ABSTRACT

Virtue in the Tragic Vision of Cormac McCarthy

Benjamin Mangrum, M.A.

Thesis Chairperson: Luke Ferretter, Ph.D.

Cormac McCarthy's novels evoke a more complex perspective than many conventional descriptions—e.g., redemptive or nihilistic, modern or postmodern—allow. Focusing primarily on his Western novels, I demonstrate in contrast that the author's vision is essentially tragic. This vision rejects hopes in the ability of humanity to escape violence and contingency, while it simultaneously affirms that human beings may pursue the good in a tragic world. McCarthy's Western novels evoke this vision through interaction with the virtues, the states of character necessary to endure inevitable tragedy. The social values underlying the American West conceive of these dispositions in problematic ways, but McCarthy affirms the virtuous life in opposition to the cultural wasteland of the region by articulating a concept of the logos. I specifically trace the dialectic between McCarthy's cultural critiques and his tragic vision through the virtues of courage and justice—a dialectic that exposes the discontents of liberal democracy.

Virtue in the Tragic Vision of Cormac McCarthy

by

Benjamin Mangrum, B. A.

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Approved by the Department of English

____
Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Thesis Committee

____
Luke Ferretter, Ph.D., Chairperson

____
Richard R. Russell, Ph.D.

____
Thomas S. Hibbs, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School
December 2010

____
J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APH	*All the Pretty Horses* (1992)
BM	*Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985)
CG	*Child of God* (1974)
CP	*Cities of the Plain* (1998)
NCFOM	*No Country for Old Men* (2005)
OK	*The Orchard Keeper* (1965)
S	*Suttree* (1979)
SL	*The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form* (2006)
TC	*The Crossing* (1994)
TR	*The Road* (2006)

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For Ashley

The essential contradiction in the human condition is that man is subject to force, and craves for justice. He is subject to necessity, and craves for the good.

—Simone Weil
Oppression and Liberty

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form* (2006), two characters debate perennial religious, philosophical, and cultural issues. Black, an uneducated ex-convict who has previously experienced a religious conversion in prison, rescues a suicidal man known as White, who earlier tries to jump from the platform of a train station. White is a cynical but erudite professor, and he advances a philosophy that he says ends in The Sunset Limited, the speeding train that represents the means for his suicide. Black, in contrast, finds meaning in the religious life that he found in prison. These two characters represent point and counter-point, but they also illustrate in their honest and intuitive conversation a recurring dialectic in McCarthy's novels. This dialectic between the characters' competing visions of life—i.e., between meaningless and transcendent meaning, or what Black suggests is a world suffused with the "lingering scent of divinity" (9)—expresses the author's tragic vision.

McCarthy's critics often seize either pole in the dialectic of his vision, interpreting him as a prophet of nothingness or redemption. In this thesis I argue that McCarthy's vision does not fit exclusively within either pole. Many conventional categories, such as "modern" or "postmodern," are likewise reductionistic, failing to recognize the nuances of thought that pervade the author's work. This study, in contrast, offers an explanation of McCarthy's tragic vision as it appears in his Western novels. The virtues—particularly courage and justice—serve a variety of functions in this study.

On the one hand, these states of character offer vehicles for discerning the author's cultural critiques. The courageous is conspicuously important to the *vaquero* culture of the American West, and thus it offers insight into the sets of values underlying McCarthy's well-known Border Trilogy and *No Country for Old Men* (2005). On the other hand, McCarthy's vision is not exclusively descriptive of reality: the *is* of his tragic view demands an *ought*. McCarthy's vision thus offers an ethic, a view of behavior necessary for avoiding both self-deception and despair in the tragic order of the world.

The ethic found in McCarthy's tragic vision accords with the virtue tradition of moral philosophy. Virtue ethics is an approach to the moral life that originates with the classical Greek world, and it is less concerned with categorical propositions about right and wrong than with states of character that take on various forms in differing contexts and cultures. If, as I argue, the author's ethic requires one to be virtuous in this sense and not through reference to universal moral categories, then his vision avoids the modern ethical assumptions that he undermines in *Blood Meridian* (1985), which I discuss in the first chapter. McCarthy is therefore concerned with the just and unjust, courage and temerity, and not with categorical imperatives, moral formulas, or bourgeois conventions. Instead, his vision is prescriptive of human identity, of the virtuous states of character necessary to face the tragedy inherent to life. My description of the author's vision accounts for the dialectic in his novels between meaninglessness and hope, failure and the pursuit of the good.

I focus on McCarthy's Western fiction because these novels share a common genesis that informs the future of the region. The American West begins in a common act of destruction, which McCarthy chronicles in *Blood Meridian*, and this genesis has

consequences that extend into the late twentieth century, which the author explores in *No Country for Old Men*. While McCarthy's other fiction bears occasionally on my study, there are significant cultural discontinuities between his Tennessee and Western fiction. Lester Ballard, the violent and rustic "[m]an of leisure" who roams throughout the hill country of East Tennessee is, for example, the product of a different culture than the laconic, hard-working cowboy, John Grady Cole (*CG* 51). There are different ideals, values, mythologies, and paragons underlying the West that take different forms or do not exist in the South. But McCarthy's Western novels also reveal the author's vision in a context that distinguishes him from his direct influences, such as Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner. These novels exhibit McCarthy's vision in its "neuter austerity," as the narrator in *Blood Meridian* describes the Western terrain (245). They afford a striking but clear view of the author's vision of the human predicament.

I begin my analysis of McCarthy's tragic vision by explaining in the first chapter the cultural crisis that the author chronicles in *Blood Meridian*. While the story of the American West is infamously bloody, McCarthy's first Western novel recounts this genesis and, more importantly, reveals its nascent *consequences* that shape the region's future. In order to understand McCarthy's concept of the West, I put *Blood Meridian* in conversation with Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of modernity. This analysis reveals that the origins of the American West, like the European Enlightenment, are dependent upon the destruction of prior cultures and traditions. This genesis creates a cultural wasteland that is foundational to McCarthy's other Western novels, shaping their twentieth century characters, and these consequences ultimately prove to be self-destructive. I then respond to the prominent critical view that McCarthy's work is amoral or unconcerned with

ethical content. This vein of criticism maintains that the author creates a purely aesthetic work, as if his fiction exists in a morally neutral realm—a state "beyond good and evil," as Nietzsche says. This reading threatens to undermine my project by its insistence that McCarthy's work, as Denis Donoghue claims, is like a "Dutch painting" that "gives the look of things and assumes that that is enough, it does not incite the mind's eye to go beyond or through the canvas to divine a story behind it" (261). Because I later argue that McCarthy's vision grounds the world in a tragic story—a transcendent logos or order that makes virtue possible despite inevitable loss—refuting the amoral critical perspective is essential for the success of my project.

I conclude the first chapter with an explanation of what I consider to be McCarthy's tragic vision. If in fact the author's work does not exist in a morally neutral realm, then its ethical content must be explicable. I argue that McCarthy's *is*—his description of the tragedy inherent to the world—does in fact offer an *ought*—a tragic ethic. The author's vision provides the vantage point for his cultural critiques, and I use the next two chapters to flesh out the dialectic between his criticism of the American West and his tragic imagination through the fundamentally human states of character known as the virtues.

In the second chapter I discuss the virtue of courage as it becomes a cultural obsession in the American West. The paragon of the brave hero who acquires the object of his quest reveals this obsession, suggesting that strong and courageous human beings can acquire their personal destinies. John Grady, Billy Parham, and Llewelyn Moss embrace this ideal of the courageous quest, and it leads them to pursue beauty, mystery, and money. Underlying this belief, however, is the concept of an individual calling—the

notion that one's work defines the significance of life. McCarthy's Western novels reveal, however, that this calling to acquire a personal destiny is both illusory and destructive. Such a quest neglects the tragedy inherent to the world and divorces the courageous quest from the cause of justice.

In the final chapter, I explore McCarthy's reflections on the virtue of justice. I argue that McCarthy's most recent Western novel, *No Country for Old Men*, narrates Sheriff Bell's disillusionment with the view of justice predominant in the American West. Since its classical formulations in Plato's *Republic*, the virtue of justice has been considered a political matter—that is, concerned with correct power structures in a society and within human relations. *No Country for Old Men* likewise depends upon this political setting, and its cultural critique is thus aimed at democracy, the predominant political value system governing Bell's Texas government. The novel's critique of liberal democratic justice proceeds through Bell's jeremiads, which reveal the sheriff's unease regarding his society's view of the just and unjust. The sheriff's disillusionment is reinforced by the fact that Anton Chigurh and Bell are inverse figures: even as Chigurh is the "*prophet of destruction*" (*NCFOM* 4), the sheriff becomes the prophet of despair who abandons his cause and succumbs to the stronger forces of violence and evil. I conclude by demonstrating that, although it is not completely intelligible to human beings, McCarthy's vision depends upon a tragic logos or transcendent narrative undergirding the world.

As a vision for literature, tragedy is, in George Steiner's view, coterminous with humanity's attempts to deal with catastrophe (8). Yet many critics lament the substantial disconnect between contemporary culture and the tragic tradition. Martha Nussbaum, for

example, attempts to recover the concepts of luck and chance for the field of ethics. She analyzes Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus, in addition to Plato and Aristotle, in an attempt to translate the ethic of a classical world governed by luck into a modern world organized by industry, technology, and dynamism. George Steiner's argument in *The Death of Tragedy* similarly laments the loss of the "tragic vision of life" in the literature of contemporary culture (9). Although Steiner's argument has informed much of what I find "tragic" in McCarthy's novels, his conclusions suggest that a contemporary novelist cannot have a tragic vision, for this ideal is dead. For Steiner, Ibsen and Chekhov signal the final stage of tragedy: the tradition apparently dies with their works. He concludes that the death of tragedy is coterminous with another death, the rejection of the "intolerable burden of God's presence," which "fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie" (353). The death of the transcendent—of striving for the good despite the tragedy inherent to the world—correlates to the decline of the tragic. Steiner concedes, however, that if tragic drama is not dead, it may have developed into a new style or taken on different conventions. If the latter is the case, then tragedy must participate in the greater human tradition by embodying the "same wild and pure lament over man's inhumanity and waste of man" (354).

I demonstrate, in contrast to Steiner's dire conclusions, that McCarthy's novels evoke the transformation of the tragic vision. I understand the tragic to refer to the predicament that human beings strive for the good but are unable to seize it. Tragedy is, in other words, the impossibility of beatitude, a rift between the reality and pursuit of substantive happiness. This human predicament, McCarthy suggests, is pervasive, for the relation between action and consequence is volatile. The measure of suffering is much

greater than fortune; loss is more prevalent than achievement. Yet McCarthy offers a vision for sustaining the virtuous life, for striving after the good despite the fact that this pursuit is inseparable from the tragic. Virtue, in the author's vision, is thus only possible *within* the realities of chaos, humanity's violent self-destruction, and a world of ineluctable loss.

CHAPTER TWO

McCarthy's Cultural Wasteland

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985) represents a transition not only in the author's career but also in the history of a nation.[1] The narrator remarks that the kid's flight from his home in Tennessee occurs simultaneously with another departure: "not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (*BM* 4-5). The kid's journey into the terrain of the American West is coterminous with the waning of a unique context, one in which the human will and the forces of the world vie against one another without constraints on the "wild and barbarous" nature of each. In this first chapter, I demonstrate that the decline and irrevocable loss of this context not only indicates McCarthy's critique of the American West's origins, but it also evinces the author's tragic vision of life. I juxtapose the loss of traditions, cultures, and human lives in *Blood Meridian* with Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of modernity, particularly since the latter insists that the Enlightenment is built upon the ruins of previous traditions. This juxtaposition foregrounds the *consequences* of the American West's genesis, revealing that it creates an ethical and cultural wasteland that underlies McCarthy's novels set in the twentieth-century American West. The principal corollary, therefore, is their analogous assessment that a crisis regarding past traditions has occurred. Although McCarthy's American West and MacIntyre's modernity are similarly forged out of the

desolation of the past, the novelist and the philosopher's visions of America, modernity, and human nature are not concordant in important respects. Whereas MacIntyre records the development of the Enlightenment notion of an autonomous self, McCarthy chronicles the rise of the acquisitive self through the national mythos of Manifest Destiny.

I conclude this chapter by adumbrating McCarthy's development and revision of what George Steiner calls "the tragic vision of life" (9), arguing that the author presupposes an ethic from this view that grounds his critique. My analysis is not, however, an ethical argument that merely becomes, as Dana Phillips says, "a more sophisticated, more political version [...] on the order of 'scalp hunting is imperialism by other means'" (449). While critics, such as Phillips and Denis Donoghue, attempt to avoid slipping into oversimplified ethical readings about "scalp hunting" or "Manifest Destiny," these realities created an ethical and cultural wasteland that influences the aesthetic product of the novel. As I discuss more fully below, these critics argue that *Blood Meridian* exists in an ethically neutral or purely descriptive realm. Among the many problems with these positions is their distinction between aesthetics and ethics, insisting that the two can become distinct while tacitly privileging the former. A central component to the literary-philosophical tradition of tragedy, however, is a union "in both their content and their style," a combination of poetry and perennially human questions (Nussbaum 13; cf. Steiner 11-44). Indeed, this study also demonstrates the concurrence of ethics and aesthetics in McCarthy's work. The depiction of the cultural wasteland begins with a stark, disturbing chronicle of the unnamed kid's journey through "terrains so wild and barbarous," where physical images reflect the cultural realities as the

foundations of the American West are established on top of the ruins of previous civilizations (*BM* 4-5).

MacIntyre's Modernity and McCarthy's American West

Juxtaposing the foundations of McCarthy's American West with MacIntyre's critique of modernity by no means suggests intellectual dependence between the two thinkers. Yet this comparison nonetheless evokes similarities in their respective wastelands, and it consequently brings each into sharper view. In particular, McCarthy chronicles the national manifestation of a perennial human reality—violence—and the social philosophy undergirding the West's origins. Although Judge Holden is in some ways a difficult character to interpret, he advances an articulate and formidable philosophy called the "dance" (*BM* 331). Judge Holden's philosophy is, as other critics have observed, a strange blending of Enlightenment philosophy and personalized Manifest Destiny (Donoghue 270). Although the judge does not strictly speak for the band, the havoc the mercenaries inflict upon the land provides credence to his views. Native artwork is erased, children murdered, churches devastated, and the band "moved in a constant elision" of the region's prior structures of meaning (*BM* 172). Through this group, McCarthy chronicles a well known historical fact: that the American West begins with the devastation of previous traditions. Yet, like religious myths about origins (e.g., the Book of Genesis), McCarthy's depiction of the beginnings of the cultural wasteland reveals fundamental aspects of the region's identity. Before this genesis[2] is explored further, however, MacIntyre's account of the moral catastrophe underlying modernity helps to provide clarity to what McCarthy's narrative *does* and *does not* suggest.

MacIntyre argues that a catastrophe has occurred in the ethical landscape of European and American culture.[3] He begins this argument with a "disquieting suggestion" (*After Virtue* 1-5), proposing that the contemporary landscape of ethics is a wasteland of fragments and simulacra of the original frameworks that provided morality its substance. Ethics and rationality, in other words, have lost the underlying contexts that provided moral systems with their significance. Making use of post-apocalyptic imagery, such as Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960), MacIntyre presents his argument through the allegory of a world in which the information, technology, and skills of the natural sciences are nearly expunged. Those who are interested in recovering it only possess fragmentary "knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance" (*After Virtue* 1). The new science that develops based on these fragments has lost its epistemological framework. MacIntyre employs this allegory to describe modernity as a catastrophe that initiated a long (and yet unfinished) process of historical transformation.

