has become a son of the earth and of darkness, perilously close to losing his fragile grasp on his humanity. In an interchange with a passing gunman the next morning, in response to the question “Are ye lost?” Suttree cryptically responds, “I think I know what state I’m in. I doubt you can direct me out of it” (288). It seems, at least for a little while, that madness is viable third option to the problem of how to exist. In the closest Suttree ever really comes to escape, he laughs. He only manages a few more hours of disconnect, however, in the interim imagining “in his darker heart a nether self” replete with spellbook and ratsbane, conjuring vengeance (290).

We cannot forget, however, that despite all his attempts to deny it, Suttree is a deeply intelligent, educated, philosophical being. Where we see Ballard cross the threshold of reason and then revel in his irrational state, Suttree cannot remain for long. His mind is too strong to stay broken and so, after two months of wandering, he wakes up, for the most part whole: “He woke in full daylight by the side of a road… His head was curiously clear” (291). After tottering home to Knoxville on the same bus that took him away, he returns to his adopted family, the drunks and wretches of McAnally Flats. While recuperating in Mrs. Long’s rundown boarding house on Grand Avenue, he remembers that “a dark hand had scooped the spirit from his breast
and a cold wind circled in the hollow there” (295). Having run from his true family and his chosen one, he finds himself right back among them, drinking with his friends and outfitting himself in new clothes thanks to a bequest from a dead uncle. Having attempted to remove himself through starvation and madness, he gives up. There are two things Suttree cannot escape: his own sanity and the people, past and present, who shape his life. Mother She remains a figure who haunts him.

The Hunt

Even in moments when Suttree feels he has found a modicum of safety, perhaps even a chance at love and family, outside forces track him down to remind him of his half-status, his crime of surviving his brother. While most of the darkness facing Suttree (and his brother in internal torment Lester Ballard) comes from within, they are not left alone with their pain. The twins Vernon and Fernon, who arrive inexplicably in the musseling camp of Reese and his family, bear eerie similarities to Suttree and his dead twin. They are identical, except that one is left-handed and the other right-handed. This echoes the moon-shaped birthmarks Suttree and his brother bore on opposite temples. These twins also share the discomfiting ability to know each other’s thoughts, a faculty which, if logically extended to Suttree and his twin, appears to indicate that Suttree’s brother is indeed able to communicate with him from beyond the grave. In the demonstration of their telekinetic talent, the choice of the word “brother” reinforces the burden Suttree is unable to put down. Also, the twins’ names are essentially interchangeable; even they aren’t completely sure which is which. The slippery nature of individual identity between twins helps to explain to some extent why Suttree has such a hard time feeling comfortable in his own skin.
In the alchemical reaction of vice, isolation, self-loathing, tragedy, and an irritatingly moral conscience, we see circumstance place Suttree in a position ripe for conversion to darkness. The nothingness of the void that he has sought for so long begins to fuse with the more twisted darkness of his visions, and Suttree begins to feel hunted.

Behind, beyond, and absorbing the perpetual twin figure is the darkness itself, personified in the figure of the huntsman or the surgeon, who lurks behind the visible. In the novel’s prologue, he is alternately a “weaver…a carder of souls from the world’s nap” and “a hunter with hounds” (5). In one of his many visions, Suttree sees a man flayed and nailed to a barn door, and beyond that horror “dimly adumbrate another figure paled, for his surgeons move about the world even as you and I” (86). Here is a figure much like the man in black of Outer Dark, wreaking havoc for its own sake and attempting to draw Suttree in to him. In fleeing his privileged past, Suttree plunges himself into the underbelly of Knoxville, hoping for anonymity, even protection, among the wretched men who crouch under bridges, drink homemade whiskey, and conjure up trouble of all kinds. Pursuing him relentlessly, however, is “the surgeon in the shape of the mad scientist, the false creator, even the Gnostic demiurge” (Luce 211).

For Suttree, the hounds of the huntsman and the hand of the surgeon are both external and internal, pressing in on him in the citizens of McAnally Flats and pressing outward from his own mind. Suttree is hunted repeatedly by members of his debauched riverside community. Reese says “I hunted everywhere for you” before leading Suttree off on a night of whiskey-drinking that finds him waking up alone in a roadside field (336). Leonard says “I hunted you everwheres” before asking for Suttree’s help to prevent the repossesion of his father’s grave plot (417). Harrogate, in many ways the worst of the lot, says “I hunted you up at Comer’s. They said
you was into the tall cotton” before telling Suttree of his latest scheme of rigging public telephone coin returns (419). These minor images of the hunt, dismissible in a single instance, mean more in accretion, especially if we recognize that McCarthy is very particular with his word choices, rarely repeating a phrase like this.

Suttree attracts lowlifes. In jail, where we first meet him, he befriends the “moonlight melonmounter” Gene Harrogate, whose elaborate schemes walk the line between genius and lunacy (48). McCarthy is fond of fools, and Harrogate is the most lovable of all his literary brothers. He is also a handful of trouble, and yet Suttree takes informal custody of him. Harrogate’s intelligence, or lack thereof, is reminiscent of Culla Holme or Lester Ballard, and he has been similarly ill-treated and cast out by society at large. If he’s kept his sense of humor, he has not bothered to hold on to any vestige of morality. He, like the other river rats, are agents of destruction themselves, pulling Suttree down with them as he attempts to resist. Perhaps they are the hunter’s hounds, on the scent for their master, charged with bringing Suttree fully into the darkness? Among the crimes Suttree commits while in company with his friends are car theft, improper burial, solicitation of a prostitute, public drunkenness, and assault.

And yet, despite all his scrapes with the law, Suttree resists violence and destruction for their own sake. He checks on his neighbors, calling on the ragpicker and Ab Jones. He rescues Harrogate from the sewers. In the face of all he has lost and wants to lose, he is still an essentially moral and spiritual man. But time and circumstance slowly wear him down, killing his friends and tearing down his neighborhood, until he feels drawn back to Mother She for a final visit. She concocts a “trituration” made from “grim powder,” “oily unguent” and a “speckled slug, marked like an ocelot,” which he accepts with little protest (423-424). Here
Suttree is “unalarmed,” moving with dreamlike ease through a scene straight out of a horror movie. When he asks “What do I do?”, Mother She responds: “You dont do nothin. You will be told” (424-425). As he drifts out of consciousness, the vision he has of her raping him is hideous, the stuff of true nightmare, Mother She described as “Black faltress, portress of hellgate” (426). He gives in to her, screaming and yet submitting. In a form of violation unmatched by any other prophet figure so far, Mother She becomes a succubus, consuming Suttree bodily. As he is consumed, so too is his home. It is only after he witnesses his friends killed or incarcerated one by one – Hoghead, Ab Jones, the ragpicker, Billy Ray Callahan, Harrogate – and his neighborhood razed for a freeway – that he finally finds the will to leave.

To return to Ulysses for a moment, we see that the fragmentation of the text of Suttree is clearly recognizable as an homage to Joyce’s novel, while the protagonist and the world he lives in are a negative variant of those of the earlier work. If viewed as a chronological evolution of mankind, then the Knoxville of Suttree makes logical sense as the ruin of its Irish counterpart. The prophet has announced the eventual destruction of the world, and Suttree’s city is a stop on the way down. By leaving it, Suttree buys himself time.

In our final glimpse of Suttree, we see him standing by the side of the road, waiting to hitchhike his way out of Knoxville. He accepts water from a boy working with a nearby road crew, and sees himself twinned a final time in the boy’s eyes. Fortune seems to favor him for a moment here, as the boy’s eyes are “blue eyes with no bottoms like the sea,” a much more positive image than any of the eyes we’ve peered into before (471). A car stops for him without being hailed, and Suttree makes his final escape. Looking back, however, we see not the boy, but “an enormous lank hound…sniffing at the spot where Suttree had stood” (471). What seems a
moment of good is simply a moment of preparation; the waterbearer that would not come in his
dream of the feast has arrived at last, and the hunters finally have leave to give chase. Whatever
peace Suttree has attained here is tenuous and temporary, as the final lines tell us the hunt will
continue:

Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming
corn and in the castellated press of cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds
tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed
with the ravening for souls in this world. Fly them. (471)

Suttree’s first-person persona here brings us into his nightmare, with an injunction to follow his
lead. We too, will be hunted, he seems to say. We too must fly the hounds.
Chapter Four: Blood Meridian, or
“What’s wrong with you is wrong all the way through you.”

For an analysis of Blood Meridian, we must return to our introductory notion of time as a helical construct, a conical gyre bent on expanding into incoherence. In this novel, it is easy to imagine the “rough beast” of Yeats’ “The Second Coming” loping rapidly out of the setting sun to join, or perhaps lead, John Glanton’s band of scalp hunters on their murderous spree across the West. The “widening gyre” that begins as a dispensation to hunt “savages” quickly devolves into wholesale arbitrary bloodshed for its own sake. It’s only logical that “the center cannot hold” in such an arrangement, and so we feel Blood Meridian’s final scene coming from the novel’s very first page.

Dennis Sansom defines a “blood meridian,” the bloodshed of war, as the highest point of human evolution (“Learning from Art” 7). What is interesting about this concept in McCarthy’s theo-determinist universe is that Blood Meridian is also the prophet of destruction’s highest evolutionary point in the arc of Cormac McCarthy’s published novels. Blood Meridian falls midway in the nine-novel sequence, Orchard Keeper to No Country for Old Men. The determinist thread of Blood Meridian is present in all these novels; the arc of the blood meridian mirrors the arc of McCarthy’s work to date. From the first novel, the prophet of destruction evolves steadily, and reaches his most powerful, nearly godlike form in the person of the judge, before steadily losing power throughout the Border Trilogy, until his last incarnation in the mysterious Anton Chigurh, who shares the judge’s mystery but not his invulnerability. As the arc of destruction culminates in apocalypse in The Road, we see the light of the prophet of creation rising, presumably to begin the arc of creation that completes a cycle of history, Yeats’ gyre reinstated in inverse form, but not likely more stable.
McCarthy’s interest in non-Christian ideas of the universe and alternate religious constructs is nothing new and references to tarot, Buddhism, voodoo, Gnosticism, and indigenous religion are sprinkled liberally throughout his novels. What is new, however, is his concept of an “optical democracy,” in which everything in the desert is viewed in the same light, so that every rock, snake, blade of grass, and man is of equal value, or equally unvalued, as the case may be. McCarthy’s preoccupation with the Earth as a rock turning in a void steers us into myth-making, which, like writing fiction, is an attempt to make sense of existence.

One of the functions of fiction is sociopolitical commentary, and Blood Meridian is McCarthy’s most directly political novel, appearing in 1985 at the height of American criticism of the war in Vietnam. Scott Esposito is one of many scholars who identify the novel as an “embodiment of the Vietnam aesthetic: its almost unending series of horrors, its theme of a paternalistic American war in a colored nation, and its dramatization of men being desensitized into killers” (“Cormac McCarthy’s Paradox”). But where other anti-Vietnam writers, such as Tim O’Brien or Walter Dean Myers, deal directly with the ambiguity of fighting a war for questionable reasons against a ill-defined enemy, McCarthy paints a portrait of human, particularly American, obsession with destruction. The judge is the pinnacle of human destructive power, which, according to the novel, is humanity’s ultimate purpose. McCarthy steps beyond war, beyond Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism, and recognizes all of them as symptoms and products of our inherent need to burn down the world.

McCarthy’s arc of destruction necessarily has the judge at its zenith. In Blood Meridian, the prophet of destruction is at the height of his physical, intellectual, mystical, supernatural, and murderous power. And yet he still fails to recruit the kid. He kills him, most likely violates him
in unspeakable ways, but does not win him over to the cause. At his zenith, the archetypal-archon-devil-prophet has his antithesis in the enigmatic Promethean figure striking fire out of the rock in the novel’s epilogue.

**Who Is the Judge?**

If a psychologist were to ask a focus group of Cormac McCarthy fans to say the first word that comes to mind upon hearing the phrase “prophet of destruction,” you can bet almost all of them, even those who had read *No Country for Old Men*, would say “the judge”\(^{24}\). Even though he is not the title character, Judge Holden of *Blood Meridian* is the archetypal prophet of destruction. He is larger than life, well over seven feet tall and a hefty 330 pounds. He is unnaturally white and entirely hairless. He appears inexplicably in the most unusual places. He scalps children, chucks puppies off bridges, and crushes men’s skulls with his bare hands. And he talks. And talks. And talks. Judge Holden is the most learned and erudite figure in all of McCarthy’s fiction, and the most horrific. His brutality matches his intellect, making him simultaneously magnetic and repulsive.

Both the judge and John Glanton are based on historical figures, drawn from Samuel Chamberlain’s memoir, “*My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue,*” in which the author describes his time among a 19\(^{th}\)-century scalp-hunting gang led by Glanton. McCarthy likely based the kid on Chamberlain himself, who ran away from home as a boy, going to war against Mexico at 16 as a member of the “Illinois Foot Volunteers.” His portrait of Glanton seems true-to-life, the historical Glanton being known to collect scalps well before he was hired by the

\(^{24}\) While the judge does have a last name, he is referred to most often simply as “the judge,” which, when combined with “the kid,” also lowercase, leads us to think of them as archetypes, although that temptation seems to be tempered by McCarthy’s insistence that the judge is literally eternal, the same judge throughout time. What does this imply about the kid?
Mexican General Urrea to do so professionally. Glanton was an equal opportunity murderer, readily taking Mexican scalps as well as Apache. But it is Chamberlain’s depiction of the historical Judge Holden that is particularly interesting:

In describing him, Chamberlain claimed, ‘a cooler blooded villain never went unhung.’ Holden was well over six feet, "had a fleshy frame, [and] a dull tallow colored face destitute of hair and all expression" and was well educated in geology and mineralogy, fluent in native dialects, a good musician, and "plum centre" with a firearm. (qtd. in Turner)

Chamberlain also mentions rumors circulated of atrocities committed in Texas and the Cherokee nation by the judge under a different name, and claims that a “ten year old girl was found ‘foully violated and murdered’ with ‘the mark of a large hand on her throat,’ but no one ever directly accused Holden” (qtd. in Turner). Many of the judge’s identifying characteristics are present in the historical account, but McCarthy moves him up from second in command to Glanton and elevates his original creepiness to a new level of horror.

Judge Holden has been foreshadowed in earlier McCarthy fiction, bits and pieces lurking in the proto-prophets of the Appalachian novels: the preternatural poise and physical repulsion of Kenneth Rattner, the fateful charisma and unexplained appearances of the black-bearded leader of Outer Dark’s triune, the perversion of Lester Ballard, the intellect of Suttree. And yet it is only in the judge that McCarthy finally masters the alchemy of the prophet. Critics have tried to label him many ways, and in Understanding Cormac McCarthy, Stephen Frye presents a detailed, but by no means exhaustive, summary of the judge’s possible progenitors:

In literary terms the judge recalls Melville’s white whale and Captain Ahab, as well as Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, Milton’s Satan, Shakespeare’s Iago, and the extraliterary character of the Marquis de Sade. From a religious and philosophical perspective, the judge’s many pronouncements throughout the novel reflect the Nietzschean Übermensch ..., Satan of the Old and New Testaments, Job’s comforters, the evil archons or the demiurge of ancient
Gnosticism, and he is perhaps most obviously the dark avatar of scientific positivism—in this case the Enlightenment gone horribly astray. (69)

In trying to understand the judge, we encounter the same difficulty we face every time we try to pigeonhole McCarthy. He has no one specific precedent, and yet we recognize him instinctively as the embodiment of what we all fear most, the potential truth that darkness and evil may be the only real thing out there; the place where we all are headed. Destruction is nothing new. We know the minute life blooms, it begins to die; so the judge adapts to the evil system each reader readily understands, and graciously embodies our own personal evil.

One particular precursor, however, is worth exploring more deeply. Of the few authors McCarthy admits to admiring, Melville shares hallowed company with Dostoevsky, Joyce and Faulkner. In the same way he appropriated the tale of the real John Glanton and his gang, McCarthy dismantles and redraws *Moby-Dick* in his own tale of gargantuan undertakings. Echoes of Melville’s masterpiece are woven throughout *Blood Meridian*: the vast white bulk of the judge, the colorful and storied men of the crew, the lone survivor of calamity in the kid, the adopted idiot. But where Melville pits an all-too-fallible human captain against the leviathan monster, McCarthy fuses the two. The judge is simultaneously Ahab and Moby-Dick, the hunted become the hunter.