MacIntyre traces this process of change through its French, English, and especially Scottish forms. To adumbrate his argument, MacIntyre says that these Enlightenments (the plural is intentional) shared a common project of providing an independent rational justification for morality. This project also distinguished "the moral from the theological, the legal and the aesthetic," in part because of the secularization of Northern Europe as well as the rise of the modern nation-state (*After Virtue* 39; Toulmin 45-87). The Enlightenment enterprise of a justification for morality entails, in other words, a partitioning off of various realms of life. This fragmentation thus conceives of morality as an object distinguishable from social, historical, and religious traditions, such

that "morals"—a term that received its modern usage in the seventeenth century—needed to be defended in some "pure" logical realm (*After Virtue* 39). This endeavor is problematic, for MacIntyre, because systems of rationality and justice are not "objective" in an abstract sense. Instead, as he contends in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, these metaethical notions derive their meaning from traditions. Morality, MacIntyre later shows, is an element in a tradition's holistic account of rationality and justice that cannot be divorced from its other religious, civic, and aesthetic aspects (*Whose Justice* 327).

MacIntyre chronicles the failure of two different attempts to provide an independent rational justification for morality. These two distinct veins of the Enlightenment attempt (generally speaking) to ground morality either in ubiquitous reason or the human passions. On the one hand, MacIntyre argues that Kant's method of positing categorical imperatives attempts to find secure ground in a ubiquitous rationality, yet even this position ultimately determines that "until an agent has decided for himself whether a reason is a good reason or not, he has no reason to act" (*After Virtue* 46). On the other hand, MacIntyre says that the moral inquiries of Diderot and Hume both attempted to locate ethical grounds within human physiological nature—i.e., the passions or expressions of feeling that determine moral judgments. This project likewise failed, according to MacIntyre, because of the reality of "rival and incompatible desires and rival and incompatible orderings of desire" (48). Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist philosopher, is a *via media* between these two attempts, yet his position is akin to Kant's in that it relies on "the act of choice [which] had to be called in to do the work that reason could not do" (47).

It follows that when these Enlightenment agendas failed to find a sufficient ubiquitous rationale for moral discourse, the philosophical heirs of modernity simultaneously claimed the project's failure and logical conclusion: that is, that "moral debate" is "a confrontation between incompatible and incommensurable moral premises," while moral commitment itself becomes arbitrary and unjustifiable apart from personal choice (*After Virtue* 39). The enterprise's failure reveals that there is no morality-as-such, a system of ethical convictions deriving from a universal rationale. The failure of the Enlightenment project to provide such a comprehensive account of morality uncovers the truth that there is no "pure referential relationship" between moral systems and a shared rationality that can provide a faultless ethic (*Whose Justice* 377). This failure undermines the notion of ubiquitous moral grounds and leads to a consequent (re)discovery that moralities are subjective. MacIntyre argues, however, that this discovery of rival moral accounts dislodges the notion of morality itself within the modern cultures of Northern Europe and, as a result, the Enlightenment's national experiment, the United States. These cultures embraced modernity's failed project and then ironically preserve its logic by retreating into various forms of emotivism, which insists that all notions of justice and rationality are either individual and arbitrary or repressive of personal freedom (*After Virtue* 6-35).

It is therefore overly simplistic to say that rationality subverted the Church, State, and other traditional categories of meaning and morality, for "reason" itself underwent a transformation in this history (*After Virtue* 51-61). Furthermore, as I discuss more below, this process of historical transformation also entailed a change in the conception of the self. Yet MacIntyre's argument nonetheless revolves primarily around the historical

rejection of what he calls human "traditions." MacIntyre's "traditions" are not only dynamic, continuous accounts of rationality and justice, but they are also those aspects of pre-modern cultures that ordered society through hierarchies and a typically theistic teleology—whether Jewish, Christian, or Islamic (53, 60). MacIntyre thus proposes what Peter McMylor, following Karl Polanyi, calls a "Great Transformation thesis" (78). Critics of this thesis, such as Alan MacFarlane in *The Origins of English Individualism*, challenge it by arguing for the earlier existence of supposed Enlightenment concepts. I have necessarily not taken into consideration the revisions and objections to MacIntyre's historical account. My account is instead concerned with a central point of comparison between MacIntyre and McCarthy: that is, a catastrophe has occurred that resulted in the loss of a previous set of traditions, the epistemological framework undergirding that history, and that certain cultures developed upon the ruins of this desolation. The catastrophic event of modernity fractured previous modes of existence, which were not without their faults but still, for MacIntyre, they were ethically and socially superior. Modernity thus caused a singular cataclysm that transformed those cultures and societies that created it.

McCarthy's narrative is comparable to MacIntyre's thesis in its revelation of the consequences wrought by the American West's origins. Although violence is an enduring component of reality, the national and capital interests that shaped the West distort this human inevitability through its underlying philosophy regarding prior structures of meaning. This philosophy differentiates the region's genesis from the scalped "300,000-year-old fossil skull" in the novel's third epigraph. While violence is not just a phenomenon of the American West, its elision of prior orders—its "fear" of

"time," as the first epigraph states—is unique. McCarthy's vision thus differentiates between what is tragically inherent to human experience and what is particularly distinct about the West's history. The author offers a vision for pursuing the good despite the former, while he simultaneously reveals that the latter created a cultural wasteland that serves as the underlying context for the region's future. The West's genesis is therefore the "context" that influences and extends into McCarthy's other Western novels.

After the mercenaries' first slaughter of "rebel" Apaches (*BM* 148), the generally distant narrator offers an enigmatic commentary on the band's enterprise. This commentary indicates the consequences caused by Glanton's mercenaries:

> They rode like men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote. For although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a thing that had not been before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live and where there is nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds. (152)

This passage is a central interpretive crux, although it is full of ambiguity. For example, the band "made a thing that had not been before," but does this phrase mean that the new "thing" is sui generis in the history of the world? Or does the band become a "communal soul" that simply did not exist while they were "discrete unto themselves"? Furthermore, what are the obscure "origins" of the group's purpose? These issues are central because they determine how a reader will interpret Glanton's band and thus the novel itself.

That the mercenaries' "purpose" is "antecedent" suggests not only that their origins are temporally prior, but also, in a pun on the grammatical connotations of "antecedent," that this history paradoxically refers to them (*BM* 152). Their "origins," in other words, lead up to their murderous and acquisitive actions. They are "legatees" of a

sordid history, inheriting an "order" that culminates in their activity. This passage initially neglects to name the origins of the band's purpose, and instead their constitutive genesis remains "both imperative and remote." However, the band soon crosses "the del Norte," which likely refers to the name of the Rio Grande in Mexico, the Rio Bravo del Norte (152). Soon after the band crosses this border, they encounter another episode of destruction. Although the "victims" are "argonauts" who "preyed on travelers in that wilderness and disguised their work to be that of the savages" (153), the narrator offers another subtle commentary on Glanton's band through this episode.[4] Specifically, the argonauts' slaughter is set within a "waste wherein the hearts and enterprise of one small nation have been swallowed up and carried off by another" (153). Although Tobin, the ex-priest, speculates that the bandits' deaths constitute the ironic retribution of a "cynical god," the "small nation" also alludes to a history prior to the argonauts. Because Glanton's band has just crossed the border, the narrator in fact implicates the national histories that have created such a "waste" (153).

The argonauts' slaughter helps to clarify the "remote" origins informing Glanton's band by raising the historical context of the United States' own "Golden Fleece," to extend the allusion to Jason's journey on the ship *Argo* (*BM* 152). Manifest Destiny was not only used to justify taking land from Mexico and the creation of national borders, but it also engendered a legacy that culminates in Glanton's band. A variety of critics have made similar observations (Jarrett 93; Lincoln 87; Shaviro 146), yet what I argue is that Glanton's mercenaries are not the only "legatees" of these origins (*BM* 152). In fact, the consequences of Manifest Destiny entail a problematic social philosophy as much as the physical ruin and appropriation of a region.

Judge Holden articulates a range of beliefs underlying this philosophy, even if in inconsistent ways (Bell, *Achievement*, 125-26). He says, for example, "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test" (*BM* 250). The judge obviously advances a critique of morality akin to Nietzsche's argument in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (I §10-13). What is noteworthy about this passage, however, is the judge's lucid recognition of a central modern dilemma and the conclusions that he develops from it. The judge realizes that there is no independent rational justification for moral beliefs, no "ultimate test." Instead, "historical law," which the judge understands as the "test" of the individual duel, is the only sure "petition" that can distinguish between two wills (*BM* 250). The judge implicitly undermines the Enlightenment and bourgeois underpinnings of contemporary American morality, which only privileges the "weak." His philosophy insists that false constructions of universal or divine law hide the agendas of those in moral authority. Holden then perceives that either one of two responses can be undertaken: a person can persist in endless debate or "forgo further argument" and decide between two arbitrary (i.e., not universally rational) wills through force (250).

The judge's conclusion construes the ethical landscape as a field of contesting wills. Indeed, his alternative "test" is epitomized in an *individual* conflict—the duel (*BM* 250). This conviction explains what the judge means when he later insists, "If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (307). This holiness undermines the efforts of (modern) "moral law" to be prescriptive of behavior and implicitly rejects the (pre-modern) "superstitions" of divine providence (e.g., Tobin's "cynical god") (250, 153).

The judge's account of his culture, therefore, depends upon the ruins of those orders he has destroyed. He alternatively proposes an "order" that is "both imperative and remote" (152)—that is, he insists that "War is God," providing a set of beliefs that are both prescriptive and impartial (249). The judge's conclusion that human significance depends upon the holiness of war is thus indicative of more than the tautology "war is the main feature of human experience" and thus it must be holy "for man's existence to have any sanctity" (Bell, *Achievement*, 121). While the judge certainly believes in such a tautology, his conclusions derive from the void created by the subversion of his culture's moral laws.

The judge's philosophy is therefore emblematic of the Western cultural wasteland, for by rejecting human moral orders he destroys prior structures of meaning in order to institute his alternative vision. Judge Holden insinuates that his dismissal of human "moral law" is ubiquitous (*BM* 250), and McCarthy gives no overt reason in *Blood Meridian* to contest this claim. His overthrow of prior traditions is also characteristic of Glanton's band, even if certain characters, such as Brown and Tobin, object to the judge's philosophy.[5] This relation becomes clear, for example, in the aimlessness and lack of debate about the group's destination. Toadvine, the kid, Jackson, and the majority of the group follow Glanton and Holden without asking about their direction. In fact, the mercenaries are frequently asked, "De dónde viene?" (120, 197, 229, 255), but they consistently neglect to provide an answer to this question. They are desultory, journeying from Mexico throughout the Texas territory, across the Colorado River, and they conspicuously do not discuss this wandering. Indeed, as the judge says, "Means and ends are of little moment here" (306). Means, he says, are only "idle

speculations" in the "dance" of violence (306, 331). The judge ironically dismisses the teleological view of human beings (i.e., "means and ends") after he has falsely testified that the kid conspired with the Yumas at the river encampment (306). This episode of twisted injustice evokes the structures of life in a region forged out of a violent history that makes its "purpose" obscure and "remote" (152). Not only is the band of mercenaries adrift in this waste throughout the novel, but also their aimlessness evinces that justice itself has become desultory and individualized.

The obfuscation of a *telos*—and, thus, a teleological view of human beings—is connected to the group's disturbing treatment of the remains of past civilizations. The group's desultory violence not only fragments the border culture but also defaces its remnant traces. For example, the narrator observes the group as they "wandered the borderland for weeks," characterizing their odyssey in the following way:

> Deployed upon that plain they moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them. Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat. (*BM* 172)

Glanton's band affects a "constant elision" upon the borderland, exploiting it for their purposes and then destroying the remainder. They paradoxically possess the land by destroying "what had been." Indeed, this passage evinces the shared "origins" of the judge's agenda and the group's desultory violence (152), for immediately afterwards Holden discovers ancient Native American wall paintings in a cave. The judge records them in his Darwinian notebook of the region's natural life (173). Then, as Bell says, "having so taken possession of them, chooses one of the designs to stand for the whole and symbolically scrapes it away" (*Achievement* 125). In an overt embodiment of the

“constant elision” of Glanton’s band (*BM* 172), the judge elides the memory of a prior culture and leaves “no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been” (173).

Glanton’s band also “divide[s] out the world” (*BM* 172), an act that manifests the judge’s later explanation that “the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way” (245). Because universal narratives, teleologies, and moral laws have failed, the judge advances an alternative totalizing order of individual wills to fill the void. The band is thus in the business of bringing order to reality, yet paradoxically their enterprise is of a disordered kind:

> Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all. (172)

In contrast with MacIntyre’s critique, Glanton’s band evinces, on the one hand, a “primal” nature that uncovers disorder as fundamental to human experience. The disorder they bring has always been latent, as if animality constitutes the fundamental element in human nature. Yet, on the other hand, their rejection of “moral law” and teleologies does not lead to the recovery of some prelapsarian or Edenic state. In other words, the group’s “venture” demonstrates the judge’s point: reality has no inherent order save that which, like “nomenclature,” humanity brings to the world (172). Their primal devolution reveals that the rejection of anthropocentric orders does not provide, as MacIntyre similarly argues, an alternative stability. Instead, their rejection of anthropocentric orders causes them to be “doomed” as they “wander” among the wastes (172).

This landscape evokes a subtle critique of the American West's diverse cultural, national, and philosophical origins. The region becomes concatenations of wastes and, as John Cant argues, this "harsh landscape" is a "character in itself" that mirrors the consequences of western expansion (158). These wastes required, however, that prior traditions be elided before expansionists and venture capitalists could bring "order" to the region (*BM* 245). The judge reveals the necessary response to the past if one is to bring such an "order." Specifically, the judge sees the past as a rival, a force that must be discarded. As the novel's first epigraph says, he has a "fear" of "time." For example, in a parable that speaks subtly about the "ghost" presence of prior civilizations, the judge says that the ruins of prior traditions and cultures become "much revered" like a "frozen god," thus establishing an unattainable ideal (146, 145). The ruins of previous cultures haunt those who dwell among them, and these fragments "stand in judgment on the latter races" (146). The judge's conviction makes his erasure of the cave drawings more explicable: the past possesses an authority that has "weight" and "ubiquity" (146). While many prior traditions are ephemeral, destroying the remnants of a culture "buil[t] in stone" saves later inhabitants from becoming subject to the authority of a "frozen god" (146, 145). Eliding the past, in other words, enables the judge to advance his individualized ethic of violence without exterior authorities challenging that order.

The judge's method consequently founds a social order upon a cultural wasteland. Whereas MacIntyre argues that modern cultures construct moralities through the simulacra and fragments of prior traditions, McCarthy's narrative suggests that the foundations of the American West at least began through attempts to elide completely antecedent orders. The cultural wasteland foundational to the West is thus a drastic

intensification of T. S. Eliot's 1922 description of Europe, where "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" (lns. 21-24). The cultural landscape provides no shelter because everything—or almost everything—has been eradicated to keep it from challenging the new social order.

The origins of the American West, therefore, do not represent a "Great Transformation" but, instead, a consorted attempt by men, such as the judge, to erase "ruins [to be] wondered at" (*BM* 147). It obviously does not follow from the judge's philosophy that his convictions are indicative of "America's beliefs," whatever that may mean (cf. Brewton 121-22; Shaviro 146). In fact, the band is comprised of a several members wanted for arrest in the United States, including Glanton himself (*BM* 172). Again, it is important not to expand McCarthy's critique of the foundations of the American West beyond its limits. Yet McCarthy nonetheless modeled the mercenaries on historical sources, as John Emil Sepich has demonstrated (*Notes on Blood Meridian*; "A 'Bloody Dark Pastryman'"). One interpretive difficulty with reading McCarthy's Western novels as an ethical critique of the consequences wrought by the region's genesis is the pitfall of offering an interpretation from the historical materials that bind the novel within the past (cf. Phillips 436, 456 n.6). In contrast, McCarthy's American West functions as a particular manifestation of a perennially human disposition, but it also exposes the enduring assumptions of the group's "purpose" as they influence the wasteland in which later cultures develop (*BM* 152). However, before I argue that McCarthy's later Western novels are set within this selfsame cultural wasteland, another

significant point of juxtaposition between MacIntyre and the novelist sharpens a concept that features centrally in McCarthy's other works.

Autonomous Self, Acquisitive Self

MacIntyre's critique of modernity and McCarthy's narrative of the American West's origins reveal the redefinition of "human," of the self, that occurred during these events. The Enlightenment and the founding of the American West take place over one hundred years apart. Yet the American project in the country's southwest region is in certain ways a development of the Enlightenment project, as if the former has "imperative and remote" origins in the latter (*BM* 152). The differences and similarities between the two events are at least partially explicable through a nuanced evolution in the predominant Enlightenment conception of the self. MacIntyre demonstrates that the modern ethical wasteland develops in large part from the Enlightenment notion of the autonomous self. McCarthy's cultural wasteland, in contrast, reveals that Manifest Destiny and the genesis of the West presuppose the concept of the acquisitive self. McCarthy's acquisitive version is a development of the Enlightenment concept in that it reveals the incorporation of a capitalistic imperative. The acquisitive self maintains the liberal assumptions that MacIntyre analyzes, yet it also defines the meaning of the individual through enterprising terms. I invoke both aspects of the self (i.e., autonomy and acquisition) in chapter two when I discuss the "calling" imperative that underlies the quests of McCarthy's protagonists and in chapter three, where I discuss the liberal democratic presumptions that shape justice. For MacIntyre and McCarthy, these versions of the self are fundamental to the modern crises underlying their respective wastelands.

MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment entailed a fundamental transformation "of the self and its relationship to its roles" (*After Virtue* 35). Specifically, the rejection of a teleological view of human beings and societies led to the distinction between persons and performances, individuals and social roles. Functionality no longer defined persons in the societal transformations wrought by modernity (59). This process of historical change entailed the rejection in modern cultures of traditional hierarchical roles and teleologies that were formerly constitutive of personal identities. While, on the one hand, MacIntyre seems to recognize some benefits of dismissing hierarchies, such as the king/peasant feudal structure, he argues that a new problematic conception of the self replaced this prior social order. The location of moral authority in this "new social setting" no longer derives its weight from a telos (61), and, as McMylor says, "an inevitable arbitrariness must enter, which leaves us trapped in a modern differentiated market order" (153). In other words, the displacement of a collective *telos* caused a vacuum in authority and identity, which MacIntyre says is filled with a disturbing new concept: the autonomous self.

MacIntyre argues that the concept of the autonomous self redefined the human *telos* and ultimate "good" according to personal, privatized notions, stating that the "distinctively modern self […] required not only a largely new social setting," but it even "invented" the individual (*After Virtue* 61). He refers to but does not directly discuss the somewhat complex etymology of the term "individual" and its related social developments. The term "individual" comes from the Latin *individuus*, which originally referred in the fifteenth century to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Latin term indicated the belief that the Trinity is one unique substance that cannot be divided and

thus is discrete unto itself. The Trinity's only authority is the Trinity because it stands alone as a unique ontological being. The term's current colloquial usage—that is, that an "individual" is a single person—begins circa 1742 (OED). MacIntyre alludes to this etymology and suggests that a modern view of the self allows for discrete, personalized versions of morality. Being indivisible and discrete, according to MacIntyre, suggests that the "individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority" (*After Virtue* 62). MacIntyre argues elsewhere that this conception of the self paradoxically develops into a tradition, known as classical (i.e., eighteenth century) liberalism (*Whose Justice* 326-48). This tradition advances a common set of beliefs about society and the self that, although largely individualized, nonetheless provide a collective account of justice and rationality. Indeed, as Pericles Lewis says, in "liberalism, the state is neutral with respect to the substantive values its citizens pursue; each citizen can follow any definition of the good or the sacred that she chooses" (151).

MacIntyre's narrative regarding the autonomous self is debated, particularly in arguments such as Alan MacFarlane's assertion that individualism began long before the Enlightenment. Such a counterargument is helpful because it reveals the complexity of MacIntyre's view of the autonomous *individual*. MacFarlane argues that individualism existed in England as early as the twelfth century, and he defends his argument by citing, among many other practices, the legal custom of ascribing private property to single persons (86). This custom represents a social and economic arrangement that he says emphasizes the nuclear family and not the community. In other words, MacFarlane argues that individualism existed before the Enlightenment because private property,

among other things, resided not with communities, families, or classes but with individuals. Yet, as McMylor points out, MacFarlane's work neglects the fact that land was passed down through community families: "these so-called English individualists were, in fact, members of village communities who often acted together to restrict the way land might be used in particular cases, e.g. abuse of access to common land" (McMylor 85). MacFarlane's definition of the individual therefore mistakes the depth of the Enlightenment view of the self.

In contrast to MacFarlane's understanding of individualism, MacIntyre says that the autonomous self first-and-foremost attributes "conceptualised" possessions to the individual ("After Virtue and Marxism" 253). Guido de Ruggiero describes this autonomous self as the application of the "fact of liberty" to every individual (357), and eighteenth-century continental philosophers formulated this notion in response to the "feudal liberty" of contractual medieval politics, which presupposes a dualism in human relations (e.g., prince/people) (3). The ideal of the autonomous self ascribes instead equality, liberty, and authority to the individual: they are not merely self-benefiting desires or private physical possessions, as MacFarlane defines individualism, but part of individual agency (McMylor 83). This distinction between simple individualism and the autonomous or liberal individual is important not only for the legitimacy of MacIntyre's argument but also for properly understanding his nuanced view (see D'Andrea 52-57).

It does not necessarily follow that ascribing authority and liberty to the individual will result in the lawlessness of *Blood Meridian*. The notion of an autonomous self is much more complex, and it is certainly not the only one in modern cultures. John Stuart Mill, for example, proposes that autonomous freedom does not allow an individual to

infringe upon another's liberty (*On Liberty* 13). Yet MacIntyre argues that arrangements such as Mill's nonetheless create a vacuum that characterizes contemporary moral discourse, transforming debate about "values" into a discussion centered on the promotion of individual liberties (*After Virtue* 6-22). Thus, as McMylor says, MacIntyre's account is "necessarily totalistic" in its critique of modern cultures (80). Regardless of whether his argument satisfactorily encompasses every culture influenced by modernity, MacIntyre reveals that moral discourse founded upon the concept of the autonomous self either disparages or complicates debate about public "goods," for such collective decisions potentially impose unwanted restrictions on a contemporary individual's values.

The conception of the self that McCarthy exhibits in *Blood Meridian* evolves from the Enlightenment conviction of autonomy, for it defines individual identity through enterprise. As discussed above, the judge undermines "moral law" and replaces it with the "test" of individual wills, which he claims is not arbitrary like the "disenfranchisement" of the strong in favor of the weak (*BM* 250). The judge's philosophy thus rejects prior structures for human relations by redefining them according to individual activity. Yet the narrator explains that Glanton's band embodies something more than modern individualism: "For although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a thing that had not been before," a "communal soul" constituted by mysterious "wastes" (152). Having discussed the other aspects of this passage, it becomes clear that the narrator envisions war as a "purpose" that unites otherwise discrete individuals. As the judge says, "What joins men together [...] is not the sharing of bread but the sharing of enemies" (307). The custom of breaking bread,

whether over a domestic or religious table, is a false unity according to the judge. Traditional teleologies of community and religion are only "orders" brought to the world, "like a string in a maze" (245). Thus, as Dana Phillips insists, all "humanist discourses," including nihilism, collapse in light of the narrative's departure from the "anthropocentric point of view" (452). War, however, is fundamental to human nature—it is not a "humanist" construction but a metaphysical reality. The judge thus insists that war is the only "purpose" that can order and unite human beings (*BM* 152).

Although I alluded to this point in my overview of MacIntyre's critique of modernity, he argues in *Dependent Rational Animals* that human rationality is intertwined with an animal nature. MacIntyre argues that human dependence upon both the passions and learned activity means that we have "animal identities" and "animal histories" (83). Yet, albeit to a lesser degree than Plato, MacIntyre argues that rationality and communities of "human flourishing" enable moral agents to reflect on their sources of dependence. MacIntyre's argument is somewhat hindered by his own language, however, because he proposes ways in which humans can become "independent reasoners" (71), whereas it would be more consistent with his argument to strive for "interdependence." Regardless, McCarthy is much less optimistic than MacIntyre about the extent to which human beings can transcend this animality, although he does not altogether reject humanity's ability to make ethical and social decisions apart from their fundamentally violent and contingent nature. Humanity, for McCarthy, is determined by its animal nature to a much greater degree than MacIntyre allows.

Beyond violence's ability to unite human beings, McCarthy also suggests that one of the West's primary cultural mythologies, Manifest Destiny, conceives of the self in a

unique way. In the kid's interview with Captain White, the filibuster says, "Unless Americans act, people like you and me who take their country seriously while those mollycoddles in Washington sit on their hindersides, unless we act, Mexico—and I mean the whole of the country—will one day fly a European flag. Monroe Doctrine or no" (*BM* 35). The appeal to Manifest Destiny is overt, but Captain White only invokes this rationale after he senses that his promises of capital gain have not enticed the kid: "we will be the ones who divide the spoils. […] A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver I would say beyond the wildest speculation" (34). Angel Trias' promise to pay two hundred dollars per Apache scalp similarly entices Glanton's band (185). Therefore, the region's origins combine humanity's propensity to violence with a dangerous amalgam: the individual authority with a capitalistic obsession with enterprise, with undertaking a venture in order to acquire. The cultural values that justified westward expansion, in other words, advances an acquisitive view of the self that replaces pre-modern functionality with a belief that individual undertakings are the principal element of identity.

In the second chapter, I return to the concept of the acquisitive self, using Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to explore further the notion unique to modern capitalism that combines personal calling with acquisition. I argue that the self underlying the West's genesis becomes rationalized, as Weber says, in the societies shaping John Grady Cole, Billy Parham, and Llewelyn Moss. Manifest Destiny is obviously not the only contributor to their society, for the region is diverse and a variety of historical and cultural orders have shaped it. Yet the region's genesis—both its historical provenance and its complex set of mythologies that explain the beginnings of

its identity—create a common ethos that unites people otherwise "discrete unto themselves" under the banner of liberal enterprise (*BM* 152). As I demonstrate in chapters two and three, this genesis informs later mythologies, and thus Glanton's mercenaries are not the only "legatees" of sordid origins (152).

The Cultural Wasteland and McCarthy's Later Novels

McCarthy's cultural critique of the West's genesis begins with *Blood Meridian*, but it extends these origins into the twentieth-century contexts of his other Western novels. These works thus share not only a sustained vision regarding the tragic shape of the world but also a cultural critique regarding the West's relation to prior traditions. One passage at the end of *Blood Meridian* illustrates this crisis that runs throughout the later novels. After Holden and the kid disagree about the "dance" (*BM* 331), the kid buys time with a prostitute for one dollar. The kid has a rendezvous with the "dark little dwarf of a whore" (332), and then he leaves the bar to visit the jakes, where he finds the judge "naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him" (333). The kid's enigmatic death is followed by the narrator's final entry into the story: a dance breaks out in the bar, and "[t]owering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant" (335). The narrator then repeats a series of the judge's claims, as if it were a refrain in the dance: "He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. […] He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (335). This refrain provides continuity with the judge's earlier claims that individual war, which the "dance" represents, is the only enduring reality of human experience. The

narration insists that the judge towers over the patrons of the California bar, and he is "a great favorite" (335). This language suggests that the judge's law, his jurisdiction, extends over these patrons. He has rejected all other "orders" brought to "creation" (245), such that his claims are the only enduring structures arranging reality.

Yet the refrain is also subtly indicative of the narrative's refusal to fully endorse the judge's claims. The repetitive "He says [...]" in the conclusion establishes a degree of distance between the narrative voice and the judge's totalizing contentions (*BM* 335). While the judge may posit his own eternal jurisdiction, the narrative is undecided. On the one hand, the judge undermines the ubiquitous and disinterested pretensions of moral law, advocating a Nietzschean response to the failure of the Enlightenment enterprise. Yet, on the other hand, the novel ends on what amounts to a series of unanswered questions: Does the judge ever die? Will there be a sufficient adversary to rival his claims and violent "order" (152)? Is he, in fact, everyone's "great favorite" (335)? Although the novel is self-contained, it begs questions that the narrative refuses to answer.

Interpreting the Western novels together thus allows the judge's claim to be tested. If the "dance" endures forever in the region, then McCarthy's novels will affirm the judge's individual egoism (*BM* 331). His dance would be all that remains. But exploring the later permutations of the cultural wasteland allows the author's vision to challenge the region's assumptions, values, and mythologies as they evolve into diverse cultural orders. As the wasteland of destroyed prior structures for meaning shapes McCarthy's later characters, its own social consequences become apparent. For John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, for example, these consequences involve a commitment to

individual quests that leave destruction in their wake. Their quests presuppose that the good life is attainable through their enterprises—a consequence of the self as conceived in their region's genesis. Yet what I call McCarthy's tragic vision challenges the pretensions, assumptions, and consequences of the cultural crisis underlying the American West. He reveals that the region's mythologies and values neglect the reality of the tragic, fostering an illusory sense of the self's ability to attain the good life. McCarthy thus describes the region's genesis as a cultural wasteland precisely because it lacks the resources to foster human wellbeing in the face of inevitable tragedy. His vision of tragic reality—the *is* of a world characterized by loss and suffering—interrogates the wasteland by revealing that the various modes of existence that develop from it cannot provide a satisfactory *ought*. Interpreting the author's Western novels as the progression of a common cultural genesis therefore offers not only an accurate view of his vision but also a firmer grasp on why the mythologies underlying the American West are problematic.

The Ethics of McCarthy's Tragic Vision

The ethic of McCarthy's vision is not a systematic prescription for behavior. As *Blood Meridian* reveals, the author envisions a world in which human contingency, not certainty, dominates. Despite the immense difficulties of human existence in general and the problems of the American West's cultural wasteland in particular, McCarthy's vision nonetheless suggests that a virtuous life is possible, even if it is subject to inevitable failure. The author's view of behavior necessary to pursue the good, to be virtuous within a tragic world, by no means presupposes the same naïve assumptions as those positions that it critiques in *Blood Meridian*. For example, virtue and vice both entail

destructive consequences, so, for McCarthy, justice and courage do not provide a happier existence. Living a virtuous life, as a matter of fact, seems necessarily to entail living a tragic life. This vision grounds the author's critique, distinguishing his exploration of the cultural wasteland from his beliefs about the human predicament. However, before I can discuss these issues further, I must respond to the critical opposition to the view that McCarthy's tragic vision entails an ethical vantage point.