It is possible even to read *Blood Meridian* as a continuation of the sea tale, picking up the kid-as-Ishmael’s story as he rises from the Comanche massacre of the aptly named Captain White’s band of mercenaries. Into the void left by the death of the kid’s comrades steps the giant albino judge, the whale-turned-man intent on finishing the job of destroying the *Pequod*. The fusion of Ahab’s madness with the whale’s sheer bulk makes him an irresistible force whose
wake sucks the kid up, forcing him to follow. It’s neither his size nor his intellect alone that make the judge so horrific; it’s his unnatural whiteness. As described by Melville,

…there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood. This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds. (231)

The judge, already a threatening persona, eliminates the division between good and evil, appropriating in his own body the color once associated with goodness and divinity, now permanently divested of any positive denotation. In the process, he becomes truly terrifying.

In addition to echoing the Melvillian characteristics of the judge, Harold Bloom calls him prophet, demigod, and archon in his introduction to *Blood Meridian*. Leo Daugherty and Rick Wallach separately explore the idea of Holden as archon in their own work. However, as Bloom notes, “McCarthy gives Judge Holden the powers and purposes of the bad angels or demiurges that the Gnostics call archons, but he tells us not to make such an identification” (ix). However convenient a Gnostic interpretation may be, it cannot fully house the gargantuan judge. The kid acknowledges what we refuse to, that nowhere in the judge’s history will the “ultimate atavistic egg” (310) be found to explain his existence. Similarly, the judge is not God, nor a god. Dennis Sansom’s groundbreaking essay “Learning from Art: Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* as a Critique of Divine Determinism,” presents the novel as a test of the theory that everything is divinely decreed by God. If that were true, Sansom argues, then violence and evil would be as holy as any other act, and the world that the judge inhabits is therefore the highest evolution of man, whose primary purpose is to die.

For Sansom, the work of imagination can serve as a testing ground for theory:
Imagination is always an interpretation of what the world could look like. It not only mirrors but heightens experience to focus on a certain viewpoint about the possible meaning of life. By doing this, the imagination enables us to explore whether certain ideas are worth keeping. That is, if we could picture living this way, would we want to live it? (“Learning from Art” 2)

Clearly, we would not want to live in the world of *Blood Meridian*, and so the experiment of divine determinism is a failure for us as readers, but that does not change the fact that for the judge and the kid, the universe is absolutely determined, and by a God for whom destruction is the preferred plane of existence. Of the judge’s role in this world, however, Sansom explains that “though carnal, primeval, and relentless like the whale, McCarthy does not pretend that the judge is God. The novel displays him as God’s prophet” (“Learning from Art” 6). The judge does the work of finding human weapons, and Glanton and his scalphunters are his most devoted disciples. As prophet, however, the judge must not just find devotees to his cause, but also find voices to spread the gospel of destruction.

John Sepich, a McCarthy scholar whose work with Christopher Forbis has provided linguistic concordances for all of McCarthy’s ten novels, provides one of the most intriguing analogues of the judge in his contemplation of the “alchemical Mercurius” as a forerunner. Sepich turns to Jung for explanation, citing Jung’s proposition that Mercurius narrowly misses being identified as the Christian devil: “The magic of his name enables him, in spite of his ambiguity and duplicity, to keep outside the split [between Christ and the devil], for as an ancient pagan god he possesses a natural undividedness which is impervious to logical and moral contradictions” (qtd. in Sepich 144). While it seems quite easy, and in truth necessary, to view the connection between the judge and Mercurius as another incomplete comparison, the manifestation of Mercurius as the metal mercury illustrates both the allure and the frustration of
encountering McCarthy’s enigmatic judge. Push on him however you like, he is inseparable, his divided parts running back together as a seamless and unchanging whole, perfectly round and light, reflecting only your distorted self, quivering and poisonous, back at you. Interestingly enough, mercury makes an appearance in the novel, appropriately mixed with blood, as Glanton’s men ride a pack of mercury-laden mules off a cliff in order to make room for their own horses:

The riders pushed between them and the rock and methodically rode them from the escarpment, the animals dropping silently as martyrs, turning sedately in the empty air and exploding on the rocks below in startling bursts of blood and silver as the flasks broke open and the mercury loomed wobbling in the air in great sheets and lobes and small trembling satellites and all its forms grouping below and racing in the stone arroyos like the imbreachment of some ultimate alchemic work decocted from out the secret dark of the earth’s heart. (195)

Here, in this “decoction,” the metaphor of the judge as mercury persists in the work of his disciples, the animals’ blood incorporated into the fluid, indivisible force of destruction. At the same time, the passage ties destruction and darkness back to the Earth, reminding us they are as much a part of existence as light and life. The judge is no extraterrestrial, sent from some other place here to torture mankind, but rather, like the biblical prophets, he is a son of this earth.

**Larger than Life and Death**

And yet the judge is no mere man either. A trait the judge shares with the bearded leader of the dark triune of *Outer Dark* is the ability to be found by those who did not know they were searching for him. The judge does so dramatically, saving Glanton’s crew from certain death at the hands of the Apache when they are caught in the desert with no gunpowder. The “ex-priest” Tobin explains to the kid:

Then about the meridian of that day we come upon the judge on his rock there in that wilderness by his single self. Aye and there was no rock, just the one. Irving
said he’d brung it with him. I said that it was a merestone for to mark him out of nothing at all …. And there he set. No horse. Just him and his legs crossed, smiling as we rode up. Like he’d been expectin us…. Glanton just studied him. It was a day’s work to even guess what he made of that figure on the ground. I dont know to this day. They’ve a secret commerce. Some terrible covenant. (125-126)

Glanton has been successfully saved and appropriated by the judge. Glanton and his men kill indiscriminately as their cult of destruction requires, pelting headlong into their own eventual deaths.

Aside from the title, the word “meridian” occurs just four times in the novel, only here in connection with light25 (Sepich “A Concordance to Blood Meridian”). At the height of the gang’s need, there is the judge, ready to conjure gunpowder out of charcoal, nitre gleaned from bat guano, sulphur from a volcanic peak, and the urine of the scalphunters: “We hauled forth our members and at it we went and the judge on his knees and the piss was splashin about and he was…workin up this great mass in a foul black dough, a devil’s batter by the stink of it and him not a bloody dark pastryman himself” (132). The “black dough,” when dried on the rocks, becomes enough gunpowder to massacre the Apache warriors pursuing them, and elevates the judge to legendary status among the gang. Illustrated graphically in this scene, “the highest expression of human evolution in the novel is the bloodshed of war—hence blood meridian,” with the judge straddling its very peak fueled by a concoction of feces, urine, and brimstone, all waste products of acts of destruction (“Learning from Art” 7). Logically speaking, if everything in the world is divinely determined, and in that world war is the “highest expression of human evolution,” then the moral duality of good and evil must necessarily become irrelevant. This is

25 See “midnight meridian,” page 88; “His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day,” page 147; and “across the meridians of chaos and old night,” page 163.
the height of the blood meridian, when destruction reaches its peak of power, with the judge riding its crest.

As the crew faces hardship on their journey, the fireside talk turns to the Bible one evening, with one man worrying over the amount of war depicted in a book that counts war “an evil” (248). The judge sets him right:

It makes no difference what men think of war, said the Judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way. (248)

When asked why war endures, the judge explains that “it endures because young men love it and old men love it in them. Those that fought, those that did not” (249). With moral divisions gone, the only decision left to these young men is whether to wage war and die under the judge’s banner, or refuse to wage war and die at the judge’s hands. He, a man older than reckoning, will love them either way, but those that fight can be allowed to exist for a time, while those that don’t cannot.

Like all of McCarthy’s prophets, the judge is an expert manipulator, saving the gang from death in order to bend them to his own purposes. After rescuing them from the Apache, the judge continues to preserve Glanton’s men. He diffuses any situation that threatens Glanton and his men with a deftness that borders on the supernatural. For example, after the kid has joined the gang, the proprietor of an eating-house asks the scalp hunters to move to the table reserved for black patrons and is promptly murdered by Jackson, the only black man traveling with the group. The local lieutenant tracks them to the neighboring cantina, where Glanton outright denies that he and his men were ever in the eating-house, despite the obvious facts to the contrary. Nonetheless, the judge is able to talk the local authority, Sgt. Aguilar, out of charging Jackson:
“The judge translated for him latin (sic) terms of jurisprudence. He cited cases civil and martial. He quoted Coke and Blackstone, Anaximander, Thales” (239). He buries the man in his knowledge of legal precedent and leaves him stunned. From this point on, the judge, Glanton, and the men take over the town, drinking everything in sight and roaming naked door to door “demanding drink and women” (240). Their riotous behavior ends the next day with the judge’s superhuman feat of lifting an enormous meteorite and hurling it ten feet (240). His inexplicable power makes clear his authority over everyone present.

Beyond mere men, the judge claims authority over creation itself. When Toadvine asks why he presses leaves and sketches animals and artifacts in his ledgers, the judge replies, “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (198). He explains himself as a suzerain, “who rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgements (sic)” (198). In his own words, the judge claims everything as his own, and so his tireless recording of all he encounters is the method by which he appropriates it. In recording it, he destroys it, just as he crushes the footpiece of a 16th-century suit of armor after sketching it meticulously. For anyone else, this artifact would be a museum find, but for the judge, it is an affront that must be subsumed, recorded, and destroyed (140). For ordinary men, the way the world as ordered is incomprehensible and shrouded in mystery, but the judge claims he has “singl[ed] out the thread of order from the tapestry” and “by the decision alone [has] taken charge of the world” (198-199). Following this remarkable logic, Holden has also taken charge of humankind and so it follows that he can control them, hence the ease with which he extricates his men from peril time and time again. He saves them in order to bring their fate about when he sees fit, for they belong to him and no one else.
Who Is the Kid?

Just as Culla Holme walked willingly into the camp of the bearded man not once but twice in his journey, so does the judge inexplicably appear to the kid, both in person and in dreams. The judge’s first appearance to the kid, which seems roughly to coincide with his miraculous appearance to the gang, is especially important for two reasons. First, it occurs well before the kid falls in with Glanton’s gang, and therefore reveals the judge’s foreknowledge of the kid and where he is going. Second, it demonstrates the judge’s primary purpose of bringing destruction wherever he goes, at whatever cost. The judge accuses a traveling preacher of depravity with an eleven-year-old girl and a goat, only to admit after the fact that he had never before seen the preacher. McCarthy keeps the truth of this scene ambiguous, so that we do not know whether his accusations are true, but seems to imply that truth is irrelevant, as long as the destructive end result is achieved. While the kid watches, the judge meticulously ratchets up the outrage of the crowd, explaining the preacher is “wanted on a variety of charges the most recent of which involved a girl of eleven years… whom he was surprised in the act of violating while actually clothed in the livery of his God” (7). It is important to note here the judge says “his God” rather than “God,” thereby implying that the judge does not share a belief in this God. If we were to stretch the symbolism a little farther into McCarthy resonances outside this work, his accusation of congress brings in another cloven-hoofed animal, similar to the pigs of Outer Dark. If the cloven hoof represents the Christian devil, then perhaps the judge is even at this early stage marking out himself as separate from the Christian dichotomy of good and evil. After all, if God
is “his God,” then is the devil not similarly possessed by the preacher, but not the judge?

After his first accusation about the girl, the crowd wants to hang the preacher, but after the judge brings in his claim about the goat, a man shoots the preacher on the spot, sparking a general brawl ending in much more bloodshed than the hanging would have brought, and even the collapse of the preacher’s tent, which “began to sway and buckle like a huge and wounded medusa” (7). The judge sidesteps legal process in favor of causing direct violence and crime on the part of the outraged citizens, who are now guilty of murder, a sin just as shameful as what they have accused the preacher of committing. When the kid escapes the tent and runs to the bar, the judge is already there, and when the kid leaves town the next day, the judge watches him go, smiling, clearly pleased with the kid’s own demonstration of violence that has culminated in the town hotel burning down.

The judge and the kid share more than just an affinity for violence. The kid, while unschooled by the judge’s standards, is of elevated stock:

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…. He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. (3)

The kid proves repeatedly throughout the novel that he has innate intelligence and a predisposition to violence, as well as reluctance to use either. As fathers and father figures have plagued earlier McCarthy protagonists, so too does the kid flee his father, with the mindlessness of Culla Holme and, paradoxically, the intellect of Suttree. Following his first sighting of the judge, the kid joins up with the warparty of Captain White and is immediately embroiled in an attack by the Comanche that leaves nearly all of White’s party dead. The kid, the “one soul [who] rose wondrously from among the new slain dead,” staggers off into the desert and finds
another survivor, a man named Sproule who is wounded in the arm. As the two wander
together, Sproule deteriorates rapidly in body and spirit. An attack by a bloodbat seems to be the
last straw for him and he cries out in a “howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the
pulsebeat of the world” (66). The kid, inherently able to read people, understands the futility of
Sproule’s howl, and simply says, “I know your kind…What’s wrong with you is wrong all the
way through you” (66). The kid knows that Sproule is not cut out for McCarthy’s determinist
universe. He is weak from the core and can do nothing but die.

The judge, blessed with this same gift of insight, in addition to a very thorough education,
recognizes the kid’s potential and intends to take the kid for himself, as his recruit. While most
followers of the judge need only an ability to kill, new prophets must have intellect, instinct, and
drive.

The Kid as Recruit

To better understand the judge’s relationship with the kid, we turn to the judge’s second
appearance in the novel. The judge is leading a “pack of vicious looking humans mounted on
unshod indian (sic) ponies riding half drunk through the streets” of Chihuahua City, where the
kid is being held prisoner for his part in Captain White’s massacre (78). This is the kid’s first
glimpse of Glanton’s fearsome gang, with “the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human
skin and their bridles woven up with human hair…and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces
of dried and blackened human ears” (78-79). That these men will be hailed as heroes by the
townspeople subtly underscores just how far the divide between right and wrong has shifted,
reinforced by the addition of the intelligent-yet-violent kid and criminally branded Toadvine to
their ranks, straight from the jail cell where they were being held as murderers.
Analogues to this relationship are troubling. To varying levels of accuracy, we see Marlow and Kurtz, Frankenstein and his monster, even Lolita and Humbert. The judge is repulsively magnetic, but free of Kurtz’s moral compass. His relationship to his “natives,” Glanton’s gang, is similarly godlike, but he wallows in the carnage he creates, rather than struggling with the “horror.” And the kid has Marlow’s moral qualms, but because we have so little access to the inner workings of the kid, it’s difficult to determine whether he feels any affection towards the judge, or merely compulsion. If the kid is sculpted by the judge as Frankenstein’s monster is by his own monstrously brilliant doctor, then his rejection of the judge has a parallel. And the predatory love with which the judge pursues the kid has the omnipresence of Humbert: “Don’t you know I’d have loved you like a son?” he tells the kid near the end of their story (306).

Returning to Moby-Dick provides additional insight into the kid. Both Ishmael and the kid are the first people seen in their respective novels, both with iconic one-line introductions. But where the former’s “Call me Ishmael,” conjures an authoritative narrative voice, the latter’s “See the child” sets up a third-person, weak narrative perspective. Ishmael names himself as the teller of his tale, while the kid’s unnamed, nearly mute opacity makes his a frustratingly inaccessible focalization. We view things from his perspective, but are denied the interpretive inner light that Ishmael sheds on his tale. We are given direction, and therefore some autonomy, by Ishmael. We will call him by name, and step into his story as active participants. With the kid we will view the narrative construct as through thick glass, only to be fed information as the distant narrator sees fit. We work equally hard, but in an effort to combat the narrative’s obliqueness, rather than as partners with a forthcoming narrative voice.
And so, mired in this web of complexity, the kid begins his training at the feet of the judge. The kid, whose actions at times foreshadow *No Country’s Chigurh*, is the judge’s primary focus. While he wreaks havoc everywhere he goes and kills indiscriminately, what the judge truly wants is the kid, precisely because he resists him. Like Saul on the road to Damascus, conversion is sweeter the farther the convert travels on the spectrum of good and evil. The prophet of destruction is a recruiter, and in the relationship between the kid and the judge we find the maturity that could not come to fruition in the relationship between Culla Holme and the bearded man. Culla, essentially a weak natural man, does not possess the intellect necessary to become a true prophet, only the blunt energy. The kid, however, has the spark of Suttree, of Llewellyn Moss, and of Chigurh. He is untrained, but smart, the evolved natural man. With sufficient leverage, he could become a true prophet. It may be that the judge has known all along that he will not have the kid and will in the end murder him, and perhaps the kid knows it too, but their fates are tied together, so they have to dance the dance, and we have to witness the exquisite pain of recruit and recruiter mourning the way things must be.

**The Judge as Recruiter**

The judge is a monstrous anomaly among the scalphunters, inexplicable and rightly to be feared. His customary position is half-naked before the campfire, declaiming to the company on the nature of man and beast. On one such night, among the ruins of the Anasazi, the judge finishes his lecture and is described as an icon:

> He was sat before the fire naked save for his breeches and his hands rested palm down upon his knees. His eyes were empty slots. None among the company harbored any notion as to what this attitude implied, yet so like an icon was he in his sitting that they grew cautious and spoke with circumspection among themselves as if they would not waken something that had better been left sleeping. (147)
The prophet is an unknown quantity, something wholly alien to those who encounter him, and this absence of a referent is at the root of the fear he causes in people. They do not know what he is and so are completely unequipped to experience him.

One of the judge’s less mystical powers is his facility with language, literature, and the history of the world. His intellect mirrors his intimidating size. He regularly floods his listeners with deeply philosophical rhetoric that only the kid and Tobin have any hope of processing. To see the judge’s own opinion of the power of knowledge and language, we need only return to the scene where he rescues black Jackson from Sgt. Aguilar. Of his speech to the sergeant, the judge says:

It is not necessary, he said, that the principals here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding. But it is consistent with notions of right principle that these facts—to the extent that they can be readily made to do so—should find a repository in the witness of some third party. Sergeant Aguilar is just such a party and any slight to his office is but a secondary consideration when compared to divergences in that larger protocol exacted by the formal agenda of an absolute destiny. Words are things. The words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning. (85)

His interlocutor’s ability to comprehend, then, is not necessary for the words he says to have their meaning. In the same way the dichotomy of good and evil is erased in McCarthy’s universe, so is the dichotomy of signifier and signified. It seems the signifier, the judge, can bring meaning into existence without having it processed by a reciprocally gifted mind. Words are things, and he owns them.

Captain Ahab, too, tends to talk, but in the judge that verbosity is stripped of all of Ahab’s emotional weakness. Where Ahab questions his own sanity and readily admits his obsession with the whale, the judge confidently holds forth on philosophy and religion,
subsuming all of creation into his own bulk. Ahab is readable, his face a window to his emotions: “Did you fixedly gaze, too, upon that ribbed and dented brow; there also, you would see still stranger footprints – the footprints of his one unsleeping ever-pacing thought” (199). Compare this to the inscrutable judge’s sitting icon-like before his fire, his eyes “empty slots.” Ahab’s obsession and emotional instability make his crew fear him; for the judge’s crew it is his unnamable otherness.

Equally mystifying as his language is the judge’s connection to magic and the occult. When the gang allows a juggler and his fortune-teller wife to travel with them, the judge has them read tarot cards for the company. The kid, “el joven,” draws the “cuatro de copas,” the four cups, which depicts a man seated before three cups while a fourth is offered by a hand extending from a cloud. The seated figure has his arms crossed, accepting none of the cups. The drawer of this card is facing a time of contemplation or inaction, apparently unaware of or unwilling to accept what it being offered. The card can also predict hard times ahead, perhaps requiring self-sacrifice (Lammey 81). The kid, when he draws the card, had “not seen such cards before, yet the one he held seemed familiar to him” (94) and the judge laughs. The juggler, whose blindfolded wife is able to identify which member of the company draws what card, witnesses the connection between the kid and the judge. The judge, purveyor of cups, has offered the kid a position by his side. The kid, in refusing the offer, will necessarily have to sacrifice himself.

When Glanton is chosen, he draws “la corroza,” the chariot, but the card vanishes from Glanton’s hand, either pulled into or thrown into the night. The juggler’s wife, however, understands the card:

La carroza, la carroza, cried the beldam. Invertido. Carta de guerra, de venganza. La ví sin ruedas sobre un rio obscuro…Perdida, perdida. La carta está perdida en
la noche…Un maleficio, cried the old woman. Qué viento tan maleante…Carroza de muertos, llena de huesos. El joven qué…(96)

The chariot, the chariot, cried the beldam. Inverted. Card of war, of revenge. I saw no wheels on a dark river. Lost, lost. The card is lost in the night. A curse, cried the old woman. That blows the marauder…Chariot of the dead, chariot of the dead, full of bones. The young man who…

Glanton’s card, swallowed by the night, predicts the meandering path of destruction ahead of the company as well as the kid’s as-yet-unclear place of importance in it. During the woman’s speech, Glanton himself threatens to shoot her if she does not stop, and the judge, “like a great ponderous djinn, step[s] through the fire” and puts his arms around Glanton, perhaps to reassure him and perhaps to stay his hand. Clearly, Glanton’s place as the judge’s favorite has been usurped, unwillingly, but the kid. The judge orchestrates the entire scene, and the end result for the company is a feeling of being cursed, of being on an irreversible path with no guidance, but only the judge knows where that path leads man: “As if beyond will or fate he and his beasts and his trappings moved both in card and in substance under consignment to some third and other destiny” (96). Choices are yet to be made, war is yet to be waged, but all involved know that both are coming.

The judge sees himself as a father figure for the kid, and he sees in “the child the father of the man” that he wishes the kid to become (3). His perceived relationship with the kid can be found in a story that the judge tells one night among the ruins of the Anasazi. The story ends with a son whose father has died before the son was born, and therefore lives his life comparing himself to a an idol rather than a real man, for, as the Judge says, “The father as euchered the son out of his patrimony. For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods” (145). The analogy is that the contemporary heathen are to these
Anasazi ancestors as the boy of the story is to his dead father, inferior and insufficient in front of a past that places judgment on them: “For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons however primitive their works may seem to us” (146). The kid ran away from home, never to return, and so cannot receive the inheritance of his own father’s death, and instead faces perpetual judgment. The judge wishes to step into that lost father’s place, offering not his own death, but the death of all fathers. But the kid must prove himself worthy first.

Later in the same scene, the “expriest” Tobin asks the judge:

So what is the way of raising a child?  
At a young age, said the judge, they should be put in a pit with wild dogs. They should be set to puzzle out from their proper clues the one of three doors that does not harbor wild lions. They should be made to run naked in the desert until…

Hold now, said Tobin. The question was put in all earnestness…

And the answer, said the judge. If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now? Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet? (146)

The judge is testing the kid. He travels in a pit of wild dogs, the men of Glanton’s gang. He continually faces peril and continues to survive. As the wolves around him continue to cull themselves, the kid will emerge as the lone survivor, save the judge. The logical verdict is that he is more “predacious” than his brethren, but he accepts neither this inheritance nor his place beside the judge. And the judge does not accept his refusal.

Like Ahab with his crew, the judge loses a few of Glanton’s men along the way, but essentially brings them complete to their final battle with the Yuma tribe, where all of them are
killed but the kid, Tobin, the judge and the idiot. His fused dual role has him marshal his
troops like Ahab and then drive them down to death like Moby-Dick, trading the white of the
whale here for the more traditional red of the Yuma tribe, himself surviving by using a cannon as
a rifle.

Immediately juxtaposed are the scenes of Glanton’s gruesome death at the hands of a
Yuma warrior and judge’s escape from the same fate:

Hack away you mean red nigger, he said, and the old man raised the axe
and split the head of John Joel Glanton to the thrapple.
When they entered the judge’s quarters they found the idiot and a girl of
perhaps twelve years cowering naked in the floor. Behind them also naked stood
the judge. He was holding leveled at them the bronze barrel of the howitzer. The
wooden truck stood in the floor, the straps pried up and twisted off the pillow
blocks. The judge had the cannon under one arm and he was holding a lighted
cigar over the touch-hole. The Yumas fell over one another backward and the
judge put the cigar in his mouth and took up his portmanteau and stepped out the
door and backed past them and down the embankment. The idiot, who reached
just to his waist, stuck close to his side, and together they entered the wood at the
base of the hill and disappeared from sight. (275)

In this astonishing scene, white evil floats above the predictable red of slaughter, freeing
both the judge and the kid for their more intimate final stand-off. The idiot too, is transformed in
Blood Meridian, compared to his counterpart in Moby-Dick. Pip, the black dot on the white die
of the captain, is given prophetic status by Ahab, and becomes his constant companion, Ahab
swearing to keep him by his side “unless I should thereby drag thee to worse horrors than are
here. Come, then, to my cabin” (597). The idiot of Blood Meridian, by contrast, is found by the
Yuma in the judge’s quarters “cowering naked in the floor” (275). This companion idiot is
nameless and mute, mentally handicapped rather than insane, and his attachment to the judge is
rooted simply in his feral imbecility. Neither Pip nor the idiot survive in the end, however, both
discarded by their masters, who have turned their attentions to more important prey.
The judge makes his case plain for the kid as he stalks him and Tobin after the Yuma massacre, saying “I know…you’ve not the heart of a common assassin…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 clemency for the heathen” (299). In this era of a “blood meridian,” there is no place for hesitation, and moral qualms are considered flaws. Tobin, the failed priest, is an example of just this principle. While we never learn his specific story, Tobin is called “expriest” no less than 22 times in the novel, a remarkably high number in McCarthy vocabulary. He is regularly named as the failure of his previous vocation, and yet in an important moment, the judge calls him “priest” instead. After the kid kills the judge’s horses to limit his mobility, the judge says “I know what you’ve done. The priest put you up to it and I’ll take that as a mitigation in the act and the intent. Which I would any man in his wrongdoing. But there’s the question of property” (292). Tobin’s place as counselor and companion to the kid reveals him as a moral man, if no longer a holy one. When the judge calls him “priest,” he is not restoring Tobin to his former glory, but rather making clear that the distinction between “priest” and “expriest” doesn’t matter. Both are equally useless because the kid is the property of the judge, and therefore completely outside the purview of God and his labels. The judge knows this about the kid and seeks to claim or kill him, since he cannot let his flaw of morality exist unaddressed. Tobin is in his small way a symbol for the entire system of human deities and worship based on good and evil. All are failed and ultimately destroyed.

After this encounter, Tobin and the kid reach San Diego and the sea and can move no farther west, Manifest Destiny reaching its literal end. After the kid’s arrest for his part in the gang’s marauding, the judge visits the kid in his cell. The judge, who had walked out of the
desert naked, now stands immaculately dressed, down to his “small silvermounted derringer
stocked in rosewood” (305). In this meeting the judge reaches out for the kid, saying, in nearly
biblical language, “Dont you know I’d have loved you like a son?” (306). He condemns the kid
for refusing to “empty his heart out into the common” with the rest of the gang and give his
whole person, body and soul, over to the waging of war. For, as the judge explains, “If war is not
holy man is nothing but antic clay” and the world has no ultimate meaning (307). For his crime
of “reserving some clemency” the kid is charged with all the atrocities perpetrated by the gang.
But his death cannot be on the scaffold; it must come at the judge’s hands, and so the kid is
released.

After this visit, the kid dreams of the judge and their shared connection with the world of
learning:

In the white and empty room he stood in his bespoken suit with his hat in his hand
and he peered down with his small and lashless pig’s eyes wherein this child just
sixteen years on earth could read whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the
courts of men and he saw his own name which nowhere else could he have
ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a
traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or
on old dated maps. (310)

The kid is already logged in the judge’s book, and only in this state, as property of the judge,
does he have a name, much less the ability to read it. The power of naming rests in the judge’s
hand, just as it did for the black-bearded leader of Outer Dark’s trio, who refused to name one of
his acolytes. For the kid, and in many ways for the moral reader as well, literacy and learning
belong to the judge and are therefore to be feared and avoided. The kid chooses to remain
unlettered and unnamed. The seed of reason is genetically planted in the boy, albeit by his
drunken and useless father, but because that seed was not nurtured, the kid, quite literally in
the dream, is history.

For McCarthy, dreams are powerfully connected with prophet recruits. Culla Holme,
Lester Ballard, Suttree, and the kid all dream of men, fathers and father figures, who are in
positions of authority over them. For the kid, that can be no one other than the judge, who is both
father figure and executioner for him: “in that sleep and in sleeps to follow did the judge visit.
Who would come other?”(309).

The world of Blood Meridian is powered by the same absolute determinism that
underpins all of McCarthy’s works. At the same time that there are moral men, the kid among
them, there is also the judge, a force beyond morality, functioning as indiscriminant death dealer
to uncounted men, women, and children. Initially fueled by an injunction to bring back the scalps
of Apache, the judge soon makes it clear that a black-haired scalp is a black-haired scalp, no
matter to whom it once belonged. What once was justification for the bloody rampages inflicted
by the scalphunters becomes merely an excuse for them. The location of power, all power, solely
in the judge reveals that war is the only thing that makes sense in this world, and morality is
essentially irrelevant.

What’s Left When Morality Dies?

McCarthy reinforces the futility of ideas of good and evil, and any notion of human
supremacy, in the way he illustrates the landscape of the novel. The Glanton gang moves
incessantly west, in a brutishly literal incarnation of Manifest Destiny, through a landscape
where all objects, living and not, are utterly equal:

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 stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity… and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

In such “alien” terrain, not only is the superiority of good men over evil negated, but so too is the primacy of man over all other creatures and objects. The playing field here is leveled to the point that a rock and a man are on equal terms. Even the relationship of earth to man, here simultaneously familiar and “alien,” is brought into question, as is the placement of the earth itself in the larger universe, for here it “mills” internally the outer darkness of our cosmological existence.

As even the reliability of physics crumbles, Steven Shaviro explains that

*Blood Meridian*, is a book…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. (‘‘The Very Life of the Darkness’’ 147)

The westward movement of the gang is revealed as movement for movement’s sake as the world functions like a giant treadmill beneath them. In moral and philosophical terms, the principles of Manifest Destiny are revealed as empty, as is every illusion that man progresses in any way other than toward his unavoidable end. The optical democracy is no trick of light, but the truth of McCarthy’s world, not just in *Blood Meridian*, but in all of his novels. Naturalists find in passages like this a clear resonance in McCarthy with their own principles, and his affinity for the world of science is well documented. The naturalist strain in McCarthy is clear, and yet even here the tone is less pessimistic than it is matter-of-fact, even somehow reassuring. The “kinship” discovered between man and stone reduces neither, but instead makes them
brothers. Removing man from the top of the evolutionary pyramid also removes his moral responsibility for it, which in some ways comes as relief to the reader.

In that world, the duality of good and evil becomes meaningless, replaced by the duality of submission or resistance to the doctrine of war. The judge tells the kid that “war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (249). This statement becomes a formula for understanding the relationship between the kid and the judge, where the will of the one (the judge) and the will of the other (the kid) are opposed within the will of the god that is war.

Because it must select, this god chooses his prophet, the judge, and the will of the kid is defeated and absorbed, very nearly literally, by the great bulk of the judge. Our last glimpse of the kid is his entry into the “jakes” or outhouse of the bar where the judge has been waiting for him:

He went down the walkboard toward the jakes. He stood outside listening to the voices fading away and he looked again at the silent tracks of the stars where they died over the darkened hills. Then he opened the rough board door of the jakes and stepped in.