Many critics read McCarthy's narratives as wholly unconcerned with ethical judgments and the tragic problems with living a virtuous life. Vereen Bell's early article on *Suttree*, for example, argues that the author is an "ambiguous nihilist," asserting that, "Cormac McCarthy's novels are as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot" ("The Ambiguous Nihilism" 31). The development of plot in McCarthy's later fiction, especially beginning with the Border Trilogy, obviously complicates this position. Yet, regarding *Blood Meridian*, Bell's statement initially seems correct. Other critics argue that the novel intentionally refuses to make ethical judgments about the band's desultory violence. Dana Phillips, for example, employs Lukács' Marxist-humanist categories of "narration" and "description" to argue that McCarthy does not promote a single ideological vantage point in *Blood Meridian*. Phillips employs this distinction to dismiss, on the one hand, what he calls the "Southern" school of critics who find redemption in McCarthy's novels and, on the other hand, the nihilistic "Western" interpretations (434-36).[6]

In contrast to Phillips' two interpretive schools, a third critical view reads *Blood Meridian* as intentionally amoral. This vein of interpretation threatens to undermine my analysis of the relationship between McCarthy's tragic vision and the virtues by

removing his novels altogether from the realm of ethics. Denis Donoghue is the most compelling critic of this third "non-moral" interpretation, which he advances in his chapter on *Blood Meridian* in *The Practice of Reading*. Donoghue begins by articulating his frustration with agenda-based criticism. He says, "I have found it hard to convince students that a work of literature is not an editorial or a political manifesto and that the experience of reading a novel does not consist in finding one's prejudices confirmed. It is difficult to speak of language, form, style, and tone without appearing decadent, ethically irresponsible" (258). Donoghue instead compares McCarthy's novels to "a Dutch painting," which "gives the look of things and assumes that that is enough, it does not incite the mind's eye to go beyond or through the canvas to divine a story behind it" (261). In contrast to ethical and agenda-based interpretations, Donoghue's aesthetic criticism insists, "Meaning coincides with what is offered as visible; there is no remainder" (261). McCarthy is thus less concerned with making ethical judgments about Manifest Destiny than providing the reader with a sense-experience for his or her "mind's eye" (261).

Donoghue argues that the novel's remote narration "thwarts" a "critical or ethical impulse" by evoking its conspicuous absence (267). This non-moral narration transcends the ethical because the novel finds that these categories are empty, arbitrary, and anthropocentric. The three epigraphs, for example, "have in common a vision of life beyond good and evil, as if the constitutive principle of life were energy, self-subsistent and unquestionable" (269). Not only does Donoghue overtly allude to a Nietzschean construction of life—i.e., "beyond good and evil," the title of the philosopher's work published in 1885—but he also insists that reading the novel through these categories

effectively fails to interpret the post-ethical landscape that McCarthy describes. Furthermore, Donoghue's non-moral vision depends upon the absence of a plot. He explains, "McCarthy's novels don't make me wonder what is to happen next and whether or not a significant pattern of events is to be disclosed at last. His episodes are produced not to be interrogated but to be sensed, mostly to be seen in the mind's eye. The appalling quality of each deed is its emptiness, as if it were done before anyone thought of a meaning it might have" (261). Although Donoghue's assessment of the function of McCarthy's plots and dramas—that is, whether they lead the reader to wonder what happens next—is debatable, he is certainly correct in asserting that these narratives do not hinge on some final revelation for clarity. None of McCarthy's novels offer the kind of final *coup de théâtre* of Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), although even this novel emphasizes the human psyche more than a series of events. Nonetheless, it is false logic to conclude from the novel's lack of dependence upon plot that emptiness determines the quality of the characters' actions. While certainly McCarthy's early figures, such as Lester Ballard in *Child of God*, are violently atavistic and even insentient, the displaced and pilgrim-lives of the kid and Billy Parham, for example, are far from "empty." Instead, the desultory and displaced aspects of the characters' lives are evocative of a crisis underpinning their societies.

As I have demonstrated, *Blood Meridian* reveals that the American West is founded upon the ruins of previous traditions. This cultural wasteland necessarily entails a degree of ethical detachment on the part of the narrator, even as the landscape itself imitates the social desolation left in the wake of the band's "constant elision" (*BM* 172). What John Cant argues in regards to the novel's physical terrain applies similarly to the

remote narration: "*Blood Meridian* is the text that most tellingly expresses this sense of a harsh landscape as a 'character in itself' whose propensity to 'imprint its own qualities on human characters' implies a move away from an anthropocentric cultural standpoint, the grievous consequences of this change being greatly increased by the West's largeness of scale" (158). In other words, Donoghue is partially correct, for McCarthy largely omits ethical comment in dark mimicry of the exclusion of ethical deliberation. The judge's rejection of human traditions (i.e., "moral law"), the concept of an individualized acquisitive self, and the band's arbitrary violence find a poetic reiteration in the novel's episodic, macabre form (*BM* 250). This certainly does not make McCarthy's work amoral, however.

Not only does the narrator's mimicry of the wasteland provide a relationship between aesthetics and ethics that is largely missing in Donoghue's criticism, but also the idea of a non-moral vantage point is philosophically problematic. To narrate without an ethical position would require an author to inhabit a disinterested realm, ironically embodying the attempts of Enlightenment philosophers to find an independent rational ground or position from which morality may be judged. In an odd version of this position, the non-moral interpretation insists that an author inhabits an independent ground in order to refrain universally from ethical decisions instead of deliberating about them.

The notion of a non-moral critical view is also problematic in that it assumes a distinction between moral and non-moral values, as if such discernable barriers regularly exist regarding the ethical quality of various human actions. While this distinction is a complex issue,[7] it seems to overstate an author's abilities to produce a purely aesthetic

work, as if some non-ideological realm existed. Donoghue's denial that *Blood Meridian* functions as a "satire against the myth of Manifest Destiny" is tenuous at best, because he bases this assertion on the fact that "McCarthy's Comanches and Apaches […] were just as vicious as the mercenaries who scalped them" (*BM* 267). While certainly the categories of good and evil, the virtuous and reprehensible, are not simplistic or pure binaries in *Blood Meridian*, this complexity does not obviate the existence of "evil" or "virtue." Instead, the difference between the two murderous groups is one of degrees: the Apaches' murder of children is obviously evil, even if on a lesser scale than Glanton's considerable slaughter of several groups of innocent Native American tribes. There is, in other words, no realm beyond good and evil, but only concatenations of violent events that create a region.

Undoubtedly McCarthy's novels—and *Blood Meridian* in particular—are much more than political manifestos or historical critiques. Yet McCarthy does in fact chronicle historical events, inevitably advancing some perspective on ethical issues. Indeed, that vantage point is the author's tragic vision of life, and it necessarily entails an ethic. In an attempt to recover the lost art of aesthetic criticism, Donoghue has overstated the negation of the rivaling argument and overlooked the tragic tradition informing the author's work. Aesthetic issues of language and form are of course central and undervalued aspects of critical discussions about McCarthy. Perhaps the historical and ethical critiques are even ancillary to the author's philosophical-literary agendas. Yet this does not obviate the force and presence of his ethical position.

Claiming that McCarthy maintains an ethical position—one that critiques the West's relationship to prior cultural traditions—does not mean that his vision offers the

same alternative as the philosopher who similarly criticizes Enlightenment Europe. Whereas MacIntyre's response to modernity is the recovery of living traditions within reflective communities, McCarthy's tragic vision suggests that the traditions and prior histories are irrevocably lost. Although antecedent traditions are by no means Edenic in McCarthy's novels (Cant 10), these fragmented ruins cannot be reconstructed into a living tradition.[8] For example, Glanton's band leaves "what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them" (*BM* 172). The essences of previous cultures are removed from the world.[9] McCarthy later expresses this tragic loss in *The Road* when the father looks across a scorched landscape. That novel's narrator describes the scene through an obscure but significant term: "He walked out into the road and stood. The silence. The salitter drying from the earth" (*TR* 261). The term "salitter" is a neologism coined by Jakob Boehme, the German Christian mystic who McCarthy quotes in the epigraph of *Blood Meridian*. Although Boehme employs the term in various ways throughout his long meditation known as *The Aurora* (1634), he identifies the "Salitter" as a fundamental component to the nature of God that has also been dispensed throughout the earth (92-102). At the end of his explanation of the "Salitter," Boehme says, "Thus God may withdraw his divine power […] when [either the angels or humanity] elevate themselves against him; but when that is done, a *spirit* must pine away and perish" (102). While McCarthy is not making a confession of Christian apocalyptism or orthodoxy, he invokes this mysterious concept in Boehme's theology in order to reveal the world's tragic loss of some fundamental, transcendental essence.

McCarthy laments a similar deprivation in the essence of the West—the permanent loss of "terrains so wild and barbarous" because of rapacious expansion and

industrial forces (*BM* 4). The ecological dimension of the author's critique laments the destructive consequences of the acquisitive self: its enterprises elide nature in irremediable ways. Yet McCarthy also critiques the expansionist values of the West by exposing it to the tragic reality that human existence is fundamentally characterized by radical interconnectivity. In the final chapter I explain this concept through the author's use of chaos theory, but the intertwined dimension of reality reveals that the desolation left in the wake of the acquisitive self becomes self-destructive. Instigating the deprivation of "the salitter [...] from the earth" also creates for humanity "unforeseen consequences," as an unnamed *ganadero* in *The Crossing* says (*TR* 261; *TC* 202).

McCarthy's tragic vision not only maintains a belief in the interconnectivity of human existence in order to critique the destructive assumptions deriving from the cultural wasteland, but he also reveals that the interconnectivity of causes within the world subjects human existence to ineluctable and unmerited loss. The *ganadero* also asks, "What act does not assume a future that is itself unknown?" (202). Despite the attempts of McCarthy's protagonists to create a "remedy" for their contingent natures (202), it is precisely the unavoidably human predicament of being subject to choices and consequences exterior to one's own volition that precipitates the fall of McCarthy's characters. The author's view of the world thus critiques those positions that presume to rise above this interconnectivity of existence, while also affirming the human pursuit of virtue despite the fact that this "path" is inevitably subject to the tragic (*TC* 318).

This interconnectivity of human existence also suggests that McCarthy views life in a narrative mode. In *The Crossing*, for example, the priest of Huisiachepic says, "all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one" (143). The priest relays his narrative, yet

he also insists, “This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised. Because the seams are hid from us, you see. The joinery. The way in which the world is made. We have no way to know what could be taken away” (143). In fact, as the priest says, there is a “tapestry that was the world in its making and in its unmaking,” and persons constitute a single “thread” in this interconnectivity (149). A single decision or natural process—such as the lightning that leads to the theft of Blevins’ horse—carries innumerable consequences, and this radical interdependence suggests that human existence is a narrative, even if a chaotic one. Human existence thus has meaning, yet, McCarthy suggests, darkness, obscurity, and unforeseen losses are equally as constitutive of its predicament.

McCarthy’s ethic therefore affirms that virtue *is* possible for humanity, even if this pursuit confronts the tragic realities of inevitable loss and confusion. The author critiques the cultural mythologies that develop from the wasteland of the West, revealing that these orders fail to grapple sufficiently with reality, become exploitative, or foster behavior that forgoes virtue. In contrast, McCarthy’s tragic vision suggests that the most virtuous aspect of genuine courage and justice is that they do not offer beneficial recompense. Furthermore, because the past is permanently lost, virtue can never regain Eden or rectify wrongs. As a result, when McCarthy’s characters are truly virtuous, it is not for the sake of a perceived gain but in the face of inevitable misfortune. As the narrator says in *Cities of the Plain*, the “world past” and the “world to come” both share “a knowing deep in the bone that beauty and loss are one” (*CP* 71). The good life in McCarthy’s novels is coterminous with the tragic life. The virtues of this tragic life thus interrogate the misdirected and insufficient forms of courage and justice that develop out

of the cultural wasteland's legacy. The dialectic between tragedy and the cultural wasteland creates a double bind in McCarthy's vision: forgoing justice and courage succumbs to the cultural malaise of the wasteland, while assuming that these virtues only benefit the agent is erroneous. A character may be a "legatee" of both versions of a virtue (*BM* 152), such as John Grady Cole's pursuit of the good life in *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*. Yet even in these cases the products of the cultural wasteland are revealed to be "fraudulent destinies," as the narrator of *Blood Meridian* describes the deceptive light of the ignis fatuus (120). Like the lights of this foolish fire, the cultural underpinnings of the American West delude McCarthy's characters into believing in their authenticity—in their ability to illuminate a path to the good life.

CHAPTER THREE

The Failure of Individual Courage

For McCarthy, the pursuit of the good is inseparable from tragedy. Yet many cultural values, mythologies, and beliefs that develop in the wasteland of the American West attempt to supersede or obfuscate this relationship. In this chapter, I employ the virtue of courage as an occasion for discerning McCarthy's critique of these cultural values. I argue that the ideals and mythologies underlying the American West foster an obsession with courage. I demonstrate this obsession by comparing the quests of McCarthy's protagonists to Max Weber's analysis of the vocational calling in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/05). John Grady Cole, Billy Parham, and Llewelyn Moss are each "legatees" of the Weberian capitalist calling (*BM* 152), for Protestantism and enterprising capitalism have shaped their cultural heritage. This calling predisposes the protagonists to the belief that a meaningful life requires an enterprise, a productive quest of an ostensibly fated goal, such as mystery or a lover. This belief patterns the quest-genre after the cultural values underlying the American West. Specifically, the Western version of the quest exalts a courageous hero, who, like a modern Jason, must acquire his Golden Fleece through individual bravery.[1] The quests of McCarthy's protagonists therefore reveal the region's obsession with courage, for it values this disposition as the chief virtue necessary to attain the "good life"—or *eudaimonia*, as Aristotle describes the human *telos* and its most complete state of wellbeing (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1101a5-8). McCarthy's narratives subtly undermine this

destructive obsession with courage, however, by revealing that its underlying cultural ideals erroneously reorder the virtues, thereby subverting justice for the sake of bravery. Through the failures of his characters' quests, McCarthy critiques the belief implicit in this cultural mythos that the good life may be *attained* as a personal destiny and that courage is the chief venue in the world for the good.

Vocational Calling and Personal Destiny

The rationale behind the quests of McCarthy's characters is often obscure. For example, during an interview with a local sheriff, Billy Parham discusses his flight into Mexico to return a she-wolf that wandered onto his family farm. While on this quest, Billy's parents are murdered and their farm's horses are stolen. The sheriff tries to understand Billy's flight:

> What were you doin in Mexico?
> I dont know. I just went down there.
> You just got a wild hair up your ass and there wouldnt nothin else do but for you to go off to Mexico. Is that what you're tellin me?
> Yessir. I reckon. (*TC* 166)

Similar vague inclinations lie behind John Grady's journeys to Mexico, his quests for Alejandra and Magdalena, and Llewelyn's decision to take the drug money. Such quests are shrouded in language of mystery, fate, and destiny. In fact, the impetuses behind McCarthy's Western protagonists become callings to attain the objects of their quest—a calling that orients their work ethic toward achieving their ends against all resistance. As Johnson (sentimentally) advises Cole, "I think you ought to follow your heart, […]. That's all I ever thought about anything" (*CP* 188). Johnson's advice indicates the phenomenon of personalized ambition that combines the doctrine of "calling" implicit in Manifest Destiny with the ethos of an individual work ethic.

Max Weber proposed a similar amalgamation in his seminal sociological study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/05). While Weber undoubtedly misreads several Protestant theologians, his argument nonetheless provides a helpful framework for the secularized quests of McCarthy's protagonists. Weber analyzes the ethos that develops from the notion of the "vocational calling" in Calvinism, Puritanism, and several early Protestant sects. He argues that this religious belief helped the "spirit of capitalism" to become pervasive in certain cultures in western and northern Europe and, by extension, foundational to America. Although Weber's historical evidence and theological assumptions are often challenged, his *description* of the sociological underpinnings of modern capitalist culture remains provocative. Putting Weber's analysis of the "vocational calling" in tandem with the ambitions of McCarthy's characters sheds light on the problematic nature of their quests to acquire the "good life" through courage and an inexorable work ethic.

Weber's analysis of the vocational calling is one part in his argument that a unique correspondence exists between regimented religious life and "intensely developed business sense" (67). He claims that capitalist economies have tended to flourish in the same European countries where Protestantism took root after the Reformation, explaining this correlation through the thesis that the Protestant idea of a vocational calling was the "harbinger" of "purely rationalistic views of life" (87). Although the term is not consistent across his work, Weber uses "rationalism" to refer broadly to "regularities and patterns of action within civilizations, institutions, organizations, strata, classes, and groups" (Ritzer 243). George Ritzer traces this concept across several sociological arenas in Weber's work, such as art forms, economics, and religion (243-54). In effect, a

rationalized social order represents external systematizations of a society's view of rationality. A rationalized order is an efficient method for realizing societal ambitions and therefore it is conducive to the "spirit of capitalism," Weber says, because it fosters regimented and productive structures for a society (67).