The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden bar latch home behind him. (333)

There is no need for detail here. The judge intends to love the kid “like a son,” like the mute Indian child he adopts, fondles, and then kills in the gang’s travels. The kid will be raped and brutally murdered, fully subsumed into the judge. But he will not continue the judge’s legacy, will not go out into the world and preach the gospel of violence. While the kid loses in the end,

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26 In the Border Trilogy, this concept of an “optical democracy” is continued, but in more positive terms. John Grady Cole’s connection with horses and Billy Parham’s desire to help the wolf are clear examples.
the judge does not win what he hoped. We see a moral man die a terrible death, but he manages either to preserve his soul or at least keep it from the judge. Morality itself may not have a place in this world of destruction, but yet it persists. In this land of optical democracy, everything that exists is equal, and equally subject to judgment, with only the judge himself being free of it. Even those converts to the God of war must finally be victims of their own art. And those who resist conversion, like the kid, taint the holiness of war with their skepticism, as the judge explains:

As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior’s right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be? (331)

The judge charges the kid with the contamination of the holy act of war, thereby robbing its adherents of their rightful place in its “dance.” In the same sentence he also predicts the eventual end of the era of war, when the dance itself will become a “false dance” with “false dancers,” and his own place as singularly and perpetually true among them. In the optical democracy, everyone loses but the judge, who alone continues the dance, for “there is room on the stage for one beast and one alone” (331). The judge has offered the kid a place beside him on that stage, but the kid has refused it, and condemned all men alongside himself. Now “dishonored,” the god that is war saves only his prophet, abandoning even its most devout followers to an uncertain darkness.
The Prophet’s Failure

Turning to Abraham Heschel’s work on the biblical prophets, we find a disquieting parallel between the nature of the judge, who most decidedly serves a different kind of god, and historical prophets like Elijah and Isaiah:

The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man’s fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is the form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words. (The Prophets 5-6)

Here, in this inverted world where destruction is the natural motion of man, the prophet serves his god in the same way Elijah served his. The judge is a man who feels deeply, and the kid’s refusal to join him cuts him to the quick (“Don’t you know that I’d have loved you like a son?”). But rather than “bowed and stunned,” the judge is stunning, roping men’s wills to his own through magnetic speeches, inexplicable feats of conjuring, and sheer blunt force. The burden on the judge’s soul is not to save man from his agony, but rather to thrust him headfirst into bloody action. Apply the necessary inversion to match Heschel’s words to McCarthy’s world and you have a man rejoicing, reveling in man’s greed, glorying in his agony, voicing his terror with staggering eloquence. The poor deserve plundering, the rich profaning, and the crossing point between this man and his god is human death. The god of war is raging in the judge’s words:

“Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance” (331). The judge speaks in language akin to that of Isaiah:

Behold, the LORD maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down, and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof…The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws,
changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate: therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left...And it shall come to pass, that he who fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit; and he that cometh up out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare: for the windows from on high are open, and the foundations of the earth do shake. (Isaiah 24: 1-18)

Continuing the inversion, it is the pit that is the salvation of man, for having brought destruction to the earth, heralded by his prophet, the god of war rewards those who sink the lowest. The judge’s only failure is the kid, who refuses to descend.

Rooted in the parallels between Blood Meridian and Moby-Dick is Melville’s position as a writer that recognizes the potential for darkness in the world. Dana Phillips accurately reveals that “[p]hilosophically, however, McCarthy is much more assured than Melville that there is a ‘darkness inside the world’ (BM 111) – and less disturbed by it. For McCarthy, it’s just darkness... In Blood Meridian darkness is not a ‘theme,’ a dire metaphysical possibility mad characters can urge upon saner men, but a reiterated fact” (438). While in many ways an homage to one of McCarthy’s four favorite novels, Blood Meridian is also a parody of Moby-Dick, in funhouse-mirror fashion folding and distorting its archetypes into fused and foreshortened versions of themselves, making the white whale an eternal, inviolable menace and hamstringing any attempt to go against it. As a diminished version of Ishmael, the kid in the end walks with eyes open into the whale’s lair, voluntarily to be sucked into the vortex, the “jakes” standing in as a diminished and tainted sea.
Chapter Five: The Border Trilogy, or “Evil is a true thing in Mexico.”

The Border Trilogy begins with *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy’s most transparent attempt at a bestseller novel, and the most optimistic by far of his body of work. John Grady Cole is a good guy of improbable proportions. With the reserved gentility and uncanny horse sense of a young Clint Eastwood character, he broods his way across the Mexican border at the beginning of the novel, fleeing a dead grandfather, a cancer-ridden father, and a divorcee-turned-actress mother intent on selling the family farm. We have no choice but to root for him, and settle in for the heart-wrenching tragedy of a noble heart betrayed to unfold before us. That’s about as far as McCarthy can go in terms of meeting mainstream expectations, however, before upending them completely. This nice guy does not finish last, nor does he get the girl. He is shattered and left empty, with the world swinging around in him in that black and empty void that his creator returns to time and again.

*The Crossing* is no lighter. Sixteen-year-old Billy Parham, himself a horseman to equal John Grady Cole, nobly attempts to return a pregnant wolf to her Mexican homeland, only to fail miserably and end up shooting her himself to prevent her torture at the hands of dog fighters. Returning from this trip, he finds his parents dead at the hands of an Indian he had tried to help at the beginning of the novel, and his younger brother Boyd, now an emotionally scarred orphan, in the hands of strangers. A second ill-fated trip to retrieve the horses stolen by the parents’ killers ends up with Boyd’s desertion and eventual death, Billy’s futile hunt for his brother, and his recapture of only one of his father’s horses. His only success in the novel is the retrieval of Boyd’s bones on a third trip to Mexico, but in the process, he gets his horse stabbed in the chest and himself very nearly killed. At the end, he is a homeless man of twenty, unable even to enlist
for World War II because of a heart murmur, with the emotional baggage of a tragic figure at least three times his age.

*Cities of the Plains* brings the two men together, with Billy now 28 and John Grady now 19. John Grady retains his conviction in the inherent goodness of most people, but Billy has lived harder, with harsher results. A world-weary would-be cynic, Billy tries to temper John Grady’s optimism with a dose of reality. As James Barcus aptly puts it, “For Billy, the world is to be endured, not embraced” (44). Perhaps it is his flat pragmatism that saves Billy from an early death, but this blessing-as-curse merely ensures that he lives to a ripe old age as a homeless drifter, only taken in at the end of his days by a family who pities him. Maybe John Grady’s early exit is the more admirable, or at least more expedient, way to rid oneself of the world’s burden.

Where the prophet of destruction has been physically or psychologically human in the novels that precede the trilogy, here he is geographical, embedded in the landscapes the young men travel and the people of those lands. The vastness of Mexico has a prophetic call that draws good men down. McCarthy’s typical protagonists are present in the Border Trilogy, but in slightly more heroic incarnations than those of McCarthy’s earlier novels. John Grady Cole is a young man with a once intact family, a once loving father and mother. Billy Parham, too, begins with a strong family base, but Mexico takes it away from him.

The first two border books are classic quest novels crossed with the bildungsroman, with recognizable kinship to Browning’s “Childe Rolande” and Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Young men with noble lineage and clean hearts venture into a strange land to find adventure, meaning, and purpose. But the land they enter is corrupt, peopled with the prophet’s
acolytes and littered with the rubble of his passage. The border they cross is not just the line separating the U.S. from Mexico; it is a border in time, in space, in mind, and in flesh. The liminality of the borderlands will torment these young men, and if it does not kill them outright, it will suck them dry in the trying.

Not surprisingly, we find the common threads of McCarthy’s overarching worldview running through the trilogy. The first is the persistently peculiar place of traditional religion, mainly Christianity, but indigenous religion as well. All of the ancient mechanisms are in place, including the requisite places of good and evil, but a close study reveals that religion has become, or perhaps been revealed as, impotent. Churches fall down, priests are shot, anchorites live hermetically without congregations. All the power in the world of McCarthy’s Mexico resides in those who rightfully understand that the only true purpose of life is death. Philosophy too spins itself out fruitlessly, merely passing the time until its own eventual destruction. The presence of the prophet figure in fully realized humans is almost always associated, directly or obliquely, with religion.

The second thread is the inability of the hero to do any good, and his stubborn refusal to admit his own shortcomings. No matter what these men do in the name of rightness and goodness, they end up with heartache and worse. More often than not, they deliberately begin an act of bravery or morality with secure knowledge in its failure. The impracticality and brazenness of their noble acts regularly recoil on them, causing harm not just to themselves, but also to the ones they love. In this futility, we see the prophet of destruction most clearly, as the reason why the protagonists fail.
A final and intriguing thread is the holiness of land and animals, of Mexico’s vast tracts, of horses and wolves, and the understanding the men feel towards them. Transcending the “optical democracy” of Blood Meridian, McCarthy does seem to offer a hierarchy here, with nature often above, or more precisely without, men. Where there are last vestiges of kindness or wisdom in the people the protagonists encounter, it is usually in direct association with land or animals.

**The Frailty of Religion**

More transparently and emphatically than anywhere else, in the Border Trilogy religion has been disemboweled. In the beginning of All the Pretty Horses, both John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins are self-proclaimed believers in God. Rawlins sees God as a necessity for the world to even hold together at all:

> Way the world is. Somebody can wake up and sneeze somewhere in Arkansas or some damn place and before you’re done there’s wars and ruination and all hell. You dont know what’s goin to happen. I’d say He’s just about got to. I dont believe we’d make it a day otherwise. *(ATPH 92)*

His is not a ringing endorsement by any means, and in his vision God is the hamstrung caretaker of a world perpetually on the brink of tearing itself apart. There is belief, yes, but a backhanded, jaded kind of belief.

John Grady’s upbringing has been an austere one, by an opportunist mother and a fair but hard-driving father. It is clear Mr. Cole loves his son, but it is usually expressed in a rough-edged instruction. He knows the world for the unforgiving place it is, and his view of religion is equally clear-eyed: “The Good Book says that the meek shall inherit the earth and I expect that’s probably the truth,” he tells John Grady. “I aint no freethinker, but I’ll tell you what. I’m a long way from bein convinced that it’s all that good a thing” (13). In the father’s mind, a world run by
the meek is not appealing. It is better by far to be self-sufficient, well defended, and wary of others. It quickly becomes clear to the reader that had John Grady adopted his father’s worldview, he would have saved himself from heartbreak many times over. But John Grady has an unfortunate streak of noble kindness and sensitivity, likely inherited from his actress mother and better suited to a poet or philanthropist, not a horseman. He has real religious sentiment and wants the world to have meaning. In one of our first glimpses of him, “He walked out on the prairie and stood holding his hat like some supplicant to the darkness over them all and he stood there for a long time” (3). Similes are often quite literal with McCarthy, and so we are safe in assuming that John Grady is an actual supplicant. The problem is that he does not know whom to address or what to ask. The “darkness” here has more associations with the unknown than it does with a known and trusted God, and its pervasiveness “over them all” is simultaneously inclusive and ominous. As we well know from McCarthy’s other novels, darkness is usually more than the opposite of good; it is its absence.

The uncertainty to which John Grady prays is complicated by his friend Rawlins’ increasing ambivalence toward the idea of God as savior. After the two have crossed into Mexico and picked up the wandering child bandit Blevins, Rawlins waxes religious one evening:

You think there’ll be a day when the sun wont rise?
Yeah, said John Grady. Judgment day.
When you think that’ll be?
Whenever He decides to hold it.
Judgment day, said Rawlins. You believe in all that?
I dont know. Yeah, I reckon. You?
Rawlins put the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and lit it and flipped away the match. I dont know. Maybe.
I knowed you was a infidel, said Blevins. (60-61)
Rawlins’ discomfort with the idea of Judgment Day gives us a more nuanced understanding of his perspective from the beginning of the journey south. The God that holds the world together isn’t guaranteed to return and offer the permanent salvation of the blessed and damnation of the doomed on Judgment Day. Implicit in Rawlins’ answer is the possibility that the world may just keep on turning indefinitely, forgotten by the being that put it in motion. The farther they travel into Mexico, the more uncertain both John Grady and Rawlins become in what they believe. Blevins’ inexplicable appearance from nowhere implicitly supports the idea of a universe that is incomprehensible, if not nonsensical. Blevins is somehow a believer, even naming himself after a radio evangelist, even though he certainly is not living in Christ’s image. His naming Rawlins an infidel underscores the hollowness of Blevins’ own religiousness.

Similarly, the early days of *The Crossing* present a protagonist, Billy, who believes in traditional ideas of goodness, but is contrasted by his more realistic brother, Boyd. Upon their first encounter with the Indian who likely kills their family later, Billy honors the man’s request (demand, really) for food. Boyd asks:

> Are we goin to carry him some supper?  
> Yes. We can do that I reckon.  
> Everthing you can do it dont mean it’s a good idea, said Boyd.  
> I know it. *(TC 8-9)*

In a universe governed by honor, Billy’s actions would be noble, but Boyd knows that most people are no longer noble, or perhaps have never been. His pragmatism highlights the difference between Billy’s “can,” which is rooted in duty, and Boyd’s “can,” which points out his brother’s vulnerability. The fact that Billy acknowledges Boyd’s point and proceeds anyway tends to confirm the stubbornness of Billy’s nobility. Like the kid of *Blood Meridian*, like Suttree in Knoxville’s underbelly, Billy’s rebellion against the darkness is a refusal to operate by
its precepts and to do what traditional religion would call good, despite full knowledge that he will likely cause harm to himself and those he loves in the process. By choosing to help this Indian, Billy sets in motion a series of events that will end in the destruction of his family. It’s easy to hear the echo of Rawlins’ words to John Grady in Billy’s actions here: “Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I’d made before it. You understand what I’m sayin?” (79). We want to shake Billy, to make him listen to Boyd, to force him not to make the choice that leads to disaster. The truly tragic aspect of this scene is that Billy effectively hears us, hears Boyd, knows we’re right, and goes ahead anyway. He, like John Grady, feels he has no choice but to do the right thing, no matter how wrong it is.

In both novels, as the protagonist crosses into Mexico, he finds a world much older than his own, with readily visible religious associations. Much more so in Mexico than in the states, the trappings of traditional Christianity are still present, but always corrupted.

**Heroic Futility vs. Prophetic Power**

Throughout the Border Trilogy, the physical spaces of the holy become corrupted, such as *All the Pretty Horses*’ hacienda chapel, which Don Hector converts to his billiards room. The hacendado explains that “It is supposed to be made unsacred….To have the priest come and make it no longer a chapel. Personally I question whether such a thing can be done at all. What is sacred is sacred. The powers of the priest are more limited than people suppose” (144). Somehow the sacred nature of the chapel persists, despite the fact that men gamble in it. The powers of the priest seem limited, yes, but his limitations extend further than Don Hector supposes, into creating sacred space in the first place as much as removing the same place’s
holiness when it is no longer useful. The idea that a room can live on when its religious purpose is no longer warranted indicates a similar fragility in the religion itself. If what is sacred remains so, does the same not hold true for what is not? And if a room now used for a clearly secular purpose is now logically unsacred, does that not mean that it effectively never was? The idea of sacred space becomes ludicrous, a sham created to make ordinary men feel holy.

As it takes a back seat to billiards, so too does religion step aside for authority. After his capture by John Grady, the Mexican captain tells the injured boy:

You going to die, he said.
We’ll let God decide about that. Let’s go.
Are you no afraid of God?
I got no reason to be afraid of God. I’ve even got a bone or two to pick with him.
You should be afraid of God, the captain said. You are not the officer of the law.
You dont have no authority. (272)

Here God is doubly emasculated, first by John Grady, who intends to take him to task, and secondly by the captain, who sees his position as above that of God. As an officer of the law, he has the authority to wield God’s name. Because John Grady does not have that power, it logically holds that God’s power is in the hands of men and of the law, and not the other way around.

The captain is the most fully articulated prophet character in All the Pretty Horses, and he echoes back to the grandeur of Judge Holden, although in contrived ways. John Grady first meets the captain after Rawlins has already been worked over, and the captain’s poise belies his brutality. We do not see him beat Rawlins, but we know he has because “the captain sat as before. His hair newly slicked” (266). His appearance is neat and trim, but newly so, indicating that he has recently exerted himself.
The captain’s speech is in English rather than his native Spanish, and his mannerisms appear studied. His shirt is a specifically tailored military cut; he smokes cigarettes in prescribed motions, “in a posture that seemed alien to him. As if perhaps he’d admired it somewhere in others” (167). The captain clearly wants to project an intelligent, civilized persona, choosing to speak in the language of the U.S. and displaying a gentility that borders on prudishness. In a less flattering nod to the judge, McCarthy has John Grady also question the sexuality of the captain. In attempting to determine Blevins’ age, the captain tells John Grady, “He dont have no feathers,” to which John Grady retorts “I wouldnt know about that. It dont interest me.’ The captain’s face darkened” (167). By implying that the captain may be sexually interested in the young Blevins, John Grady subverts his authority. In the larger continuum of McCarthy’s canon, we are witnessing the prophet’s star, which reached its zenith in the judge, perceptibly wane.