Protestantism precipitated the rationalization of many socio-economic orders by disseminating the idea of the vocational calling. This notion overturned what Weber calls the prior "economic traditionalism" of most Western civilizations (Weber 85). These prior social orders, according to Weber, viewed the citizen's productivity as an ancillary sphere to life, relegating it to the feudal, familial, and religious spheres. Production, in other words, was not central to the common conception of the self in economic traditionalism (89). Yet the Reformation altered this traditional order by rejecting Catholicism's teaching that the sacred could be experienced through the sacraments, priestly confession, or good works (139).[2] Martin Luther insisted instead that the "fulfillment of one's duties in the world constitutes, under all circumstances, the only way to please God" (90). In other words, one's earthly work, not faithfulness to the sacraments of the Catholic Church, constitutes religious devotion in the early Protestant social order. Luther thus advances a nascent form of the vocational calling.

Far more than Luther, however, John Calvin provided the primary impetus for the spirit of capitalism to flourish through his doctrine of predestination. This doctrine became influential among later prominent sects of Protestantism. Calvin, Weber says, essentially maintains that salvation cannot be earned apart from God's election. Weber thus suggests, "Predestination can actually be understood as only the *most extreme* form of the *exclusive* trust in *God* […]" (107). Early Protestants inheriting this doctrine were

even exhorted not to trust in the support of friends, family, and religious leaders. Believers therefore could no longer rely on the traditional signs that brought the certainty of their salvation. In a development fundamental to subsequent Protestants, Calvinism—that is, not only Calvin but also his followers—taught that faithfulness in one's duty, in addition to material blessing in that task, evokes the certainty of the believer's salvation. This rationale soon developed into a conviction that "*work without rest in a vocational calling*" is indicative of one's membership in the elect (111). Productive work demonstrates God's grace, testifying, as Weber says, "to one's belief as the psychological point of origin for methodical ethics" (121). That is, the believer's behavior conforms to the belief that hard work and success demonstrate divine favor. The Reformation was uniquely able to "increase drastically the infusion of work (organized by a calling) with a moral accent and to place a religious value, or reward, on it" (91).

The Protestant belief in a vocational calling thus reframed the common conception of the self through productive and individualistic terms. Because Calvinism influenced later Protestant sects, including Methodism and other "Baptizing sects" (Weber 130-39), its prevalence spread beyond the Reformed tradition. While Weber does not suggest that Calvin and other Protestant leaders believed material goods to be a legitimate *telos* (96), he argues that these diverse religious movements proved amiable to capitalism through the rationalizing vehicle of the "vocational calling" belief and its consequent ethos. This doctrine fostered the rise of the "modern capitalist spirit" when religious traditions waned and societies became secularized (151). For example, when Puritanism began to lose force in America and England, its prohibition against wealth as an end in itself also began to wane while its rationalized organization of life remained.

This efficient social order is amiable to capitalism in the sense that it orients individuals toward productivity. Weber explains, "As the paroxysms of the search for God's kingdom gradually dissolved into the dispassionate virtues of the vocational calling and the religious roots of the movements slowly withered, a utilitarian orientation to the world took hold" (154). Members of modern capitalist cultures began to define their existence according to productivity. Weber cites Benjamin Franklin's moral aphorisms as the epitome of the fact that "this 'spirit' exists without the religious foundation" yet retains the ethos that developed from the "vocational calling" doctrine (157). Franklin says, for example,

> Remember, that *time* is *money*. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent or rather thrown away five shillings besides. (qtd. in Weber 70)

A person's life, according to Franklin, is always an opportunity to acquire money.

Weber adds an important qualification to his description of the Protestant work ethic: he insists that, contrary to "adventure" capitalism, which has existed in other times and places (e.g., medieval China), the spirit of *modern* capitalism is uniquely ascetic (72). Calvinism and the Puritans tempered their emphasis on the worldly work of the believer through a simultaneous insistence that the laborer ought to gain nothing "from his wealth for himself personally, except that irrational sense of having 'fulfilled his calling' well" (84). Believers submit their lives to an order of productivity that God has foreordained, and work in a calling thus becomes "endowed with a peculiarly objective, *im*personal character, one in the service of the rational formation of the societal cosmos surrounding us" (109). Through a complex historical analysis, Weber argues that the social

organization of predominantly Protestant countries became rationalized and the belief that religious faithfulness is to be found in the believer's work transformed into a middle-class ethos (155). This religious conception created a social ethic that not only requires inexorable productivity in work, but it also demands spartan austerity in self-discipline.

Weber concludes his analysis with the well-known assertion that modern capitalist culture is an "iron cage" or "steel-hard casing" (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*) (158). He says, "The Puritan *wanted* to be a person with a vocational calling; we *must* be" (157). The modern capitalist spirit has created a system in which "economic man"—that is, the human being viewed in productive terms—must participate in the acquisition of wealth or suffer poverty and even death (153). More specifically, the modern economic conditions of "mechanized, machine-based production" determine "the style of life of all individuals born into this grinding mechanism" (157). Everyone living within cultures influenced both by Protestantism and the spirit of modern capitalism inherit a vocational ethic (97),[3] and therefore the axiom that "the purpose of life *itself* involves work" has become increasingly prevalent (143). The ethos of a vocational calling "now wanders around in our lives as the ghost of beliefs no longer anchored in the substance of religion" (158). The fragments and simulacra of a Protestant work ethic provide the structures for behavior, while "modern capitalist culture" promotes labor as an absolute end in itself (78). In Weber's analysis, the vocational calling is *itself* the *telos* that provides purpose to "modern" human existence.

McCarthy chronicles a comparable social phenomenon as Weber, for his Western protagonists embark on quests that become "callings," ends in themselves that define the self through productive and acquisitive terms. A common Protestant heritage and their

close ties to the capitalistic ranching industry of the American West orient McCarthy's protagonists to the *telos* of an individual calling. The cultural values of this heritage advance the paragon of the brave hero who acquires his quest's object and thereby fulfills his destiny. Cole, Parham, and Moss embrace this ideal, and its underlying mythos leads them to orient all other activities to that courageous individual pursuit—whether the object is domesticating a horse or marrying a lover. These quests function as personalized versions of Manifest Destiny, for each one is couched as an unavoidable and ultimate calling, as a Golden Fleece in itself that the hero pursues through individual courage.

Even as Weber notes that the "spirit" of modern capitalism is distinct from the unfettered rapacity of adventure capitalists (Weber 72), McCarthy's protagonists follow an ethos distinct from the greed and facile nationalism of Captain White's filibusters.[4] Yet Cole, Parham, and Moss nonetheless share common "origins" with Glanton's band of mercenaries (*BM* 152), for they all variously incarnate a heritage that conceives of the self in acquisitive terms. Cole, Parham, and Moss's quests evoke a Weberian calling: each character's pursuit is cloaked in language regarding fate, suggesting that his goal is a venue for attaining a higher cause. In fact, I demonstrate that each character views his quest as his life's *summum bonum*. Their quests thus indicate that the acquisitive self implicit in *Blood Meridian* has "rationalized," as Weber says, into a methodical pursuit of a calling that endows their life with significance (67). Thus, while McCarthy's protagonists are virtuous in ways that Glanton's mercenaries are not, this does not obviate the common conception of the self undergirding their respective quests. For Cole, Parham, and Moss, the *pursuit* of a "calling," whatever its object, constitutes the fated

purpose of their lives. As John Grady believes, "there was no help for it" (*APH* 81): these characters must submit their lives to the destiny of their quests.

John Grady Cole's journey in *All the Pretty Horses* occurs roughly one century after *Blood Meridian*, apparently opening on September 13, 1949 (*APH* 10). The death of Cole's maternal grandfather and the prospect of his mother selling the family ranch for oil interests precipitate his flight to Mexico. As Cole's dying father asserts, the consequences of these changes are irremediable: "the country would never be the same" (25). This disinheritance provokes John Grady to regain the ranching life that has died out in America, and so he convinces his "buddy," Rawlins, to accompany him on the flight from Texas (26-27, 55). Therefore, if the loss of a terrain "so wild and barbarous" is not complete by the end of *Blood Meridian* (*BM* 4-5), the settling of the West becomes final during the Border Trilogy. The decline of the ranching life leads Cole and Rawlins to set out "like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing" (*APH* 30). They are not picaresque heroes but burgeoning *vaqueros* seeking to realize their calling as cowboys. Rawlins and Cole's journey begins with opportunity, but the possibilities are couched in language of acquisition. They must take from other worlds in order to refurnish their own. Indeed, after Alejandra rejects him, John Grady realizes that Rawlins had "come to ruin no man's house. No man's daughter" (255)—the implication being that his own actions have, in contrast, created these ravages.

Cole's journey is of course a *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age story (Morrison 178), yet it also evokes the sense of entitlement and destiny underlying the quest-genre. When Jimmy Blevins tries to recapture his stolen horse, for example, Cole agrees to

assist his young companion despite Rawlins's objections, because "there was no help for it and the dipper standing at the northern edge of the world turned and the night was a long time passing" (*APH* 81). The astral imagery following John Grady's decision suggests a sideristic concession to fate. The quest hinges on forces beyond Cole's volition, turning on "certain things [that] happened over which [he] had no control" (240). Thus, falling victim to fate, Cole's quest interacts with the notions of luck and chance that extend back to Homer's *Odyssey*, and in fact each of McCarthy's Western novels adapts and interacts with the quest-genre. Those critics who laud *Blood Meridian* as an American classic, such as Harold Bloom (257-58) and John Cant (3, 175), view Glanton's mercenaries as Western forms of Melville's *Pequod*, embarking on a quest to conquer that is finally self-destructive. The quest-motif in the remaining Western novels follows a similar pattern, but the destructive consequences of these quests are less barbarous than those that Glanton's band left behind in their chaotic wake. Cole certainly leaves another "man's house" in "ruin" (255), but his journey is destructive because of its underlying assumption that mystery and beauty can be *possessed*. John Grady is not Glanton; he is instead the "knight errant," as Morrison says (178), who mistakenly believes that he can *own* the Golden Fleece.

If Cole's journey to Mexico is precipitated by the American quest-impulse, then his relationship with Alejandra cannot be divorced from this "calling" to pursue a destiny. When John Grady encounters Alejandra on an open road, the meeting is unsettling and profound: "He'd half meant to speak but those eyes had altered the world forever in the space of a heartbeat" (109). Although excessively romantic, this encounter evokes not only the mysterious force shrouding Alejandra but also, as Cant says, the fact that "John

Grady's world has been altered in a manner that will destroy it" (182). When the couple first makes love, Alejandra is "so pale in the lake she seemed to be burning. Like foxfire in a darkened wood. That burned cold. Like the moon that burned cold. Her black hair floating on the water about her, falling and floating on the water" (*APH* 141). She is an illuminating force, a paradox of fire and ice that haunts Cole.

An earlier meeting between the couple in Don Héctor's barn raises a leitmotif of Alejandra's association with wild horses. After they greet one another, Alejandra quietly leaves and Cole is left thinking about "horses and of the open country and of horses" (117-18). Yet Alejandra is not a tractable creature open for domestication, even if John Grady's association between his lover and the animals depicts her in this way. When John Grady later rides Don Héctor's new stallion, for example, he encounters Alejandra on the road and she responds with a coy double entendre, "I want to ride him, she said" (130).[5] Her persistence in coming to Cole's bunkhouse nine nights in a row likewise reiterates her willful role in the relationship, undermining assertions that John Grady objectifies her. If, therefore, she is Cole's Golden Fleece, Alejandra is also the anti-type of the passively exploited woman. As Cant says, their erotic love is in fact a "subversion of romantic assumptions" (183), not facile reiterations of male-oriented dalliances or sentimental love stories.

Despite Alejandra's wildness, the ideal of the brave hero undergirds John Grady's calling to pursue his lover. For example, Cole is imprisoned because Don Héctor discovers his relationship with Alejandra. In prison John Grady learns that the West tests, as the prison guard Pérez says, whether "you have cojones. If you are brave" (*APH* 193). He is forced into a nearly fatal knife fight, which requires him to kill another

prisoner. Along with the other demonstrations of his "cojones," his individual bravery when facing harm, Cole's quest evokes the obsession in the cultural mythologies of the West with individual acts of courage. Indeed, the use of "cojones" emphasizes the *individual* and *productive* nature of this test, for it pejoratively refers to a man's potency—his ability to propagate himself.

Like the brave hero in other Western mythologies, such as the popular Louis L'Amour novels, John Grady's quest requires him to face dangers and impediments. In L'Amour's *The Lonesome Gods*, for example, Johannes Verne braves the Palm Springs desert on his adventure to stake a claim in Los Angeles—the city that his novel depicts as the epitome of the modern West. This quest requires Verne to exhibit remarkable courage to fulfill the opportunities offered by the burgeoning West. Such cultural mythologies promote the brave hero and extol his courage as the chief vehicle for his journey's success. The paragons of courage are indicative of the values supporting John Grady and Verne's quests, for, even as Aristotle defines courage as bravery to endure harm for a noble end (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1115b22-24), the mythologies informing John Grady suggest a definition of the good. The context for what constitutes bravery reveals, in other words, the values of a particular cultural order. John Grady's quest suggests that the paragon of the courageous hero defines the noble end as "follow[ing] your heart" (*CP* 188), as pursuing one's personal calling.

Alejandra's willful and wild nature is one of the primary forces that thwarts Cole's destined quest. Although Cole leaves Alejandra in "ruins" regarding her relationship to her father (*APH* 255), she also retains her selfhood. She is not, like Don Héctor's prized stallion or even the West itself, won by being broken. Rawlins

repeatedly enjoins John Grady to conclude his affair with Alejandra (138, 211), yet Cole rejects his friend's wise, even prescient advice. Instead, Cole continues to pursue her after his recognition that Alejandra has already made a deal with her aunt, the Dueña Alfonsa, to reject him in order to save his life. Despite a series of difficulties, Cole returns to his quest "[a]s if he were some personage bearing news for the countryside. As if he were some newfound evangelical being conveyed down out of the mountains and north across the flat bleak landscape toward Monclova" (217). John Grady's quest is inexorable because, like an evangelical missionary, he understands his life through the imperative of his calling.

Billy Parham's quest in *The Crossing* follows a similar pattern to John Grady's, yet this next novel inverts the emphases of its predecessor. Whereas *All the Pretty Horses* is an understated, subtly profound narrative, *The Crossing* constantly retards the plot through its concatenations of philosophical reveries and secondary narratives, which are the *mise-en-abyme* that corroborate the novel's theme, "Rightly heard all tales are one" (*TC* 143). These devices force the reader to work slowly through the book. Despite the deliberation it requires, however, *The Crossing* is a relatively simple story. Billy returns a captured and pregnant she-wolf to the mountains of Mexico. After encountering adversity and corruption, he shoots the wolf before vicious Airedales kill it in an underground fighting ring. When he returns home two years later, Billy discovers that horse thieves have killed his parents. His younger brother, Boyd, witnessed the atrocity, and they laconically agree to return to Mexico in search of the stolen horses. Like John Grady, Parham seeks to regain a lost state of goodness through his quest across the border. He eventually recaptures his family's horses through the clemency of a

superintendent, Quijada, who works for the ranch that originally sold them. The brothers also rescue an unnamed Mexican girl from two rapists, and Boyd later falls in love with her. In carnivalesque fashion, the trio encounters a group of traveling gypsies, and Billy sees the troupe's prima donna bathing naked—one of several events that make this novel, like its predecessor, an adaptation of the *Bildungsroman* (Lincoln 117). The unnamed girl leaves to visit her mother, promising to return the horse that she borrows.

The final two sections of the novel contain its most tragic and philosophically dense material. Boyd, after recovering from a gunshot wound, leaves his brother for the unnamed Mexican girl. Billy searches unsuccessfully for the couple, and the fourth and final section of the novel chronicles his attempt to verify the rumor of Boyd's death and his protracted journey to bring Boyd's bones back to America—an odyssey filled as much with the grotesque as Billy's silent audience to a variety of verbose, philosophizing characters. Before returning to Mexico, however, Billy attempts to enlist in the army to fight in World War II, which he learns about long after American involvement began. Billy's failures to enlist disrupt the storyline regarding his brother, but it also offers commentary on the sense of duty underpinning his quests into Mexico.

When Parham crosses the border, a patrolman says, "I guess you come back to sign up" (*TC* 333). Billy mistakenly assumes that the patrolman is referring to a ranch, but when he responds, "Hell fire, boy. This country's at war," Billy sets out to Deming, New Mexico, conspicuously without deliberation, and tries to enlist (333-34). The recruitment officer accepts Billy, despite the fact that he is underage, and says, "You aint got noplace else to go" (337). Billy is displaced, an orphaned *vaquero*, and war temporarily offers a surrogate vocation to fulfill his calling. The novel's long foray into

Billy's failed enlistment—significantly because of a heart murmur—recalls that the Second World War unsettled millions of lives through death, desolation of economies and lands. This global conflict creates in America a "lost" generation (as Gertrude Stein famously labeled Hemingway and his post-WWI European contemporaries),[6] and Billy's displacement, both in Mexico and throughout the Southwest, reflects the crisis underpinning his era.

Billy's "career" of failed attempts to enlist also evokes the sense of duty that he is compelled to fulfill (*TC* 340). He tells another recruitment officer, for example, "I dont have anyplace to go. I think I *need* to be in the army. If I'm goin to die anyways why not use me? I aint afraid" (341, italics added). Billy's desire to enlist not only presupposes a "need" for an endowing work, a quest to define his life, but it also indicates the central role of courage in his culture's set of values.[7] Courage is necessary for Billy to fulfill his calling, and his vague desire to enlist in the military mirrors his forays into Mexico: both offer a theatre to exhibit his courage and fulfill a sense of destiny. The measure of Billy's courage corresponds to his perception of the quest's success, thus "testifying," as Weber says, to his attainment of a meaningful life (121).

Even as Billy repeatedly attempts to enter the military despite his conspicuous lack of knowledge about the war, his earlier decision to return the she-wolf to Mexico is similarly shrouded by a nebulous drive. As one New Mexico sheriff tells Billy, "You just got a wild hair up your ass and there wouldnt nothin else do but for you to go off to Mexico" (*TC* 166). His journey is explicable only as an impulse, a sense of fated duty that is satiable solely by a quest into a foreign land. For Billy, returning the she-wolf is, as Weber describes the Protestant vocational calling, "an end it itself that persons [are]

obligated to pursue" (Weber 85). For example, when Parham is an hour away from Cloverdale, where the wolf will most likely be killed or sold for a reward in this town, he reflects on the creature's capture: "South lay the open country. The yellow grass heeled under the blowing wind and sunlight was running over the country before the moving clouds. The horse shook its head and stamped and stood. Damn all of it, the boy said. Just damn all of it" (*TC* 63). The pastoral language of this passage suggests that, for Parham, there is a natural order in which creatures ought to be free, "running over the country" like sunlight. Indeed, in the novel's opening scene, Billy sneaks away into the night to observe a pack of wolves: "Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their noses in the snow. Loping and running by twos in a standing dance and running on again" (4). This early scene also establishes a connection between wolves and light—in this case from the moon—as well as the presence of an "inner fire" that exists in all things (4).

When Billy decides to "ride south toward the mountains of Mexico" (*TC* 63), a burden to reconcile the wolf to its feral, running, light-bearing state undergirds his journey. Yet, as Kenneth Lincoln observes, Billy also tries to domesticate the animal, to "rope the wind, the stars, the rivers, the lightning, the sun or moonbeam" (118). Billy refuses to cash in the reward that local authorities offer for a captured wolf because he senses an obligation to the mystery and freedom that the creature embodies. But this obligation is not innocuous. Billy also believes that "the wolf had been put in his care" (*TC* 110), that he participates in a "godmade" order within the world (426). While the wolf "is unreachably 'other'" (Cant 196), Billy strives to cross into that alterity, even as he crosses cultures, borders, and languages throughout the novel. Billy works to preserve

the natural order, but his quest also disrupts it (198). He ruins the unnamed Native American's hunt (*TC* 9), displaces a stray animal (424), shoots a hawk from the sky (129), and his actions thus *invert* the order of the world: "the river was running backwards. That or the sun was setting in the east behind him" (*TC* 130; Cant 198). In Billy's quest to participate in the natural order, he destroys it—or at least does damage to it. Thus, like Alejandra in *All the Pretty Horses*, the wolf remains free only insofar as it is not finally won by Billy's quest. In McCarthy's vision of the world, the wolf must die in order to remain "wildly free" (Lincoln 120).

Billy's quest thus involves a more vivid—although more complex—journey than John Grady's. Like his attempts to enlist in the army, Billy senses a "need" to return the she-wolf to Mexico (*TC* 341). This "wild hare up [his] ass" is only justifiable as an inner imperative, which leads him on a quest to regain a mysterious order that is conspicuously waning in the novel (166). There are frequent statements that wolves no longer roam the area because the land has been settled and the ominous threat looms over the farmers that the government will soon buy up large areas of West. Billy tries to regain the good life of a pre-settled Western United State, but his pursuit also tacitly depends upon the belief that the hero's quest can be successful, that the brave man can find significance in the fulfillment of his enterprise.

McCarthy's most recent Western novel, *No Country for Old Men*, is perhaps the clearest example of the way in which the Weberian capitalist calling shapes the quest-genre. In this novel McCarthy returns to the laconic and subtle forms of narration that he successfully employs in *All the Pretty Horses*, yet he also combines the conventional noir of crime fiction with Sheriff Bell's jeremiads. The italicized commentaries remain

distinct from the interconnected plots of Bell, Chigurh, and Moss, suggesting that the sheriff does not necessarily speak for McCarthy or the narrative.[8] Jay Ellis says that this complex structure is intentionally deceptive, for Moss initially appears to be the protagonist, with Bell and Chigurh as dueling but ancillary prophets. When Moss dies, Bell becomes the "true protagonist" in Ellis's reading (236). Yet, as will become more apparent in the next chapter, Moss's quest subtly comments on the sheriff's reflections on justice. Llewelyn discovers the money from a failed drug deal, and his subsequent quest to survive and thwart his pursuers, while simultaneously retaining the millions of dollars, complicates Bell's initial good/evil binary. Llewelyn is not without scruples, however, for he returns to the scene of the drug deal to bring water to a dying trafficker. Moss's kindness begins a chain of events that leads Anton Chigurh, the "prophet of destruction" (*NCFOM* 4), to search for him, and the Texan's quest ends not only in his own death but also in those of the unnamed runaway and his nineteen-year-old wife, Carla Jean.

When Llewelyn first takes the briefcase with the drug money, the narration draws back like a camera lens and provides a glimpse of the import of his decision: "His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead. All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel" (*NCFOM* 18). On the one hand, Moss's gaze evokes a momentary recognition of the interconnectivity of life. A single event can determine all of one's future actions, and the web of interrelations is therefore innumerable and impenetrable. On the other hand, Moss's future also "cooks down" into the capital, as if the paper itself sums up his life. That retaining the drug money functions as a calling becomes clear when he later tells the runaway, "Things happen to you they happen. They dont ask first. They dont require your permission"

(220). Like John Grady, Moss explains his quest as a calling beyond his control, as if it were his destiny. The remainder of the narrative reveals that his decision and subsequent journey is both interconnected—a story, a quest—while also evincing that the money and what it represents is to Moss what the she-wolf is to Billy. That is, the drug money provides Llewelyn with an opportunity to become the brave hero who wins the good life through his quest, to fulfill his own "need" to enlist in a cause (*TC* 341).

Llewelyn views his attempts to retain the drug money as an opportunity for a better life, for he is cynical regarding not only his culture's values but also his own life (182). This is clear from the fact that Llewelyn is adrift in the world, albeit in less overt ways than John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, and this displacement subtly influences his quest. Moss takes the money in 1980 (*NCFOM* 56), only five years after the Vietnam War officially ends. This war haunts the novel, becoming a past burden that the characters hesitantly discuss. Moss's father says that the Vietnam soldiers

> *all done things over there that they'd just as soon left over there.* […] [Llewelyn] *smacked the tar out of one or two of them hippies. Spittin on him. Callin him a babykiller. A lot of them boys that come back, they're still havin problems. I thought it was because they didnt have the country behind em. But I think it might be worse than that even. The country they did have was in pieces*. (294)

Vietnam, according to Llewelyn's father, was only the apex of the national crisis, the "*icin on the cake*" (295). The national ramifications of these claims become reminiscent of the cultural wasteland chronicled in *Blood Meridian*, the genesis that created a fragmented and desolate cultural context, which, according to Moss's father, sends "*boys*" off to war without anything "*to take over there*" (294, 295). Moss's father claims to speak for his son regarding this cultural hollowness, although only Carla Jean perceives that his efforts to keep the drug money embody his desire for a better life (182).

Even if the national implications of the father's claims are totalizing, they are nonetheless provocative. Moss's service in Vietnam was, according to his father, a quest without a Camelot or Ithaca. Moss's Penelope later dies, but only after one of her suitors—i.e., Bell—convinces her to betray her husband's trust by revealing his location (*NCFOM* 214). Carla Jean also tragically discloses Llewelyn's location to the drug dealers, who have her phone tapped (214-15). Moss's journey is thus set within a world of luck and fate, and he is displaced within that cosmological order. He cannot provide an answer to Wells, who says, "Maybe I should ask you what you intend to do" (152). Llewelyn can only respond with sarcasm because, like Glanton's wandering band of mercenaries, he cannot answer the question, "De dónde viene?" (*BM* 120, 197, 229, 255). Moss's only intentions are to keep the money, to perpetuate his quest for a better life that a national war and his job as a welder have not afforded.

Llewelyn is also adrift because he is a cowboy whose ranching life died out the generation before his lifetime. Even as the Border Trilogy chronicles the final closing of the American West,[9] Moss embodies one form of life in a region that has lost its traditions. The *vaquero* culture was founded upon the ruins of Comanche and Mexican societies, and now oil and drug industries are creating a new American West that is post-cowboy, dawning with the deaths of John Grady and Billy Parham. As Cant says, Sheriff Bell contemplates the emergence of this new day, lamenting "what the American West has come to and [seeing] the fate [of the region], allegorised in the persons of Moss and Chigurh" (250). Llewelyn, unlike Chigurh, does not have "principles" in this emerging Western world (*NCFOM* 153). For Moss, as for Sheriff Bell, "Things [are] losing shape" (127). This passage undoubtedly recalls Yeats' line in "The Second Coming": "Things

fall apart; the centre does not hold" (ln. 3). The characters live in a wasteland that cannot provide a stable center.

Sheriff Bell characterizes the violence that drug and oil interests precipitate as "war" (*NCFOM* 134), which is one of many evocations of the history of national conflict haunting the novel. Llewelyn later tells the runaway girl, for example, "You dont start over. That's what it's about. Ever step you take is forever. You cant make it go away" (227). Moss, like the priest of Huisiachepic in *The Crossing*, recognizes that life is a narrative of linked events. Yet the past is also a burden for Moss. He wants it to "go away" but realizes that one cannot cordon off the past from the future. Carla Jean suggests that Llewelyn killed "somebody" in Vietnam (130), and Bell's later conversation with Moss's father reveals that he was a skilled sniper in the war (293). It is likely, then, that Llewelyn takes this burdened view of the past because of his participation in Vietnam. His sense of national duty is unsettled by charges of being a "*babykiller*" (294), while his vocation—his answer to "What do you do?" (cf. 212)—before he discovers the drug money is likewise unfulfilling. Moss is therefore adrift in a wasteland left by a hollow culture and a history of violence. The cultural traditions of nationalism and the *vaquero* life are empty and unsettled, and, like Billy Parham, Moss therefore clings to whatever "need" arises (*TC* 341).

As a cowboy disinherited from the ranching life, Moss sees the drug money as an opportunity to become the brave hero who achieves his destiny. Like John Grady, Moss's contest against Chigurh and the drug dealers evokes more than his *auri sacra fames*. His quest strives to gain the good life after the cultural crises of the 1970s left it "*in pieces*" (*NCFOM* 294). Although he returned from Vietnam as a "*babykiller*" (294),

Moss's quest to keep the drug money provides him with the opportunity to become a hero. This is likely why he picks up the unnamed runaway girl: he repeatedly refuses her sexual advances, yet he also gets conspicuous pleasure from her questions about his bravery: She asks, "You ever kill anybody?" and Moss sardonically responds, "Yeah, […]. You?" (221). His laconic attitude regarding the war in other places makes it clear that his relationship to the girl is an occasion to be the hero, not Lothario.

Yet Moss's quest is also analogous to his cowboy predecessors, Cole and Parham, in that his journey leaves destructive consequences in its wake. Llewelyn's courage to face Chigurh, although oriented to acquiring his destiny, embodies his erroneous belief in the ideal of the brave hero. As Carla Jean says, they both believe that his quest will end "livin happily ever after" (*NCFOM* 129). The language reminiscent of fables evokes the fact that Moss's quest, like his predecessors, embodies a cultural mythology that believes the brave man can attain the good life through his quest. Underlying Moss's quest is a sense of calling—the enterprise that endows his life with a purpose, for he believes that the event just "happened" without his "permission" (220). Moss's quest fails to embody the ideal of the brave hero, however, for it leads not only to his own death but also to the murder of Carla Jean and the runaway girl. Llewelyn is therefore not an "innocent man" but a "fallen" one (Cooper 44, 48), a mistaken protagonist who assumes that his quest is oriented toward the good.

The Failure of Individual Courage

McCarthy's Western protagonists each attempt to acquire *eudaimonia* through their personal quests to acquire mystery, beauty, or capital. These enterprises strive to recover the good life, thus fulfilling the protagonists' sense that their lives' significance

depends upon their work. The cultural underpinnings of the their pursuits depend upon the paragon of the courageous hero, who, like a modern Jason, must acquire his Golden Fleece through individual bravery. Such a conception requires them to manifest their destinies through their own courage. In effect, *eudaimonia* is, for Moss, Parham, and Cole, an individual ambition. Courage is not the only virtue that their quests require, yet the obsession with this disposition is unique both because of its primacy in the cultural values of the American West and its underlying significance as the chief disposition that derives from the acquisitive self. The predominant cultural mythologies of the American West not only exalt courageous and acquisitive heroes as its paragons (e.g., Samuel Houston). But the self implicit in the Protestant callings of McCarthy's characters also predisposes them to individual effort: an autonomous and acquisitive self-understanding inclines these protagonists to bravery oriented toward enterprise. The individualized quest thus has an imperative, and its chief command is to act courageously. Whereas Aristotle conceives of *eudaimonia* as "happiness" in the sense of a life oriented toward "rational" and "good" activity (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1101a5-8; see also X, 7), these Western heroes conceive of it as a lost destiny or "edenic" state of feral abundance (Morrison 182). Their failed attempts to repossess this abundance, however, reveal that the mythos underlying their quests is deeply flawed, particularly as it misorders the virtues.