But the captain is beyond the ordinary human in one significant respect: he commits the act of unjustified murder, and because of this

… the captain inhabited another space and it was a space of his own election and outside the common world of men. A space privileged to men of the irreclaimable act which while it contained all lesser worlds within it contained no access to them. For the terms of election were of a piece with its office and once chosen that world could not be quit. (179)

The captain is a man of destruction, won over to the theory that the world tends inexorably toward failure. He recognizes the ability of a man like him to “make the truth” (168). When John Grady counters with “There aint but one truth…The truth is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody’s mouth,” he is making the mistake of playing by the rules he brought with him into Mexico (168). The captain plays a different game, where the one who is willing to inflict the most damage wins. He clearly wants to win John Grady over to his way of thinking, however,
when he explains why he should not enter Saltillo prison: “Some crazy person, he can say that God is here. But everybody knows that God is no here” (180). The Spanish-accented English here presents interesting translation possibilities. The surface level meaning is clearly “God is not here,” but the literal phrasing of “God is no here,” could mean that “here” “God” equals “no.” He is negation, the absence of productive energy or space. Here God will not only not help, but the instinct to turn to him is also rebuffed, mutated into an antithesis of God. The language and economy “here” in prison is blood and violence, but once inside, John Grady discovers that the prison is a microcosm of Mexico itself.

A second major prophet figure appears inside the prison in the guise of Perez, the boss on the inside and the only person who can make escape possible. It is easy to understand that the legal system, the visible human authority over right and wrong, is corrupt and bribable, but harder to think that the actual authority over good and evil is equally corrupt. But the idea of evil is different for Anglos like John Grady than it is for Mexicans like Perez, who says, “There can be in a man some evil. But we don’t think it is his own evil. Where did he get it? How did he come to claim it? No. Evil is a true thing in Mexico. It goes about on its own legs. Maybe some day it will come to visit you. Maybe it already has” (194-5). This unhinges John Grady’s worldview, which rests on the assumption that good and evil are characteristics to be found within human beings. The idea of an external, sentient, mobile evil is something entirely new. John Grady is learning that what he thought to be true of men and of Mexico is false, and always has been. As we’ve seen in his earlier novels, in McCarthy’s world evil is real and walking, with no parallel good to balance it. Men manipulate and fight and kill and are imprisoned, where their manipulation and violence expand as their sphere of power contracts. The only religion is
destruction, and the only escape is death. John Grady and Billy’s exit from the prison is essentially a baptism by blood into Perez’s world. Put in prison for crimes he did not commit, John Grady must become a murderer in order to find his freedom again, forced into killing the boy assassin sent after him. Only after, when he is thoroughly broken in both body and spirit, does the Señora buy him out of his captivity, with the price of his freedom being the loss of Alejandra, the woman he loves. The good guy loses, because he doesn’t have a side. If good and evil are on a balanced scale, with neutrality in the center, when good goes away to be replaced with neutrality, or stasis, there is no longer any center. The only dynamic choice is destruction, the only absence of destruction is death. There is no winning for those who choose not to destroy.

Where men are the most visible corruptors of God in *All the Pretty Horses*, in *The Crossing* the degradation is visibly physical. As Billy makes his way through the Mexican countryside, he encounters the physical ruins of the Christian church, in “Chichimeca where the priests had passed and soldiers passed and the missions fallen into mud” (135). Later “he passed the ruins of a huge adobe church whose roofbeams lay in the rubble” (137). He also collects the stories of people who have witnessed the decline. One roadside old woman tells him of seeing a priest shot against the wall of his own church when she was a child: “She said that when young people see priests shot in the streets it changes their view of religion. She said that the young nowadays cared nothing for religion or priest or family or country or God” (87). What is important here is that the woman speaks of the young people of her own generation, who revered the dying priest as akin to Christ, dipping their handkerchiefs in his blood. In her mind, there is a holiness in their actions that contrasts with the young people of Billy’s generation, whom she
views as wholly disenfranchised. What she fails to see, however, is that in both scenarios the church is in effect powerless, either bleeding to death or entirely absent. Only in the generation prior to the old woman’s, that of her parents, had the church maintained any illusion of strength.

Billy’s disenfranchisement from religion and all other social constructs is of concern to adherents of Mexico’s traditional religions as well. An Indian seer, who knows that Billy’s family is dead even when Billy himself does not, warns Billy against giving in to his wanderlust and orphanhood: “He told the boy that although he was huerfano [orphan] still he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander this way would become for him a passion and he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself” (134). The old man implies that Billy is putting his own identity at risk by wandering without destination, and that it is by our associations with other people that we maintain a sense of self. To continue this thread, it is then by making “some place,” as if where does not matter, that we create a sense of permanence and order. When taken together with the words of the old woman, it seems that it is precisely these created institutions that the young are abandoning. And if it is the human who chooses a place arbitrarily and then endows it with meaning, then is the place itself, the institution, not arbitrary and meaningless in its essential nature? The hopeful among us would say that the place does not matter because it is the human connections that matter more27, while the pessimists could clearly argue that the entire enterprise is built on lies and doomed to fail.

If this is the direction in which we are headed, perhaps all is not yet entirely lost. The old man sees “a largeness of spirit” in Billy that “men could see and that men would wish to know

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27 This concept is articulated directly in The Road when the father traveling with his child says, “Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (63).
him and that the world would need him even as he needed the world for they were one” (134). While being one with this world is not exactly a reassuring prospect, there does seem to be room for light, even if housed only in the individual man.

But then, what good is this light, this goodness, if it lives only in single hearts, if it cannot be successfully transferred to the masses? Perhaps the most damning testament to how far the church has fallen is the long story told by a rogue hermit priest, living in the rubble of an abandoned church with uncountable cats. In a cascade of pointless tragedy, the priest relates the story of a man who in childhood loses his parents to cannonshot in a church, only to lose his only son in an earthquake, then watch his marriage crumble in the aftermath. He turns heretic and returns to the decimated church at the site of his parents’ death to pace under a precariously perched dome, blaspheming God and daring the dome to fall. The narrating priest comes to reason with the man, but because he stays outside the danger of the dome, ends up “sacrific[ing] his words of their power to witness” (152). In the end, the man dies and the priest ends up questioning his own faith and withdrawing completely from the world. Is the man a good man? The priest a good priest? Does it matter? In the end, do they not end up simply sending words out into McCarthy’s ever-present void, to remain unheard, except by the single, wandering, disenfranchised heart?

The priest thinks not, believing strongly that there is a God and that he has a voice. But the voice of God is not a quiet one, nor reassuring:

God does not whisper through the trees. His voice is not to be mistaken. When men hear it they fall to their knees and their souls are riven and they cry out to Him and there is no fear in them but only that wildness of heart that springs from such longing and they cry out to stay his presence for they know at once that while godless men may live well enough in their exile those to whom He has spoken can contemplate no life without Him but only darkness and despair. (152)
And where is the priest now, if not in darkness and despair? Does it not seem preferable to live in the relative safety of not knowing God, than to experience his presence and then lose it? An added twist to this story is that the church the priest now inhabits is neither in Caborca, the town where the man lost his parents and later died himself, nor Bavispe, the one where he lost his son, but rather Huisiachepic, the town where the man had lived with his wife and child, one touched neither by earthquakes nor war, but nevertheless ruined by time. His is a landscape of ruined churches, of institutions built by man, endowed with meaning, and now dried up and forgotten by all but hermits, cats, and wandering orphans.

**The Holiness of Land and Animal**

The reverence with and distance from which McCarthy paints his landscapes makes them simultaneously frightening, beautiful, and alien. Every description feels as if this place is being seen for the first time by eyes that only barely know how to perceive what they are seeing. Alan Bourassa says “The greatness and much-praised beauty of McCarthy’s landscapes is that they are not settings, not geography, not obstacles. In fact, properly speaking, they are not; they escape being, and in escaping, carry along the human world with them” (“Cormac McCarthy and the Event of the Human” 75). Billy’s sense of duty is inherited from his father, who goes about his work with a focused intensity. Mr. Parham is a man of the land, which to him is something predictable. For men of the land, predictability is nearly the same thing as safety, which is almost akin to religion. Family and home are paramount, and land and livestock are the staples of a homestead. And yet, for Mr. Parham, the land turns out to be unstable, taking first his cattle and then his son away from him.
There is a magic to working the land. Billy watches his father set a wolf trap, and “he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. Like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. If there be such space. If it be knowable” (22). Like Mr. Cole, Mr. Parham is a pragmatist, and seeks to define the world and his place in it by what he can see and control. He has the tools, and they are true, and if he uses them correctly, he can succeed. He seems to suspect, or Billy does as he watches, that there is more to the world than the tangible, something discernible to his instruments, perhaps. But rather than accept the mystery of that something, and his place outside it, he attempts to bridge it, to contain it somehow. Mr. Parham is of the same stock as *The Orchard Keeper*’s Uncle Ather, connected to a primal pantheism that has sustained his life up to this point, but is now sliding away from him.

Billy adopts his father’s faith in some sort of cosmic plan, but not his natural caution and distrust of strangers, and this failure leads him further astray almost immediately after this scene. His first mistake was taking a vagrant Indian as one of the old guard, rather than a prophet figure, and his second is in trying to return the wolf to Mexico, to a world that no longer exists. On the morning that he finds the wolf, “He rode out the gate before his father was even up and he never saw him again” (52). By prioritizing the wolf over his family, Billy sets events in motion that he will not be able to undo.

Like traditional religion, other forms of native and animal mysticism seem fated to die out in the borderlands. For the boys in both books, the legends of the past carry a mystique that seems lost in the contemporary U.S., but perhaps not in Mexico. In John Grady’s vision “the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair
plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women
with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only” (ATPH
5). Billy has a similar vision, but of wolves: “Her and others of her kind, wolves and ghosts of
wolves running in that whiteness of that high world as perfect to their use as if their counsel had
been sought in the devising of it” (TC 31). The visions are merely that, just long-dead ideas. The
Indians pledged to holy violence are gone, as are the wolves running free over virgin snow.

The wolf Billy finds is alone, her desperation to find one of her kind leading her straight
to the traps that take her freedom and place her in his arms. He wants her to be one of that noble
race, but she is not:

He talked to her a long time and as the boy tending the wolf could not understand
what it was he said he said what was in his heart. He made her promises that he
swore to keep in the making. That he would take her to the mountains where she
would find others of her kind. She watched him with her yellow eyes and in them
was no despair but only that same reckonless deep of loneliness that cored the
world to its heart. (TC 105)

These boys are remnants of an era in which goodness was real and could win. But
whether that era once was and is no more, or never was in the first place, the now they inhabit is
a lonely one full of ghosts.

Before he finds his wolf, Billy asks the advice of Don Anulfo (meaning “eagle and
wolf”), an old trapper, who puts the notions of wolf mythology in his head. He tells Billy that
“the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the
world save that which death has put there” (TC 45). The truth of the world is laid bare in the first
chapters of the book, but as a man, Billy does not see it. The old man says that

men wish to be serious but they do not understand how to be so. Between their
acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the
trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro and yet
this world men do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them. (45-6)

As readers, we are used to receiving information about a character that he does not know himself. By being told that we cannot see the world, we expect to be exceptions to the rule. We expect Billy to be so. By seeking out the old man, we believe he is revealing himself as one capable of seeing. But he isn’t, and neither are we, and it takes the journey of a lifetime for all of us to come to that realization. Stephen Frye sees this disconnect as “the implication, always omnipresent in McCarthy’s novels, that there exists an ‘other order,’ an organizing principle for causality inaccessible to human reason, one that stands within and against the apparent disorder of the material world” (105). If there is some comfort that the wolves at least understand the order of things, it is followed too quickly by mourning that we cannot partake in that understanding.

John Grady also seeks in animals what he finds too rarely in men: “What he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise” (6). What can be noble in horses, however, is rarely so in men, for the blood and heart in them is more often driven by rage and pain and death. In the world of McCarthy, the only thing the noble man can do nobly is die.

**Cities of the Plains: Coming Together, Coming Full Circle**

The third book of the trilogy retreads some holy ground, giving Mexico a bit of a reprieve from its religious downward spiral. Mac, owner of the ranch John Grady and Billy work, has lost his wife and finds his connection to Christianity tenuous as a result of Margaret’s death on
Candelaria, the feast of the Virgin. To his understanding, “In Mexico there is no God. Just her” (116). As if the Virgin Mother were not paradox enough, it seems in Mexico, she preserves her status as both virgin and mother, but with no God-child to be mother of. This barren birth quickly brings us back to the possibility that the truth may not just be that God is dead and his kingdom with it, but that he was never born in the first place and his kingdom is mere illusion.

John Grady, now a little older and a little more jaded, has nevertheless found himself in love with another girl he can’t have, but for wildly different reasons than before. While pining for the whore Magdalena in White Lake, he turns to the blind man for advice on how to find his way out of his predicament:

Pray to God.
Yes.
Will you?
No.
Why not?
I don’t know.
You don’t believe in Him?
It’s not that. (198)

John Grady’s answer here is telling. He is a man of few words, and rarely minces the few he utters. When he says “it’s not that” we are unclear if he means that he does believe in God and won’t pray to him for some other reason, or if he does not believe in God and yet disbelief would not be the reason for not praying. His clarification that he “wouldn’t know what to ask” only clears up the second part of the question, not whether or not he believes in God anymore (198). He knows, if perhaps only subconsciously, that the result of any heroic gesture on his part will ultimately fail, which leaves him little to ask for.

John Grady does find the ability to pray again, but only after Magdalena has been murdered and he stands at the brink of death himself in his final knife fight with Eduardo:
Holding himself close that he not escape from himself for he felt it over and over, that lightness that he took for his soul and which stood so tentatively at the door of his corporeal self. Like some light-footed animal that stood testing the air at the open door of a cage…. Help me, he said. If you think I’m worth it. Amen. (257)

As is so often the case, the grammatical logic of McCarthy’s words bely their apparent meaning. John Grady, utterly bereft, still wants to hold on to life. His prayers are a final plea for some reprieve from the universe, some way out of his desperate situation. But what he literally constructs is a conditional statement. “If you think I’m worth it,” then “help me.” That he dies almost immediately could be seen as one of two punishments: either God does not think he’s worth it, and therefore does not help him, or God is not there at all and so his plea is pointless in the first place.

Billy’s reaction to John Grady’s death is to call God to account: “he called out to God to see what was before his eyes. Look at this, he called. Do you see? Do you see?” (261) The palpable lack of justice, or logic, or compassion in the world is clearly visible in this moment. John Grady dies pointlessly, Billy survives fruitlessly, and everything beautiful in their stories is gone. As Alan Bourassa puts it, “It is now the transcendent level that has been emptied out. There is no guarantee of a return on loss. Sacrifice is thus rendered void” (“Riders of the Virtual Sage” 186).

From here what we would expect of a world-weary, hollowed-out Billy is exactly what happens. He drifts, skimming the surfaces of the world, waiting for his time to die. Nick Monk describes this culminating work as a “metanarrative manipulated with immense subtlety and skill by McCarthy as he molds his relatively inarticulate heroes into doomsayers of the contemporary world” (102). Faced with the choice of destroy or refuse, John Grady and Billy
model two different versions of failure. Refusing to be willful agents of destruction, one dies young and the other fades away.

The penultimate scene of *The Crossing* sums the three novels up in a particularly unsatisfying, and therefore uniquely appropriate way. Billy, now in his 70s, shares a saltine communion with another drifter under a turnpike overpass. He mistakes the traveler for someone else, saying:

> I thought at first you might be somebody else…
> Who did you think I might be?
> Just somebody … I sort of been expecting…
> What does he look like?
> I don’t know. I guess more and more he looks like a friend.
> You thought I was death.
> I considered the possibility.
> The man nodded. He chewed. Billy watched him. You aint are you?
> No.
> They sat eating the dry crackers.
> Adonde vas? Billy said.
> Al sur. Y tu?
> Al norte. (267)

Billy’s attempt at ritual is thwarted by the traveler, who is not the intended communicant. By stepping into death’s place, he neuters the gesture and circumvents Billy’s hope for release. This is the prophet of destruction inverted, softened, as the deliverer of that which the receiver wants least, in this case, life. The traveler’s extended narrative of his own life and a portentous midlife dream reveal many potential truths about McCarthy’s universe and the laws that govern it.