Courage, according to Aristotle, is not the absence of fear in the face of every threat. Instead, "he will be called brave who is fearless in the face of a noble death, and of all emergencies that involve death" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1115a33-34). Courageously facing an ignoble demise is therefore temerity in the classical schema. Aristotle explains,

in contrast to temerity, that death in battle is the preeminent embodiment of courage, but bravery in the face of any threat to harm is virtuous insofar as it is for the sake of a noble end (1115b22-24). Because the *polis* is the highest sphere of human activity, dying for one's city makes that courageous act the apex of fortitude (III, 6). Aristotle later explains that a sense of honor ultimately motivates courage (1116a12). Yet even in Aristotle's classical formulation of the virtuous life, he prefaces this honor-obsession with a long argument that virtue derives from *phronesis*, which is often translated as "practical wisdom." Virtue, he says, derives from "practical reason" (1107a1-2), such that courage depends upon *phronesis*, or deliberation about what ends are worthy and noble.

Later classical philosophers, particularly Christian theologians, such as Augustine and Ambrose of Milan, adapt and clarify Aristotle's formulation of the virtues. These philosophers develop a hierarchy among the virtues that is only implicit in Aristotle. The hierarchy becomes clearest when the preeminent philosopher of medieval Europe, Thomas Aquinas, later articulates his ethic, and he calls *phronesis*, or prudence, "right reason about things to be done" (*ST* II-II, Q. 47, A.8). For Aquinas, prudence is the "mold and the mother of all the other cardinal virtues," while justice, fortitude, and temperance each receive their "inner form" from it (Pieper 3). Classical and medieval philosophers insist upon such hierarchical orders because they maintain that a virtue manifested in excess amounts to a vice or distortion of an otherwise good state of character. Therefore, fortitude must be subject to the deliberations of prudence, the cause of justice, and oriented toward a temperate mean. When courage is displaced from this hierarchy, it becomes destructive in the classical and medieval views. As Ambrose says, for example, fortitude divorced from justice is "a lever of evil" (*De Officiis* I, 35).

McCarthy's narratives reveal a comparable view of isolated bravery, suggesting that in many border cultures there is an unbalanced obsession with individual displays of courage. McCarthy does not endorse the banal assumption that machismo is only a value of Latin American culture (Lincoln 114), but he also uses the seedy character Pérez to articulate most clearly the primacy of courage in the cultural values shaping McCarthy's protagonists. McCarthy is particularly concerned with the mythoi undergirding the *vaquero* culture, despite the fact that it is in decline during the Border Trilogy and *No Country for Old Men*. In one of many versions of the region's ideals, the prison guard, Pérez, tells John Grady, "The world wants to know if you have cojones. If you are brave" (*APH* 193). Pérez views the world as a theatre for the exhibition of courage, an opportunity to demonstrate one's phallic superiority. Yet Pérez's view of courage is problematic in the narrative because it is divorced from a greater end. It is a calling in itself, a performance that purports to be self-enclosed and self-justifying.

The Dueña Alfonsa interrogates Pérez's exaltation of individual courage with her recollection of the Maderos' political revolution. Alfonsa falls in love with Gustavo, the second-in-command to Francisco Madero. These brothers lead a selfless social campaign in Mexico, feeding "hundreds of people from [Francisco's] own kitchen" (*APH* 233). The Maderos eventually manifest their concern for the people of Mexico through political activity, and they overthrow the "dictator" Díaz (236). Yet it is the individual ambition of General Huerta that leads to the brothers' downfall. Gustavo suffers a horrendous death: someone from Huerta's mob "came forward with a pick and pried out his good eye and he staggered away moaning in his darkness and spoke no more" (237). Gustavo's fate echoes the cry of Oedipus, "O you horror of darkness that enfolds me,

visitant unspeakable, resistless, sped by a wind too fair!" (Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 115). They are both victims of circumstances beyond their control. Gustavo is eventually shot and killed after being mutilated by the people he worked to liberate. Thus, according to Alfonsa, Gustavo is also a Christ, suffering from the darkness brought about by a tragic death (cf. Matthew 27:45).

Alfonsa's narrative challenges Pérez's order, for the Maderos undermine the notion that one's "cojones" are sufficient as an end it itself (*APH* 193). Alfonsa believes instead that "all courage was a form of constancy," and "anyone who desired it could have it. That the desire was the thing itself" (235). She earlier locates this constancy in "something like a soul or like a spirit that is in the life of a person" (235). Gustavo exemplifies Alfonsa's view, particularly in his assertion that "those who have endured some misfortune will always be set apart but that it is just that misfortune which is their gift and which is their strength" (235). The ideal state of character that the two lovers come to prize is unavoidably bound to "misfortune," but it also refuses to allow those difficulties to divorce the virtuous person from "the common enterprise of man" (235). Alfonsa's view is therefore nearly "nihilistic," as Morrison says (189), in its conviction that the "brave and good and honorable men" must die (*APH* 236). Yet the story of Gustavo is a counter-narrative to Pérez that nonetheless insists upon the existence of the virtuous life. Courage is an enduring quality, one that is "no less for it" even when it fails to prove its strength or superiority (235). Gustavo's death is thus simultaneously tragic and virtuous because he dies for the sake of the people who finally kill him.

Pérez certainly does not speak for John Grady, as is evident in the young man's conspicuous suspicion of the guard. Yet Pérez's extreme view ennobles the "business" of

courage to the extent that it obfuscates consequences—an exaltation of bravery that leads John Grady to "ruin" another "man's house" (*APH* 192, 235). Like the *vaquero* mythos that extols individual fortitude, Pérez ensconces the self within an endowing activity, asserting that the individual finds stability in bravery. Yet the ending of *All the Pretty Horses* also undermines Pérez's view of courage and ultimately John Grady's personal quest. After Cole returns from recovering the stolen horses, Rawlins tries to convince him to stay in San Angelo. (Incidentally, St. Anthony of Padua is often invoked to find lost articles.) Yet John Grady refuses because he says, "it aint my country" (299). Rawlins asks, "Where is your country?" and Cole responds, "I dont know. […] I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country" (299). The novel then concludes with Abuela's funeral and John Grady riding "into the darkening land, the world to come" (302). Despite his quest infused with fortitude, John Grady is lost within the present world. As Jarrett correctly observes, "Cole's journey to Mexico may have attempted to recover his identity as cowboy and horseman, but that identity […] has been stripped away" (105). His individual courage has failed to win the good life, to carve out a secure sense of self, thereby undermining his attempts to manifest a lost destiny.

For McCarthy, the obsession with and individualization of courage in the American West is deeply problematic. This view of courage is both illusory and destructive, for it promises that one's destiny may be made manifest while it divorces that pursuit from public consequences. McCarthy's vision, in contrast, recognizes the necessity for courage to be directed by the cause of justice. His novels reveal a dialect that, on the one hand, challenges cultural mythologies, such as the paragon of the brave hero and his individual quest for the good life. McCarthy's work is thus "mythoclastic,"

as John Cant says, subverting the pretenses that it chronicles (8, 239). Cant demonstrates that in each of McCarthy's novels, the author "deliberately sets out to give his texts mythic form and that he does so in such a way as to point out the destructive consequences of structuring the consciousness of individuals by means of powerful mythologies which they are not in a position to live out" (9). McCarthy's Western protagonists appear heroic insofar as they embody cultural mythologies, paragons, and their concomitant set of values, yet these accounts leave John Grady, Billy, and Moss alone, disinherited, or dead.

On the other side of McCarthy's dialectic, however, there is an alternative vision that nonetheless affirms the virtuous life. What Cant neglects in his recent study of the author's fiction and McCarthy reveals in his novels is that the tragic pervades human existence. Those who pursue the virtuous life inevitably suffer, and their actions cause innumerable and even deleterious results. John Grady shows hospitality to Blevins, allowing this suspect character to accompany their journey into Mexico. Yet this association later provides Don Héctor with grounds for imprisoning Rawlins and Cole (*APH* 165). Billy Parham similarly turns back to help the unnamed Mexican girl after he passes seedy characters on the road. Although Billy rescues the girl from potential violation, this event leads to the death of his brother, Boyd, who tries to protect the girl after they run away together (*TC* 384). These episodes suggest that, for McCarthy, virtue always comes at a cost. The dozens of examples throughout the Border Trilogy of poor farmers and rustic campesinos who show hospitality reinforce this vision. The nature of virtue is tragic, McCarthy suggests, because it always requires loss.

McCarthy's cultural critique therefore proceeds from his tragic vision of life. He challenges the cultural mythologies undergirding his protagonists, demonstrating that the paragon of the brave hero is illusory, for it fails to grapple seriously with the tragic. Beyond this chimerical belief, the cultural obsession with courage has destructive consequences. Its acquisitive and autonomous view of the self romanticizes quests that center on individual fulfillment divorced from a sense of justice. The tragic vision, in contrast, reveals that loss and failure, not success, are "woven into the heart of life" (Steiner 128). If, as Billy Parham says, "There aint but one life worth livin" (*TC* 420), then this life, for McCarthy, is a tragic one. The virtues in his novels not only serve as behaviors shaped by values that illustrate his cultural critique. But the virtues, for McCarthy, are also essential for achieving a "life worth livin," even if this existence is characterized by loss. As this chapter has demonstrated, McCarthy's vision suggests that to yield to the cultural mythologies regarding individual courage is to embrace a self-deceiving and destructive illusion. Yet, as I demonstrate in the third chapter, McCarthy's vision nonetheless affirms the virtuous life: human beings can in fact have a "life worth livin" based not on their individual quests but on their participation in a deeply tragic order (420)—a commitment to pursue the just despite the fact that this journey is the "selfsame tale" of loss as all other stories (143).

CHAPTER FOUR

Justice in the Liberal Democracy

A group of workers in *The Crossing* harbor the wounded Boyd Parham, eventually saving the boy's life from a nearly lethal gunshot. When Billy encounters this group several months later, one of the workers proclaims, "Hay justicia en el mundo," while the dejected Parham rides away to continue his ill-fated journey (*TC* 318). This episode is emblematic of McCarthy's notion of justice, for on the one hand it is difficult to see how the just can exist when senseless violence, inequity, and corruption pervade human existence. Billy encounters a multitude of evils that cast doubts on whether justice is in fact "en el mundo." On the other hand, the Mexican worker's proclamation affirms what I have called McCarthy's tragic vision, for it suggests that the only authentic form of justice is bound to the loss and chaos that characterize the human predicament. In fact, the characters who insist upon the existence of justice are typically the ones who most often suffer from its absence. The disinherited, for McCarthy, are the ones who validate virtue. One could argue of course that this tragic view of justice manifests the *ressentiment* of the disinherited—the Nietzschean counter-argument that the weak categorize their destitution and suffering as holiness, goodness, or divine election in order to gain an advantage over the strong. I demonstrate in contrast that McCarthy's view of justice—particularly as it appears in *No Country for Old Men*—counters Nietzsche. McCarthy admittedly shares many of Nietzsche's objections to the "justice" of liberal democracies,[1] and he delivers this critique through the inverse figures of Anton Chigurh

and Sheriff Bell. But McCarthy also undermines the so-called justice of the "will-to-power" through a metaphysic that is a blend of Platonic and tragic thought.

Friedrich Nietzsche's repudiation of liberal democracy and its concomitant view of justice are important to consider because this critique conspicuously informs McCarthy's work. There are obvious instances where the author interacts with the German philosopher, such as Judge Holden's Nietzschean subversion of "good" and "evil" through his assertion that the weak create these moral categories to inhibit the strong (*BM* 250). The judge's claim is parallel to Nietzsche's famous argument regarding the "slave revolt" in morality, a historical subversion of the aristocratic moral decrees of the strong through the cunning *ressentiment* of the weak (see *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I §2, 6-7). Similar corollaries appear in other works, and this parallelism in thought even leads Linda Townley Woodson to argue that the Border Trilogy endorses key Nietzschean epistemological and phenomenological concepts (48). Woodson argues that McCarthy's Border fiction "instructs" the reader to have courage in the face of a dying and meaningless world—a distinctly Nietzschean prognosis for how the human animal ought to respond to the subversion of its values. Kenneth Lincoln and Steven Shaviro similarly argue that McCarthy advances Nietzschean views (Lincoln 89; Shaviro 148).

I employ the virtue of justice as a vehicle not only for considering McCarthy's relationship to Nietzsche (a central critical issue in McCarthy scholarship), but also for coming to a more complete understanding of the author's tragic vision. Justice is a fundamental moral concept that grounds a definition of right and wrong, virtue and vice. It is a multifaceted notion, applicable both to public and private, civic and interpersonal

behavior. Justice is thus not only the ground for one person's relationship to another, but it also entails a collective dimension. McCarthy's reflections on justice are set within a societal context—a variety of cultures spread along the U.S.- Mexico border—and therefore he evokes views of *civic* justice as much as personal versions of the virtue that develop out of the American West's cultural mythologies. In this societal context, democracy, both as a philosophy and a political ideal, is one of the primary sources informing the liberal view of justice, at least according to Sheriff Bell. Since Nietzsche attacks liberal democratic values, this is another important reason for putting his critique in tandem with McCarthy's novel. For both Nietzsche and McCarthy, civic justice in the democratic social order is deeply problematic, and it is a significant contribution to the crisis underpinning the American West. McCarthy ultimately undermines a democratic view of justice by exposing it to the consequences of its own social vision and its misunderstanding of tragic reality.

Nietzsche's Critique of Liberal Democracy

Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of democratic values is part of a larger exposition on the development of morality throughout European history.[2] In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche first expresses his prejudice against the Platonic and Aristotelian structures of thought, which heavily influence later European philosophy. He argues that the Greek tragedians, in contrast, combine the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses of human existence, essentially blending life and death, order and chaos. Yet Plato and Aristotle introduced transcendental ideals, effectively inhibiting the tragic genius that the dramatists achieved. Although *The Birth of Tragedy* evinces Nietzsche's early dependence upon the German composer Richard Wagner and the philosopher Arthur

Schopenhauer—a dependence that he later rejects—it also presents in an inchoate form the foundations of his later critique of democratic values in its rejection of the trascendentalizing doctrines of Plato and the European Enlightenment.[3]

In one of his last works, *The Antichrist* (1888), Nietzsche reengages his repudiation of the transcendental ideals underlying European thought. He says that modern political philosophy depends upon the belief in "the equality of souls before God" (*Antichrist*, §62). Democracy, he insists, is grounded in a belief outside human experience or the natural order of the world. As Lawrence Hatab observes, Nietzsche, along with Hegel, reveals the paradox underlying the Enlightenment: "it both was and was not a break with religion" (23). That is, Nietzsche recognizes that the modern European values of justice, equality, and compassion—the central Enlightenment ideals—derive from a Judeo-Christian heritage, which establish these values based on the doctrine of a creator God. According to Nietzsche, "a divine mind had been the ultimate stable reference point for origins and for truth" (Hatab 11), yet the Enlightenment disdain for authority (see below) and its intellectual skepticism has undermined these origins. Modern society thus has "unchained this earth from its sun," and consequently it is "straying as through an infinite nothing" (*The Gay Science* §125). Nietzsche first articulates these convictions through a madman, who berates a crowd for ignoring the consequences of a momentous death—that is, the famous proclamation that "God is dead" (§125). God's death, for Nietzsche, represents the death of transcendental ideals, and the madman's harangue in *The Gay Science* thus protests that the masses are ignorant of the death of transcendence and its consequences. Through this harangue, Nietzsche suggests that taking the Enlightenment to its conclusions ought to lead European

civilization to the subversion of the same values that its modern philosophy promotes—compassion, equity, and justice. Because they are grounded in otherworldly notions (e.g., the soul, God, heaven), Nietzsche believes that the death of the transcendental correlates to the demise of these values.