First, when describing a map he had made of his life, he says that he at first saw a face in it. When Billy questions whether he saw the face or just thought he saw it, the man says,

> What would be the difference?
> I don’t know. I think there has to be a difference.
> So do I. But what is it?
> Well. It wouldn’t be like a real face.
No. It was a suggestion. Un bosquejo. Un borrador, quizás.
Yes.
In any case, it is difficult to stand outside of one’s desires and see things of their own volition.
I think you just see whatever’s in front of you.
Yes. I dont think that. (269)

The traveler speaks succinctly, but says more than what is on the surface. If the map of his life was “un bosquejo” (a sketch) or “un borrador” (a rough draft), we can see the map in two different ways. Is the sketch the basic imprint of his complete and predetermined life, or is the rough draft a possible incarnation, open to malleability, change? And if there was a face there, however briefly, to whom did it belong? Billy’s comments further elucidate the man’s perspective however, denying Billy’s assumption that life is as straightforward as seeing what’s in front of you. The traveler’s “yes” acknowledges Billy’s belief, and then he contradicts it. Perhaps he sees Billy’s path and recognizes it as something other than what Billy has seen?

As happens frequently in McCarthy, a dream surfaces to call reality into question, a convoluted one in which the traveler dreams of a man who lies down to sleep on a sacrificial slab of some tribal origin and who in turn dreams of his own sacrifice. This telescopic vision collapses in upon itself in a final scene of the trappings of indigenous culture and religion, all of it so much scrap, important and valuable only in that dream world. For Billy and the inhabitants of the Border Trilogy, all they have ever held dear and the principle upon which they have based their lives, are wrapped up in that dream and forgotten.

We see Billy only once more after his underpass encounter and tangled discussion with the unnamed traveler. While being put to bed by the well-intentioned woman who has taken him in, he says “I’m not what you think I am. I aint nothin. I don't know why you put up with me”(292). His colloquial “I aint nothin” is intended as “I am nothing,” meaning he considers
himself to be a cipher, a drifter of the world’s surface. The woman clearly takes his statement at its literal meaning of “I am not nothing,” to which she responds “I know who you are. And I do know why” (292), a statement that in turn also has surface and subtext meanings. Intended to mean “I do know why I put up with you,” her response could also be interpreted as “I do know why you are who you are.” This wordplay in the final lines of the book leaves the surface level reassurance of a good woman taking care of an old man who is a good person on shaky legs, easily toppled by the subtext suspicion that he is meaningless and she knows that and also knows her ministrations are of no permanent good. This typically McCarthy ending hangs a by-now-familiar pall over the whole trilogy, which from this perspective looks like an elaborate joke on several young men who are painstakingly led to their own destruction.
Chapter Six: No Country for Old Men, or
“Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction”

In the opening monologue of Cormac McCarthy’s No Country for Old Men, Sheriff Ed
Tom Bell explains why he is giving up his career after decades on the force: “Somewhere out
there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he’s
real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once. I wont do it again” (4). In this,
his ninth novel, published 40 years after his first, McCarthy finally gives a name to a character
that has been a core element of his writing from day one. The prophet of destruction has
appeared in some form in every McCarthy novel, sometimes as an individual, sometimes as an
aspect of personality, but always with the same purpose: heralding the fact of human destruction.
We have watched the prophet coalesce from aspects of personality, shadowy superhuman
figures, and dreams, rearing up finally in the larger-than-life Judge Holden, who dances
endlessly and never dies. From that height, we have watched him then sink back into the lesser
devils and eternally brutal landscape of the border, solidifying here in the doggedly pragmatic,
emotionless killer, Anton Chigurh.

McCarthy, a writer who chooses his words with surgical precision, makes it clear that
Chigurh is not the “god” for whom he speaks, nor the originator of the “movement” he
embodies. He is the prophet of destruction, and his existence places destruction on the same
plane as creation: confirmed, tangible, unavoidable. This is one of the central tenets of
McCarthy’s writing and the reason for the universal presence of the prophet. As McCarthy’s
universe has unfolded through this novels, we have become acclimated to this world, where
destruction is the point of existence and free will does not truly exist.
In many ways, *No Country for Old Men* is the black sheep of McCarthy’s novels to date, meeting with critical praise and derision in equal amounts. For many, the novel is “an unimportant, stripped down thriller” (Wood) that “borders on caricature” (Kirn). For these critics, it is McCarthy’s most transparent attempt to write a bestseller in the vein of the western or crime novel. When compared with the Faulknerian complexity of *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*, we can see why critics come to such an assessment, but when viewed from its place as McCarthy’s ninth novel, *No Country for Old Men* comes into very different focus. The first lens through which we view this new perspective is its title, a line taken directly from Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium”: “That is no country for old men” (1). Sheriff Bell knows that “[a]n aged man is but a paltry thing” (9) and that he is no match for the world he inhabits, one he no longer understands. In the first pages of the novel, he describes a boy he has put away for murder who said “*he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he’d do it again ... I thought I’d never seen a person like that and it got me to wonderin if maybe he was some new kind*” (3). Like the old man in Yeats’ poem, Bell’s world has changed beneath him, populated with younger men who kill indiscriminately and for whom morality and ethics hold no sway. This is Chigurh’s world. Robbed of morality and beauty, it is stripped down to its simplest, most brutal elements, which are reflected in the novel’s deceptively simple syntax and structure.

The defining structural image of the novel is also contained in “Sailing to Byzantium,” which reintroduces the gyre first seen in “The Second Coming”:

Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity. (19-24)

As he does with virtually every literary analogue, McCarthy appropriates Yeats’ gyre and old
man for his own uses. Where the old man of the poem flees Ireland for the glories of Byzantium,
Bell has no place to escape to. His body, the “tattered coat upon a stick,” (10) will not be
transmuted to a golden bird like Yeats’ speaker; instead he will bear unwilling witness to the
destruction of his world, and the beginning of the end of the world at large. Bell, a man revealed
in his italicized sections to be a man “sick with desire” for a world that makes sense, in which he
and all “good” people are safe, finds himself instead to be strapped to the dying animal that is the
world populated by the “new kind”: drug traders and remorseless murderers. It is no wonder that
he dreams of being “gather[ed] / Into the artifice of eternity.”

In her essay “‘He's a Psychopathic Killer, but So What?’: Folklore and Morality in Cormac McCarthy's No Country for Old Men,” Lydia Cooper speculates that Bell, a man
generally guided by fact and reason, finds Chigurh to be beyond typical explanation:

Although he professes to believe in rational explanations for the man, he
nevertheless suggests at one point that he is “startin to lean” in the direction of
believing in an incarnate Satan … Bell is a rational man and a modern skeptic, but
in his mind, there is at least a niggling fear that Chigurh just might be a walking,
breathing personification of the Prince of Darkness (46).

When read in light of what we know about the prophet of destruction, Chigurh’s surreal abilities
come clear as the tools he uses to spread his gospel of annihilation. Scholars focusing on the
novel’s similarity to the western find that Chigurh has “clear antecedents, one example in a long
line of Western characters. He is, at the root, the man in the black hat” (Butler 46). What we
come to find, however, is that “McCarthy’s fiction investigates the myths of the West, the tales
of what [Richard] Slotkin calls ‘regeneration through violence,’ and lays waste to them” (47).
McCarthy has taken a familiar figure from a standard genre and repainted him in inkier hues taken not from the saloons and trails of the Wild West, but instead from the darkest depths of human fear and depravity.

One of Chigurh’s trademarks is that even when his appearance is expected, the experience of him is a surprise to his victims. He is unlike any person they have ever met, and therefore he himself is unexplainable. Llewellyn Moss expects Chigurh because he has found the transponder hidden in the case of money. He expects someone; Chigurh himself is a surprise: “The man turned his head and gazed at Moss. Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly exotic. Beyond Moss’s experience” (112). Chigurh’s level gaze and serenity in the face of Moss’s shotgun create in Moss a disquiet rooted in his awareness that he does not understand this man. The fact that Chigurh is able to find Moss even without the transponder infers something superhuman about him, much like the Judge’s unexplained appearance in the middle of the Mexican desert. Continuing his upending of the Western genre, McCarthy reveals that Moss, who plays the role of protagonist, is in over his head from the very beginning, outmaneuvered from the start by the uncanny Chigurh. Instead of championing Moss, we simply watch in horror as he is hunted down. He isn’t even given the dignity of a noble death; his death is instead reported to us second-hand by witnesses from the seedy motel where he is gunned down. No noble cowboy here, not even an anti-hero, just a man in the wrong place at the wrong time and not smart enough to leave well enough alone.

For Carson Wells, Chigurh appears in his hotel, the same hotel where he had narrowly missed Moss the week before. Wells, who has lured Chigurh to this hotel with the transponder in an attempt to kill him, should have known better, because he himself has already explained to
Moss that “There’s no one alive on this planet that’s ever had even a cross word with him. They’re all dead. These are not good odds. He’s a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that” (153). The problem with Wells is that, as another contract killer working for the same boss as Chigurh, he thinks he is a match for him. And he quickly finds out he is not. The two men work on mutually exclusive sets of principles, which leaves Wells with no bargaining room. As Daniel Butler explains, “Neither greed nor the interests of purchasing power drive McCarthy’s outlaw. He eludes the reader’s understanding, imparting a sense of anarchy and chaos even to the conventions of characterization” (46). When Wells tries to bargain for his life by telling Chigurh he knows where the money is, Chigurh’s response makes it clear to the reader that he is not in it for the money. He must kill Wells, and the boss who has set Wells on him, for trying to kill him. In one respect, he is motivated by survival, which means leaving no one alive who is a threat to him, but on a much deeper, more essential level, Chigurh’s profession is simply a means by which he can fulfill his purpose, which is to kill. His own survival is in service of that single-minded goal.

Chigurh views his own existence as something outside the experience of other humans. He points out the error in Wells’s assumption that they are the same when he says, “You think I’m like you. That it’s just greed. But I’m not like you. I live a simple life” (177). In fact, “There is a religious dimension to Chigurh’s speeches, a belief in an ultimate plan and an ideal order of which he is just a tool” (Butler 47).

McCarthy does much of his definition of Chigurh by outlining what he is not. When Wells tells Chigurh that he is “not outside of death,” Chigurh’s says “It doesn’t mean to me what it does to you,” by which we infer that death is not something Chigurh fears (177). In fact, by all
appearances, death is his closest friend. Wells is a former Army colonel, and it logically follows that he must have undergone a series of radical life changes to become the hit man he is today, and Chigurh easily sees this, and is aware of the difference between himself and Wells:

It’s not the same, Chigurh said.
You’ve been giving up things for years to get here. I don’t think I even understood that. How does a man decide in what order to abandon his life? We’re in the same line of work. Up to a point. Did you hold me in such contempt? Why would you do that? How did you let yourself get in this situation? (178)

In our attempt to understand Chigurh, we can work backwards from this moment. He has given up nothing. He lives a simple life. Because he cannot understand how a man can go about abandoning his life, he himself has not had to do the same. By questioning Wells’s contempt of him, he draws attention to Wells’ own sense of superiority, presumably thinking himself the better man for having things like military discipline and war experience. Chigurh, by his own comparison, however, is the purer of the two because he has followed a single path and a single purpose for his entire life. What he does is who he is in a way that most humans can’t fathom.

Surprisingly, one of the characters in the novel who does reach a level of clarity about Chigurh is Carla Jean, Llewellyn’s 19-year-old wife. Chigurh appears on the night of her grandmother’s funeral, taking her by surprise when she finds him sitting at the desk in her bedroom. After the initial shock wears off, however, she says “I knewed this wasnt done with” (254). While young and, as evident from her history and her speech, not especially well-schooled, Carla Jean possesses a sense of understanding about the world that eludes many people. Perhaps in her apparent ignorance, she is connected with a more elemental, instinctual way of knowing things more akin to the way Chigurh processes the world than the average people who make up her everyday experience. In this way, her character forms a bridge linking
the kid of *Blood Meridan* and the boy of *The Road*. When Carla Jean says, as she must,

“You don’t have to do this,” (257) Chigurh take the time to explain for her the force that guides
his actions, a determinism that pervades McCarthy’s writing:

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

This idea of a life being wholly visible also appeared in the scene with Wells, and its power rests
in the immediacy of death. For the victim to be able to look back through a life that has now
reached the moment before its end and to see with clear eyes the twists and turns that led that life
to its current position is terrifying in its inevitability, and yet provides a sense of closure as well,
a sense of something being finished. Unlike most people, Carla Jean has been aware of the
determined thread of her life, implicitly trusting it as a matter of course. At 16, she had a dream
that led to her job at Wal-Mart and her discovery there by Moss. She has thrown her lot in with
his with the entirety of her being, and eventually accepts even her own death as part of that
bargain. The moment, the turning in her life that brought her here was acting on her dream, a
conscious act that attached her fate to Moss’s. The turning in his life was the decision to take the
2.4 million dollars he found in the desert, again a conscious act on his part. That action brought
Chigurh into both of their lives, and as Chigurh himself explains, “When I came into your life
your life was over” (260). The last thing Carla Jean says before her death is in response to
Chigurh asking if she understands what he’s told her, to which she responds, “Yes…I do. I truly
do” (260).
Against all emotional logic, there is a sense of closure here that almost leans into relief, an unexpected and yet somehow welcome emotion echoing strongly with Blood Meridian’s “optical democracy.” When our lives are revealed to be predetermined and our sense of personal agency revealed to be illusory, and when our value is revealed to be no more or less that than of a grain of sand or scrub brush, then our responsibility is also at an end. In a numbingly fatalistic way, the release of responsibility, and even of hope, is a relief. Carla Jean gives in to the darkness and is rewarded with her death. This is Chigurh’s end goal for us all, for us to give up the illusion of good and understand that the world runs on a simple principle of destruction. As Cooper explains, “The inexplicable evil of Chigurh and the equally inexplicable moral code practiced by Sheriff Bell may merely underscore the pointlessness of any discussion of morality” (37). Bell’s moral code is revealed to be useless, and his only recourse is to fade away.

Another characteristic Chigurh shares with his fellow prophets is the ability to coerce other people with apparent effortlessness and to have no fear of repercussion. With Carson Wells, Chigurh is the one who has been lured to the hotel, and yet as soon as he arrives, he takes complete control of the situation. He tell the desk clerk he wants the registration, then kills him when he refuses. After confirming that it is Wells who is looking for him, he goes to the lobby and waits for him. As McCarthy writes, “no one would do that,” and in typical McCarthy style, we recognize the double entendre, the positive identification of Chigurh as “no one,” a figure who denies rational understanding and simply does the inexplicable. Wells returns and walks right past Chigurh, an action that becomes his turning point and his relinquishment of power. From this moment on Chigurh owns him. As so often happens with McCarthy villains, we as
readers wish for Chigurh to simply put Wells out of his misery, but he doesn’t. Instead he
tells Wells exactly how he will behave at the moment Chigurh pulls the trigger: “You think you
can put it off with your eyes….You think that as long as you keep looking at me you can put it
off….You think you won’t close your eyes. But you will.” And he is right: “He did close his
eyes. He closed his eyes and he turned his head and he raised one hand to fend away what could
not be fended away. Chigurh shot him in the face” (178). Chigurh, while arguably himself an
agent of it, can even cheat fate. In Eagle Pass, Wells had found a woman dead from the shoot-out
in her apartment, with a bullet hole in her calendar marking a date three days away. Feeling that
Chigurh had come to him to confirm the date marked on the calendar, Wells assumes he has the
minutes left until the new day begins. But after shooting Wells, Chigurh notes that the new day,
the third day, “was still a minute away” (178).

Chigurh manipulates Moss in a similar way. After killing Wells, he takes the dead man’s
cell phone, knowing that Moss will call him for help extricating himself from the situation he’s
in. When Moss predictably does call, Chigurh places him in an unbearable and unavoidable
predicament. Moss has the money that Chigurh is being paid to retrieve, although actually
getting the money is not and never has been Chigurh’s primary objective, as he is now
effectively out of the cartel he worked for and will soon go and kill the boss who set Wells on
him. He uses it now as a means to make Moss do what he wants. He asks Moss if he knows
where Chigurh is going next, which is to Odessa to kill Carla Jean, and he doesn’t even have to
speak the words out loud for Moss to respond, “Yeah. I know where you’re goin” (183). Chigurh
forces Moss to agree to bring him the money in return for Carla Jean’s safety, saying “That’s the
best deal you’re going to get. I wont tell you you can save yourself because you cant” (184). This
is how Chigurh talks, all the time. Life for him is black and white and he is in complete control of himself and everyone who crosses his path. While Moss never makes it to a confrontation with Chigurh, he has every intention of it, even though he knows it means his own death.

Chigurh forces Carla Jean to call the coin toss that determines her fate, even though she believes it is against God’s will and they both know that he will kill her no matter what the coin says, because she has seen his face. We see the bulk of the Judge shadowing Chigurh in these coin scenes, his “false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter” (Blood Meridian 310). At the literal level, there is a coin now that will serve the purpose of the prophet Chigurh, the judge’s “residual” heir. The value of Carla Jean’s life is measured in small change, and yet on the figurative level, the coin itself is a foundational piece of the worldview. The coin has two sides: evil and not evil. The toss is unwinnable because one side is merely the negation of the other, a vacuum where the concept of “good” is absent. This is the dichotomy underpinning McCarthy’s entire universe, and Carla Jean, the unlettered young wife of the doomed protagonist Moss, understands this. Like Moss, like the kid, she accepts her fate while resisting the philosophical platform on which it plays out.

Chigurh is able to manipulate people through fear, a weapon any bully uses, but more importantly, he is able to understand people, often better than they understand themselves, and he uses that knowledge against them. We have already seen this in action with Wells and with Carla Jean in each character’s death scene, and we’ve seen the result of Wells’ attempt to bargain
with him: “Everything that Wells had ever known or thought or loved drained slowly down
the wall behind him. His mother’s face, his First Communion, women he had known. The faces
of men as they died on their knees before him. The body of a child dead in a roadside ravine in
another country” (178). Chigurh is able to see all these things more clearly than Wells can, and
by his own reckoning stands cleaner, leaner in the comparison. All that Wells gave up to be in
that roadside Texas hotel did not leave him along the way, but sat waiting to be blown out of his
head by the man who stands in front of him now. We know little about Chigurh, but we know
that he is unencumbered by love. The absence of connection with other human beings puts
Chigurh in sharp contract to Sheriff Bell, whose italicized commentary is rooted in his
connections to family and community. Cooper explains that Bell “realizes that the only possible
way in which a human being can retain an essential core identity despite external changes is to
have an unrelenting commitment to being in relationship with other people” (52). Chigurh
apparently is completely devoid of any connection to another human. In this way,

These two characters, then, are juxtaposed like the twin faces of Janus, each
envisioning a different possible world. Chigurh, the ‘prophet of destruction,’
follows an archaic code of destruction and annihilation, while Bell, haunted by
prophetic visions of hope, looks into the future and the past in order to construct a
sense, however elusive, of transcendence. (Cooper 49)

Wells remembers the faces of the men he kills, presumably an acknowledgment of their
humanity. Chigurh, however, wants his victims to see him kill them, so he can watch the light
fade in their eyes. When Moss gets away from him in Eagle Pass, two other men, agents of drug
lord Pablo Acosta, arrive on the scene, firing both on Moss and Chigurh. After killing the first
from a distance, Chigurh approaches the second on foot, and tells him to look at him. When the
man complies, “Chigurh shot him through the forehead and then stood watching. Watching the
capillaries break up in his eyes. The light receding. Watching his own image degrade in that squandered world” (122). He is a killer, but he is also pure, having never had any motive other than spreading death. He is methodical and precise, and his interest in watching people die seems dispassionate, almost clinical. It’s hard to imagine Chigurh as anything other than what he is now; he seems to have no history and no family and no connection to people other than the business that allows him to fulfill his purpose.

As we have seen thus far, the picture that we draw of Chigurh is defined mainly in negatives. What other people are, he is not. He does not love. He does not have a sense of humor. He does not have a conscience. He does not make small talk. He does not feel fear. He is not seen. He does not leave survivors in his wake. He does not react to pain. Again and again, McCarthy frustrates our attempts to intuit anything about Chigurh, describing him only in terms of his actions, by which we can only deduce that he does not behave like a human.

When he forces a gas station owner to flip a coin to determine whether he lives or dies, his eyes are described as “Blue as lapis. At once glistening and totally opaque. Like wet stones” (56). When he blows up a car and sets fire to a pharmacy to cover his theft of hydrocodone and tetracycline, he doesn’t react to the explosion and “never even glanced toward the front of the store which was now in flames “(163). When we witness him disinfect and bandage his own gunshot wound in a hotel room, we are told that “Other than a light beading of sweat on his forehead there was little evidence that his labors had cost him anything at all” (164). When he kills his boss, he walks up seventeen flights of stairs with a wounded leg, and ends up “breathing no harder than if he’d just got up out of a chair” (198). As he tells Carla Jean, he is aware that “most people dont believe that there can be such a person” as himself and describes the
conundrum his presence puts people in, because they cannot “prevail over that which [they] refuse to acknowledge the existence of” (260). This statement seems to get at the crux of Chigurh, because it defines him as an “other” to all people. His mere existence is incomprehensible, and therefore indefinable. McCarthy works hard to paint a picture of a man spreading death before him, gathering his flock to him through corruption, cold logic, and a pneumatic cattle gun. The case seems cut and dried. Chigurh wins, humanity loses, and the world is on its way out.

And then, something unexpected happens. In the last scenes of the book, we find a chink in Chigurh’s armor. It turns out that as he was leaving Carla Jean’s house after killing her, his truck was hit by three boys out for a joyride. Witnesses on the scene say he had a broken arm and a cut on his head and paid them $100 for their silence and a shirt to use as a sling. Then he walked away (291-292). It’s not much of a chink, but it’s significant. In contrast to the dancing judge at the end of Blood Meridian, this prophet is injured and bloody as he disappears into the dark.

Sheriff Bell himself is defeated, saying “I wake up sometimes way in the night and I know as certain as death that there aint nothin short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train” (159). We’ve witnessed a second coming already, as given to us by Yeats, and the “rough beast” now appears to be losing strength. The final image of the novel gives us an inkling of what may shortly be on the rise. Bell dreams of his own father in the mountains at night:

He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.
Bell does not make it to his father in his dream, and he will not live to see good prevail, but hidden in his dream is another father/son pair, also adrift in the dark and the cold, who are also carrying the fire. When we meet them in *The Road*, the world will look very different.
Chapter 8: The Road, or
“Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air
and breathe upon them.”

With McCarthy’s tenth novel, The Road, we see the culmination of the path he started
down in The Orchard Keeper. From the relatively peaceful back woods of Tennessee, he has
walked us slowly through cruelty, despair, depravity, ignorance, and fear. The landscape has
gradually dried up, burned out, and reduced itself to slag heaps, salt flats, and sulphurous bogs.
We have watched the prophet of destruction skulk about the edges of men’s minds, sneak in
through cracks and crevices, and finally rear up in the terrifying bulk of the judge and the
emotionless calculation of Anton Chigurh. At the end of this arc of destruction, there is one thing
left to destroy: the world itself. This is the premise of the The Road.

The world dies when we’re not looking. Our protagonist, the unnamed man and father of
the novel, is on the road with his son after an unspecified apocalypse, and it is only in flashbacks
that we witness the cataclysm:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low
concussions. He got up and went to the window. What it is? she said. He didn’t
answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the light switch but the power was
already gone. A dull rose glow in the window glass. He dropped to one knee and
raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would
go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb,
cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?
I don’t know.
Why are you taking a bath?
I’m not. (52-53)

There are several elements here that foreshadow later events: the unborn child, the wife’s lack of
comprehension, and the man’s instinctive knowledge of survival methods. While she asks
questions, he acts, testing for power and using their largest receptacle to store as much water as
possible, in advance of the pending birth. This moment marks the shift from a world functioning
on predictable, if brutal, principles, to a new order in which the remaining humans either persists or implode, breaking down the fabric of humanity into scattered scraps.

As McCarthy’s end game, *The Road* invites us to look backward at what has led us to this point, and the number of images and motifs that resonate between this novel and its predecessors are many. We need these comparisons to bring the world of *The Road* into clarity. For instance, *The Orchard Keeper* contains an image that becomes the central motif of *The Road*. After Marion Sylder flips his car into a creek and is helped out by John Wesley Rattner, the two of them limp home to Sylder’s house: “They moved on across the field, through vapors of fog and wisps of light, to the east, looking like the last survivors of Armageddon” (104). *The Road*, a novel separated from this one by eight books and forty years, is centered on two figures, a man and his young son, struggling across a post-apocalyptic American landscape, very nearly literally the last survivors of Armageddon:

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The road was empty. Below in the little valley the still gray serpentine of a river. Motionless and precise. Along the shore a burden of dead reeds. Are you okay? He said. The boy nodded. Then they set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash, each the other’s world entire. (5)
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In the image of Sylder and Rattner in the fog-laced field at night is the embryo of an entirely different story, one which McCarthy has built toward with dogged determination. The arc of destruction has reached its end, with the world relegated to cold and ash, and its counterpart, the arc of creation, has begun its tremulous and uncertain journey. Echoes of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and variants of the search for the holy grail find their home here in both landscape and these two refugees making their way across it.

*The Road* is McCarthy’s vision of the rebirth of humanity, however uncertain it may be, with the child as the bringer of the new world’s moral code. Born after the apocalypse, the boy is
the moral equivalent of humans before the birth of civilization and before greed, gluttony
and desire began paving the way for the prophet of destruction. The boy is “carrying the fire”; he
is the vessel for the untainted goodness necessary for life to begin anew. Marked out in contrast
to the roving bands of cannibals that appear to be all that’s left of humanity, the boy shines like a
beacon.

Recognizing the purpose of his son’s existence is the man, his father, who understands
that the child is his “warrant” for survival (5). As the link connecting the child to the world as it
was, the man provides the information the boy needs to understand himself and his purpose.
Over the course of the novel, we begin to see the boy absorb his father’s understanding of
morality and then reshape it into his own code of ethics, one that rejects any aspect of his father’s
philosophy that prioritizes survival over goodness.

We witness the father’s struggle to both preserve and educate his son in a landscape that
has largely forgotten humanity. His philosophy is a taut dichotomy between the need to survive
and a moral center akin to Kant’s categorical imperative, in which an action worth doing must be
“good in itself, hence necessary, as the principle of the will, in a will that in itself accords with
reason” (Groundwork For The Metaphysics Of Morals 31). The untenable situation in which the
man finds himself requires him, he believes, to protect the child at all costs, even while it damns
him for taking actions in self defense that would otherwise be deemed immoral.

We see some of the underpinnings of the father’s philosophy through his dreams and
memories of life before the apocalypse. Dreams provide subconscious context for the man in the
same way they did for Culla Holme, Lester Ballard and Cornelius Suttree. In the opening scene
of the novel, the man wakes from a dream in which he wandered the caves of his youth. The
“wet flowstone walls” figure as the “inward parts of some granitic beast,” much like the cave system to which Ballard retreats in *Child of God* and dreams of traveling to his death (3). In the man’s dream, there is a “black and ancient lake”:

And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders … its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (3-4)

In the same way that Culla Holme is revealed to us as a prophet recruit in his dream, so here does the man give us the framing device for his story, even if he himself is not entirely aware of it. This is Yeats’ “rough beast” returned, but in its diminished, naked, and retreating form (21). Here rise iconic images of *The Waste Land*, recast as the boy’s primer for morality:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only,
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (19-30)

The “son of man” is quite literal in this case: the boy as the son of the man. And he indeed only has the “heap of broken images” his father relays in stories to make sense of what the world had been. But where Eliot’s waste land is still a place of heat and life, however diminished, the waste land of *The Road* is cold, in perpetual shadow from the ash cloud overhead, with rocks providing only the barest of shelters for the two travelers. “Fear in a handful of dust” is simultaneously the
fear of the man at his reality ending, and the fear of the cave beast, retreating from his seat of destructive power. The world is broken and in ashes, but in that total destruction, a new order is establishing itself. The dichotomy of evil vs. not evil is replaced by evil vs. good.

Terms of “good” and “bad” are explicitly established in *The Road*. Hanna Boguta-Marchel, a philologist and psychologist at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, sees this clear division of good and evil as a necessary part of the characters’ humanity: “in a situation of extreme deprivation, of the erasure of all meaningful features of the surrounding world, we are still left with a choice … this choice remains as the only chance of testifying to what is human in us” (*The Evil, the Fated, the Biblical* 118). The man and boy define themselves as “the good guys,” with “the bad guys” being the packs of cannibals roaming the landscape. If the arc of destruction has reached its end in the erasure of the vast majority of humans and their culture, then something akin to Ragnarok is now at hand. As Lydia Cooper of Creighton University describes it, “all the avarice and atrocity of which the human race is capable is being expended in a rage now reaching its inevitable conclusion” (225-226). The remaining factions will fight it out to the death, with the victor cast from the first pages as the boy.

McCarthy is careful to establish the boy as something entirely new. He is born after the apocalypse, the first citizen of the new world:

A few nights later she gave birth in their bed by the light of a drycell lamp. Gloves meant for dishwashing. The improbable appearance of the small crown of the head … Her cries meant nothing to him. Beyond the window just the gathering cold, the fires on the horizon. He held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and cut the cord with kitchen shears and wrapped his son in a towel” (59).
While the mother of the cataclysm scene is helpless and unprepared to survive in the new order, the man is ready to help his new child be born and considers it his God-given mission to make sure the child survives: “He knew only that the child was his warrant. If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). The man’s distance from his wife puts his earlier actions of filling the tub in perspective. Understanding instinctively the meaning of the “long shear of light” and how that would change his own life, the man reorients himself from wife to child, channeling all his energies into preserving the child’s life at all costs. In the way of McCarthy’s universe, this is the man’s entire purpose.

The wife, ill equipped to face her new reality, will subsequently desert the family and commit suicide with a flake of obsidian. The man tries to convince her to stay, but after her departure, the boy and man accept her absence with hardly a comment. The boy simply says, “She’s gone isn’t she?” to which the man replies “Yes, she is” (58). To compound the child’s “improbable” birth into this broken world, the mother effectively removes all possibility of continued procreation. The boy is alone in his uniqueness, the timing of his birth setting him apart from all other people. Even at the end of the novel when the boy finds other “good guys,” the little boy with them is described as “about your age. Maybe a little older” (284). To our knowledge, the boy is the only surviving human in this world conceived before but born after the event that caused the destruction.

In his isolated, and elevated, position, the child is set apart from other humans and described as “other” repeatedly: “so strangely untroubled” (191), “some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire and village who does not know that behind him the players have all been carried off by wolves” (79). He is “glowing in
that waste like a tabernacle” (273), a “Golden chalice, good to house a god” (75). The otherness of his son prompts the father to realize that, in some ways, the two of them are different species: “Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect (153-154). The man understands that the child cannot fully understand the world as it was because he is not of it, and therefore must craft his own understanding of the world as it is. The father is his guide toward that discovery.

Paul D. Knox of the University of Nevada considers the metaphysical stance of *The Road*, positing that it “presents ideology as something constructed and maintained instead of as a series of values that are received and accepted” (96). What the father only comes to realize slowly is that his child cannot be the inheritor of the father’s ideology because he is not a citizen of his father’s world. Shorn of the systems upholding morality, the father can only tell stories and paint pictures akin to fairy tales for the child, who then constructs his own ideology for his world, the cold and cruel landscape in which he lives.

Ely, the shambling old man they encounter on the road, the literary brother of the blind man from *Outer Dark* and the priest of *The Crossing*, does not know how to process his encounter with the man and boy, asking “What are you?” (162) at first and then narrowing the question to “Are you a little boy?” (166). As is so often the case with McCarthy, the simplicity of this question belies the complexity beneath. By posing the question, the obvious visual status of the little boy becomes questionable, prompting all the characters, and the reader, to wonder if the boy isn’t something more. After spending the evening with the family, Ely has a conversation with the man that explicitly spells out the possibility of the boy’s true nature:
When I saw that boy I thought that I had died.
You thought he was an angel?
I didn't know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn't know that would happen.
What if I said that he’s a god?
The old man shook his head. I’m past all that now. Have been for years.
Where men can't live gods fare no better. You’ll see. It’s better to be alone. So I hope that’s not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it’s not true. Things will be better when everybody’s gone. (172)

The enigmatic Ely, whose name is not really Ely, is a vestige of the Christian constructs of the past, the same Christianity repeatedly revealed as broken, hollow, and purposeless in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy. His phrase “I’m past all that now. Have been for years,” paints him as something akin to a retired prophet, like the expriest Tobin. It’s possible that his name “Ely” refers to the biblical prophet Elijah, whose sacrifice on Mount Carmel revealed the prophets of Baal as false. (1 Kings 18: 22-39). As stand-in for Elijah, Ely’s purpose is to differentiate the false gods from the true.

Ely’s status now, however, is allied to the man’s, as made apparent in his line “There is no God and we are his prophets” (171). Like the negative language of “God is no here” from *All the Pretty Horses*, Ely’s statement is multivalent. The surface statement is that there is no God, but the clause immediately following positively frames Ely and the man as “his prophets,” which recasts the meaning to there is “no God.” The “no God” then comes clear as the god of destruction that guides the arc of the first nine novels, and of whose world the man and Ely are fading vestiges. This “no God” is impotent now, and Ely and the man must make way for the new god rising. Ely makes the mistake of framing the boy in traditional theology, the “last god” of the old construct.
What Ely fails to recognize, the man understands. The boy is not the God of the hollow Christian past, but rather a new entity crafted for this new world. If in this pairing the child is God, then the man is his prophet, paving the way for the child and proclaiming his divinity. Like Elijah, the man will also kill in order to complete his mission: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?” (77). While voluntarily taking on the role of guide for his child, the man also reveals himself as doomed by the morality of the past world. Willingness to kill, for whatever reason, violates the categorical imperative. Because of this, the boy will have to eventually reject the ideology of his father.

The harsh reality the boy lives in is a perpetual horror to the man, but the boy to a large extent simply accepts it, both because it is all he knows and because his father trains him to understand it. One of the most significant single words in McCarthy’s canon is the word “okay,” as it is used in The Road. Throughout the first half of the book, the man uses it frequently to reassure the boy that they will survive and that they are the “good guys.” The word takes on an almost talismanic quality for both man and boy, their barometer that this moment or this situation is acceptable, not the end:

We’re going to be okay, aren’t we Papa?
Yes. We are.
And nothing bad is going to happen to us.
That’s right.
Because we’re carrying the fire.
Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire. (83)

…

Are we going to die now?
No.
What are we going to do?
We’re going to drink some water. Then we’re going to keep going down the road.
Okay. (87-88)

...  

They’re going to kill those people, aren’t they?
Yes.
Why do they have to do that?
I don’t know.
Are they going to eat them?
I don’t know.
They’re going to eat them, aren’t they?
Yes.
And we couldn’t help them because then they’d eat us too.
Yes.
And that’s why we couldn’t help them.
Yes.
Okay. (127)

This last passage follows possibly the most horrific scene in the novel, when the man and boy discover a basement with people in stages of dismemberment. We realize quickly that this is essentially a pantry for cannibal humans, and that this is the reality the boy has to come to terms with. Time and again, he witnesses horrors committed by humans: a human head under a cakebell, a headless baby spitted and roasted over a fire, pregnant women in chains, naked and weeping people kept as food. His father’s example and constant reassurance that they are “okay” and “the good guys” who are “carrying the fire” are his only weapons against the relentless evidence of evil and despair the world is piling up around him. As we watch them move down the road, we also watch the child grow up, taught by his father: “Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up.” To this the boy responds simply with their talismanic “Okay.” (137)
A brief respite from the brutality of the road comes in the form of a bunker full of supplies. The child begins to come into his own here, taking some agency of his own course and asking his father if they can thank the people who built the bunker: “Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn’t eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didn’t get to eat it and we hope you’re safe in heaven with God” (146). In the same way that the child rejects the notion of violence as a necessary evil, here he recognizes and praises an act of true goodness. Notable here too is an act of spontaneous prayer. While the man has talked to, and cursed, God in his moments alone, we have no evidence that he has taught the boy to pray. The boy is becoming more noble than the man.

The idea of “carrying the fire,” understandable here as the fire of goodness and truth, is fundamentally different from the fire which has shaped the landscape through which they move. In an echo back to *The Orchard Keeper*, we repeatedly see fire transmute objects into something new. Take for example the burning of the Green Fly Inn. The Inn sits perched precariously on the edge of a cliff, its porch cantilevered out over the abyss, which serves as a convenient dump for the inn’s owner. The mountain of glass below the inn, decades worth of discarded beer and whiskey bottles, melts in the heat generated by the burning structure that falls into the pit. Here is McCarthy’s description:

> There it continued to burn, generating such heat that the hoard of glass beneath it ran molten and fused in a single sheet, shaped in ripples and flutings, encysted with crisp and blackened rubble, murrhined with bottlecaps. It is there yet, the last remnant of that landmark, flowing down the fold of the valley like some imponderable archeological phenomenon. (48)

The term “murrhined” comes from *murra*, which, according to the *OED* is “substance (perhaps
fluorspar) of which precious vases and other vessels were made.” The top layer of the reference here is of course that the cheap glass of booze bottles is made into a precious substance, but it is important also to recognize that the melting process has transformed the material into something more than the sum of its parts. That it is “encysted” also bears attention, as cysts belong to living things and are signs of something amiss in the body. This new entity is one already diseased. The very fact that the heap is called a “hoard” indicates that it is being saved for some purpose, perhaps this one.

Turning to *The Road*, we again find melted glass, but as a secondary image to a scene that echoes the one from *The Orchard Keeper*, but in a much more gruesome manner. As the man and boy travel across the wasteland, they come to a section completely consumed by fire:

Beyond a crossroads in that wilderness they began to come upon the possessions of travelers abandoned in the road years ago. Boxes and bags. Everything melted and black. Old plastic suitcases curled shapeless in the heat. Here and there the imprint of things wrested out of the tar by scavengers. A mile on and they began to come upon the dead. Figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling. (190)

The images from both novels are permanent; the one that “is there yet” and holds the remnants of human consumption and the other that has been there for “years” and carries the remnants of humans themselves. In each, impermanent human experiences and lives are fused into new things, the “gray slagpools of melted glass in the ditches and the raw lightwires [that] lay in rusting skeins” beside the melted blacktop in *The Road* clinching the link to the earlier novel. The people caught on the road by the fire cease being themselves and instead become a testament to what once was, and proof of the new reality of things. Suitcases, possessions, glass, electricity, and in large part, civilization itself are relegated to the earth’s past.

For the boy, no other world but the one of death and ash and cold has ever been, no
matter what tales his father tells him. In this world, words become valuable, the holy “okay”
a spell of preservation. The father recognizes the falling away of the trappings of the world he
comes from:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of
things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds.
Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile
than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom
shorn of its referents and so of its reality (75).

What is the world changing in *The Orchard Keeper* becomes the world ending in *The Road*, but
in both the characters experience it as frailty, a sense of what is known having less reality than
what is remembered, and a fear that what is remembered is lost. In an echo of Yeats’ “falcon”
who “cannot hear the falconer,” the man remembers “[o]nce in those early years he’d wakened in
a barren wood and lay listening to flocks of migratory birds overhead in that bitter dark … He’d
wished them godspeed till they were gone. He never heard them again” (53). Patterns of
ingrained behavior – falcon flight and bird migration – are breaking down, being revealed as
meaningless, and fading away. The birds in both scenarios are “shorn of [their] referents” and
“gone already.”

Against his fear of “oblivion,” the father constructs the myth of “carrying the fire,” a
purifying fire to right the wrongs of the landscape and man. An analogue to this fire might be
found in the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, in which there is “a man progressing over the plain by
means of holes which he is making in the ground … striking fire out of the rock which God has
put there” (337). After the brutality of *Blood Meridian*, this image of regularity and the
methodical construction of fence post-holes seems almost a declaration of the fertility inherent in
fire, the flip side of the destruction it more often wreaks in McCarthy’s novels. The man and his
son in *The Road* might be seen as the ancestors of that unnamed post-hole digger, steadily surviving and moving southeast. Cooper views *The Road*'s journey through the lens of the narrative of the holy grail, with the boy cast as both grail and quester. The “fire” within him is the precious substance that will allow life to return to the earth, and he himself is the sacred vessel. The father believes that “the child is indeed ‘God’ – the embodiment of all value and morality. While the child exists, so too does meaning. So too does humanity” (229).

We also realize the fragility of the myth the man is constructing, and his own awareness of it as a fabrication he intentionally brings into existence for himself and his son. After shooting a road agent who captures his son, he and the child face a new reality: “This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job” (74). After such an experience, the choices seem simple, shrivel up and die or find a way to carry on. The man chooses to create a ritual from it: “All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (74).

Myth-making requires definition, and characters to play the designated roles. “If the boy is both grail and grail-bearer, vessel and antidote to the world’s toxicity,” Cooper says, “then the father must play the role of the elder Fisher King, wounded and infected by that which is destroying the land” (226). But McCarthy, as he so often does with his literary analogues, ups the ante and shifts the outcome of the scenario. Because this world is irrevocably poisoned, the Fisher King must die. The boy will be the savior, but not of the world of his father.

The father realizes this long before the boy does. In the moments of weakness and fear on the part of the father, we begin to realize that because he will not live to see his son grow into manhood, he is constructing the scaffolding on which his child will live when he is gone. He is
ill even at the beginning of the book and grows steadily weaker as they trek southeast. As so many Christian prophets have historically done, and as the prophet of destruction does in the course of the first nine novels, so too does the prophet-father have to die for his cause. His death paves the way for the child, who has learned to “construct ceremonies” of his own, to move forward into his new world with a pure morality that rejects his father’s justification of acts of violence in the course of self-preservation. Cooper pinpoints the moment of the boy’s maturation toward embracing the categorical imperative:

The boy’s growing agency, demonstrated through his capacity to articulate his own moral inclinations contrary to his father’s, culminates in his rejection of the hero stories he has long sought from his father. When his father asks why he no longer wants to hear the stories, the boy indicates his insistent pragmatic interpretation of literary morals: ‘[I]n the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people.’ (231)

It pains the child that the father will tell stories of noble heroes and yet refuse to act according to those noble principals when his child’s life is threatened. The child’s inner moral compass guides him straight and true on the path of goodness, refusing to bow to pragmatic excuses for committing evil. While with his father, he abides by his father’s principals, but voices his opposition to them.

In the last pages of the novel, the reassuring “okay” changes hands, issuing more frequently from the child. He has learned how to navigate this world, his world, and takes on the role of reassuring caretaker for his dying father. Upon finally reaching the coast, the boy sees the ocean for the first time, now a “gray squall line of ash.” When the father says “I’m sorry it’s not blue,” the child says “That’s okay” (215). This pattern of simple acceptance recurs through several instances of the man’s apology and the boy’s reassurance until they reach the final scene of the man’s life. From the beginning, the man has considered taking his son’s life before he
himself dies, but in the end realizes he can’t do it, despite his son’s pleading:

I want to be with you.
You cant.
Please.
You cant. You have to carry the fire.
I dont know how to.
Yes you do.
Is it real? The fire?
Yes it is.
Where is it? I dont know where it is.
Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it.
Just take me with you. Please.
I cant.
Please, Papa.
I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.
You said you wouldnt ever leave me.
I know. I’m sorry. You have my whole heart. You always did. You’re the best
guy. You always were. If I’m not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me
and I’ll talk to you. You’ll see.
Will I hear you?
Yes. You will. You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you’ll hear
me. You have to practice. Just dont give up. Okay?
Okay.
Okay.
I’m really scared Papa.
I know. But you’ll be okay. You’re going to be lucky. I know you are. I’ve got to
stop talking. I’m going to start coughing again.
It’s okay, Papa. You dont have to talk. It’s okay. (269-270)

Like so much else in this novel, the language of this poignant scene is reduced to simple
vocabulary, but we should not be fooled by its apparent simplicity. The father’s claim of the boy
as the “best guy” is not simply an attempt to help the boy face the inevitable, it is the literal truth.
This child is the “best guy” and “always” has been. Hearkening back to *Blood Meridian*, we
remember that “it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir” (145) and for the first time in a McCarthy novel, a dying father is able to successfully pass the
mantle of adulthood to his son before dying.
Not long after this scene, the man finally dies and the boy waits by his side for three days. Then, like the Christ figure he has grown into over the course of the novel, he rises and goes out to meet his fate. Like Christ, he too has endured his Gethsemane moment of not wanting to take up his burden of responsibility, and has likewise moved past it.

It is only here, after more than 150 years of human history and 3,173 printed pages, that a McCarthy protagonist achieves some measure of grace. The boy meets up with the first true “good guys” of his entire journey, and they have children. There is a mother figure who says “Oh … I am so glad to see you,” almost as if she had been expecting him, and “[s]he would talk to him sometimes about God” (286). She also “said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (286). McCarthy points out that the children of the couple are a “little boy and … a little girl” and that the boy is “…bout your age. Maybe a little older” (284). Here is both affirmation that the grail-child is unique in being a male child born after the apocalypse, but also that there is the possibility of future procreation. The fundamental building blocks of new human life are here, however precariously. And if the grail requires a question to be asked and answered correctly, what better question for this story than the boy’s query to the man who finds him: “Are you carrying the fire?” (283).

At the end of The Road, we witness the prophet of creation at the very beginning of his rise to power. The arc of destruction is complete and the next arc of creation, which will move forward to eventually complete this circuit of the helical journey of time as demonstrated with the Yggdrasil myth, is rooted, as it should be, in the east. The question remains, however, if the gyre will be able to hold its cohesion for another go round. Will the center hold for the child and his new world? In typical fashion, McCarthy does not answer the question, but instead gives us
an enigmatic epigraph:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286-87)

In the “thing which could not be put back,” the skeptic will see dark days ahead for the boy and his companions and an uncertain future for McCarthy’s universe; it may be true that the “falcon cannot hear the falconer” (Yeats, “The Second Coming” 2). But in the “deep glens” “hum[ming] of mystery,” the optimist will see the sparse but vibrant raw potential of a world not yet written. New “maps and mazes” will be required.
Conclusion: Carrying the Fire

As any McCarthy critic would likely agree, Vereen Bell was onto something in “The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy,” his seminal treatise on the writer, and at the end of this same essay, he describes McCarthy’s world as one where “form and meaning refuse to coincide.” This is the essence of McCarthy as genre; he presents a world that does not function as any fictional world does, but rather as our own does, complete with its inexplicability, its cruelty, its dearth of happy endings. The long slog through the novels presents us with a bewildering array of horrors, so much so that the sheer volume should present a case for giving up on the whole enterprise and succumbing to self destruction along with the rest of humanity. And yet we stick with it, spurred on by the justaposition of the beauty of the prose and the monstrosities it describes. There is something worthwhile in all of this, some gem in all this filth, and we must find out what it is.

If we take Dennis Sansom’s lead and view McCarthy’s collected work as a cosmic-scale experiment testing the validy of a determinist universe, then we reach some interesting conclusions. McCarthy sets his world spinning, gives it a worldview crafted from “evil vs. not evil” rather than “evil vs. good,” and begins forming the prophet of destruction out of the elemental muck of human intention, the innate cruelty of this universe, and the law of entropy. A world intended to destroy itself is in a race to burn itself down before the internal forces that keep it together begin to falter. If “war is God,” as Judge Holden says, then God must be very pleased with his handiwork. And yet, in all of this darkness, there is that spark of fire, of men who refuse to accept the terms their God has given them. Every time, these men fail, dying sad, brutal, meaningless deaths. In the end, the world itself fails. Except for one spark. There,
standing atop the carcass of the world, is a boy. He is the prophet of creation, beginning a new arc in McCarthy’s Yeats-inspired gyre:

![Figure 3: Time as Gyre with the Arc of Creation](image)

The jury is out on whether the gyre’s structure will hold for another go round with good as a viable player, but McCarthy is kind enough to let us hope.

McCarthy’s grand experiment has been a lifetime in the making, now stretching over more than five decades of his own life. He is counted among the greatest writers of our time, listed alongside his favorites: Faulkner, Melville, Dostoevsky, Joyce. What defines them all as great is their unflinching gaze at what makes humanity tick, warts and all. In looking so deeply into the dark, we come to appreciate the light, however faint, all the more.
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