Nietzsche draws this conclusion from his well-known narrative of the rise and fall of Western (i.e., European) morality. He argues that modern transcendental ideals evince a prejudice against history, what he characterizes as an intentional loss of memory regarding a former social order (*Genealogy*, I §5). Nietzsche says that the dominance of an aristocracy—or the master/slave binary—typifies pre-modern Western civilization. In this social order, "good" and "bad" are concepts created by the "noble, the powerful, the superior, and the high-minded" (I §2). Nietzsche describes the aristocratic value equation as an unequal privileging of the strong: "good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = blessed" (I §7). Those with power determine what is moral—and therefore what is socially and religiously a sign of correct behavior—according to their own self-understanding. These aristocratic values begin to decline, however, when the "herd instinct" raises an opposition between egoistic and unegoistic behavior (I §9). The weak—the inferior slaves—band together and redefine the moral and social phenomenology of their society. This revolt in morality depicts selfless and compassionate conduct (i.e., unegoistic morality) as "good," while self-benefiting and aggressive behavior is the opposite (I §10). Thus, Nietzsche says, "good" and "evil" are born (I §11). A subversive new definition of the just emerges. He alternatively calls this process the "slave revolt" in morality and the "radical transvaluation of [aristocratic] values," although the latter description comes during his infamous assertion that the

Jewish nation epitomizes the "*most intelligent revenge*" of the slave revolt (*Genealogy*, I §7). Nietzsche narrates a long process of transformation, in which the slave revolt eventually culminates in the normalization of the herd instinct—a final transvaluation that establishes the success of modern democracy and its view of justice.

Nietzsche clearly views democratic values as a degenerative force, for they actually manifest the reality that the "great masses of slaves and semi-slaves *desire power*" (*Will to Power* §215)—an ordering that stifles society's vitality. Nietzsche's critique therefore suggests that the "promotion of political equality is unmasked as the weak majority grabbing power to incapacitate the strong few" (Hatab 28). The slaves ally together in order to frustrate the power inequalities of the wealthy, noble, and powerful. Yet, as Nietzsche says, this bond reveals an

> idiosyncratic democratic prejudice against everything which dominates and wishes to dominate, this modern *misarchism* (to give an ugly name to an ugly development), has gradually disguised itself in the form of intelligence, the greatest intelligence, to the extent that it is now in the process of gradually infiltrating—has now been *allowed* to infiltrate—the most rigorous, and apparently most objective sciences. (*Genealogy*, II §12)

The term "*misarchism*" is Nietzsche's neologism that combines two Greek terms: *misein* (to hate) and *arche* (rule, beginning). Nietzsche uses the term to suggest that democracy advances a modern disdain for authority, against being ruled. It reverses the herd's role from victim to leader, and then defines "justice" as the freedom to live uninhibited from the interests of the strong—that is, to live as an equal among equals. This reversal pervades every social and cultural realm—for Nietzsche includes philosophy and the Humanities in the "sciences" (see Smith, Introduction, xxi-xxv)—and thus the revolt creates a culture based on conformity to the value of equality.

Nietzsche characterizes the "free society" of liberal democracies as the final "degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal" (*Beyond Good and Evil* §203).[4] The prejudice and fear underlying this normalization of the herd instinct is hidden under the guise of intelligence, for it conceives of the self as an autonomous and freely volitional will—one that is able to choose good or bad, self-interest or compassion. Yet Nietzsche responds that giving "man" a will and making him an "equal among equals" is a (relatively) recent development, enforced only "by means of the morality of custom and the social strait-jacket" (*Genealogy*, II §2). Rousseau's (and Kant's) prominent doctrine of the social contract—that is, his ideal of the citizen who enters willfully into a societal arrangement with normative expectations—provides the theoretical guise that dissembles inequalities. Rousseau, despite his critique of the modern *bourgeois* (Manent 67), promotes a view of the self and society that heavily informs liberal democratic thought, and Nietzsche therefore must deal with this "sentimental effusion" (II §17).

Nietzsche responds to Rousseau's contractual view—a view that Rousseau believes to be the solution to inequalities—by insisting that human relationships and societies are unavoidably governed by inequalities of power (e.g., creditor/debtor), not the promises of equality and justice. Liberalism maintains that the modern state came into existence to protect individual self-interests, arguing that the self has an inalienable right to freedom from social control (Hatab 31). Yet Nietzsche responds that the true origins of the state are less innocuous: society is either the vital creative work of instinctual animals, the product of a "race of conquerors" (II §17), or it is the collective machinations of the weak to suppress the strong. The liberal origins of democracy lead

Nietzsche to designate it with the latter group—i.e., as a cunning revolt by slave morality. He says that the only natural "contract" is the instinctual will-to-power, which creates societies through differences in strength, such as those that exist between a master and slave or creditor and debtor. When *ressentiment* finally "vents itself," it suppresses the instinctual and powerful "blond predatory animal"—Nietzsche's metaphor for the nation embodying the will-to-power—through the force and cunning of the herd (II §17). Punishment, therefore, becomes a means for protecting the authority of the democratic community. It ironically employs the same violent means to enforce its will as those who transgress its laws—hence, he says, the origins of modern capital punishment (II §13).

Nietzsche further attacks the liberal conception of the self through its mistaken phenomenology. He says, "popular morality distinguishes strength from expressions of strength, as if behind the strong individual there were an indifferent substratum which was at *liberty* to express or not to express strength" (*Genealogy*, I §13). To put this more plainly, Nietzsche argues that liberalism views the self as a subject, a will that can choose its actions and performances. Yet this is a chimerical ideal created by the weak and sickly to condemn the strong. Instead the "organic functions" of life are oriented toward the will-to-power (*Beyond Good and Evil* §259), such that human beings have essential dispositions as weak or strong, wolf or sheep. The human animal does not have the capacity to choose to *become* other than what it already *is*. Therefore, there "is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything" (I §13).

The fabrication of the volitional, free subject—the liberal self—is one of the most cunning machinations that the men of *ressentiment* create.[5] Yet this concept is merely an

instance of "the seduction of language" (*Genealogy*, I §13), a slight-of-hand in philosophy that posits an action and its consequence as two separate events (cf. *Beyond Good and Evil* §17-19). If this were the case, Nietzsche says, then "*the strong may freely choose* to be weak" and the "lambs" are able "to blame the bird of prey for simply being a bird of prey" (*Genealogy*, I §13). Nietzsche thus uncovers the logic of liberalism: if individuals are able to choose freely, then their actions may be viewed as deeds, as meritorious choices. Liberal democracy depends upon individual choice, and it therefore relies heavily upon a recent development within humanity—consciousness (*Gay Science* §11). "The whole of life," he insists, "would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in a mirror. For even now, for that matter, by far the greatest portion of our life actually takes place without this mirror effect" (§354). Human beings are essentially animals oriented toward the will-to-power, not conscious minds or egos.[6] Yet liberal democracies suppress this fundamental nature. They obfuscate the power relationship governing human interactions, and democracy therefore masks the self-preservation and desire for power of the weak under the guise of being just (*Genealogy*, I §13).

Nietzsche also suggests—although incompletely—that the democratic ideal of the autonomous self is disastrous in that it locates moral authority within individual interiority. He explores the problematic consequences of this liberal ideal through Zarathustra's dialogue with a "liberated" interlocutor:

> You call yourself free? Your dominant thought I want to hear, and not that you have escaped from a yoke. Are you one of those who had the *right* to escape from a yoke? There are some who threw away their last value when they threw away their servitude.
> Free *from* what? As if that mattered to Zarathustra! But your eyes should tell me brightly: free *for* what? (I, §17)

Zarathustra suggests that autonomy from all authorities and values leads the democratic individual to aimlessness. This liberal conception provides no answer to the question, "free *for* what?" The individual is left to choose for him or herself, and Zarathustra suggests that aimless self-destruction is the inevitable consequence. The free individual becomes "a star projected into a desert space, and into the icy breath of aloneness" (I §17). The unqualified liberty of self-creation—at least for the majority of people[7]—leads society into chaos, fragmentation, and radical despair. A democratic societal order, Nietzsche concludes, fosters a culture that has "unchained this earth from its sun" and consequently is "straying as through an infinite nothing" (*The Gay Science* §125).[8] Therefore, in Nietzsche's view, liberal democratic justice aims at nothing and undermines everything.

The Prophet of Destruction and the Prophet of Despair

No Country for Old Men is the most political of McCarthy's novels.[9] Although *Suttree* (1979) is set within a burgeoning urban center, Knoxville, this "*mongrel architecture*" represents the creation of a modern city and its concomitant malaise (*Suttree* 3), effectively realizing the worst fears of the author's predecessors, the Southern Agrarians.[10] While such social and cultural dimensions are also central to McCarthy's other works, Ed Tom Bell's reflections and Chigurh's lawlessness uniquely broach the political in two of its most important aspects: the structures of power that govern human relations (Millett 23-24) and the constitution of those relations into a *polis*, a society. Because the control of power and the structures of society cannot be isolated from one another, the "political" inevitably refers to both senses of the term. Thus, as Aristotle says, human beings are in fact "political animals" (*Politics* I.2), whether through their

penchant for living together or, to expand the concept, through the unavoidable concern with power relations. This is an important reality to establish because, if Nietzsche's analysis of modern democracy's origins is correct, then liberal politics (at least in its first formulations)[11] obfuscate the power dynamic governing human relations.

Both senses of the political are implicated in the cultural undercurrents of *No Country for Old Men*. Bell represents, on the one hand, the democratic state and its sense of civic justice. Yet, on the other hand, he also becomes disillusioned with this order, conceding that the nature of power relations obviate the efficacy of the civic justice he tries to institute. This subversion of democratic ideals begins for Bell when he encounters Anton Chigurh, the "*true and living prophet of destruction*" (*NCFOM* 4).[12] Chigurh epitomizes the "*new kind*" of people appearing in Bell's county, signaling a change in its social and cultural composition. The world appears to be changing before the sheriff, and it is now full of realities that he finds difficult to comprehend. For example, Bell laments not only that "dope dealers" sell drugs to children, but also that "[s]choolkids buy it" (194). These changes unsettle Bell, and in fact the eponymous allusion to W. B. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" undoubtedly applies to the aging sheriff: "That is no country for old men / […] An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" (193). Bell's sense of worthlessness eventually leads him to resign from his position as sheriff, and this stepping down signals not only his personal "defeat" but also the collapse of the civic dimension of the values that he represents (*NCFOM* 306).

Before his resignation, however, Bell becomes disillusioned with his beliefs about the democratic state's ideal of political justice. Bell's personal disillusionment runs parallel with and ultimately confirms the critique implicit in the narrative because he

represents this democratic state, serving as its proxy through his role as sheriff. By rejecting the efficacy of his position, he also repudiates its version of justice. Bell recalls that the people of Terrell County elected him as sheriff, and he tells his wife, "*I didnt feel right takin their money*" (*NCFOM* 296). He is literally a democratic official, given authority by an electoral process to enforce county laws. These laws are one of the primary venues for achieving the state's understanding of justice, so the sheriff serves as the local means for enforcing these civic ends. But Bell is also the proxy of democratic justice through his *understanding* of his position as sheriff. He often describes his role as a shepherd-like authority, explaining his interest in Moss' safety as his own benevolent will to "look out" for a "couple of kids from my county that might be sort of involved that ought not to be" (194). He says that the citizens of his county are "People I'm supposed to be lookin after" (194). Therefore, on the most basic level, Bell represents his people as the lawful means for their protection—the means that they have chosen.

Even if slightly paternalistic, Bell's genuine concern is admirable in itself. Yet, as shepherd-lawman, Bell's role is nonetheless founded upon disingenuous grounds. He explains that his desire to enter law enforcement is twofold: "*I've thought about why it was I wanted to be a lawman. There was always some part of me that wanted to be in charge. Pretty much insisted on it. Wanted people to listen to what I had to say*" (*NCFOM* 295). Bell is motivated by a need for authority, and the power endowed upon him through the role of sheriff offers him an opportunity to stay within civically sanctioned confines but nonetheless "*be in charge*." His desire to find this power within the structures of his community sharply contrasts with Chigurh, who operates wholly outside the law in his expressions of power. The difference between the two is

significant. Bell's democratically endowed power allows him to remain within the community, affording this lawful "*charge*" with a variety of collective advantages (295): "one is protected, looked after, in peace and trust, without a care for certain forms of harm and hostility to which the man *outside*, the 'outlaw' is exposed" (Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, II §9). Nietzsche says that the democratic community is based on a common concern for self-preservation, the herd instinct to avoid the threat of stronger wills. Bell articulates a comparable concern when he discloses, "*there was a part of me too that just wanted to pull everbody back in the boat*" (*NCFOM* 295). Bell recognizes that the "*boat*," the collective body, provides security—a disclosure that reveals the sheriff's will-to-survive as much as his will-to-power.

The authority Bell receives through his role as sheriff reveals a subtext for the creation of states: at least to some degree, such political bodies exist to sanction and use force. Nietzsche argues that modern communities ratify and enact laws as means to embody the will-to-power that they are otherwise too weak to assert (*Genealogy*, II §11). In many cases, this requires the normalization of violence insofar as it serves the ends of the community. Bell expresses bewilderment at this normalization of violence during his reflections on the nineteen-year-old he sends to the gaschamber. He is not only shocked at this "*new kind*," who are seemingly soulless (*NCFOM* 3-4), but the notions of justice shrouding the event are also unsettling to Bell, even if he is unable to articulate this perplexity. Bell is later more overtly skeptical, and he recalls the episode as an instance characterized by the absurd. He reflects, "*People didnt know what to wear. There was one or two come dressed in black, which I suppose was all right. Some of the men come just in their shirtsleeves and that kindly bothered me. I aint sure I could tell you why*"

(63). Bell's discomfort at the dress of the condemned is multivalent. The convicts' casual dress evokes their irreverence for life—whether their own or their victims. Yet Bell cannot "*tell you why*" the episode is bothersome because the system of justice that he supports is responsible for treating a human life in the same way as the lawless. The political body sanctions the death of the murderer, but Bell is at a loss as to why this event is not normal, why it is "*peculiar*" (63). The actions of the law and the lawless mirror one another, and, for Bell, this calls into question the legitimacy of the justice embodied in the punishment.

Nietzsche's analysis of the punishment systems of modern states maintains that "the spectacle of the judicial and executive procedures themselves prevent the criminal from feeling his deed, his type of action to be reprehensible *as such*: for he sees exactly the same type of actions performed in the service of justice and as such approved, practised with good conscience" (*Genealogy*, II §14). Nietzsche argues that modern liberal states do not use punishment to deter crime or to create a sense of guilt. Instead, their version of justice effectively sanctions violence against those who threaten the stability of the community. This cunning inversion, Nietzsche says, is effectively "a declaration of war and implementation of a military strategy against an enemy of peace, law, order, authority, who, deemed dangerous to the community and in breach of contract with regard to its conditions, is combated as a rebel, traitor, and breaker of the peace with the very means offered by war itself" (II §13). Modern liberal states, he says, normalize violence while hiding it under the guise of protection, stability, and justice. Their violence differs only in its orientation as an action justified by the community.

Nietzsche's analysis of punishment further suggests that, when cloaked in the terms of justice, the violence of penal codes often becomes sacred, being construed as the device of a higher purpose. Bell's uneasy experience during the execution of the young murderer uncovers a similar exaltation of violence: those facilitating the execution "*pulled this curtain around the gaschamber with him in there settin slumped over and people just got up and filed out. Like out of church or something*" (*NCFOM* 63). The observers do not leave the execution in a solemn manner out of horror; instead, they view the event as a worthy act that accomplishes the just, the good, as if it fulfills a religious duty. They are witnesses that testify to his guilt, representing a public body that condemns the convicted. When the executioners hide the corpse behind a curtain, they dismiss the community's detritus from the public realm and remove another threat to its stability. The solemn event has thus secured democratic hegemony.

This democratic performance leads Bell to reflect on the "*old timers*," who never had to wear a gun and are thus paragons of the shepherd-lawman ideal (*NCFOM* 64). Yet this ideal is itself shrouded in skepticism, for Bell immediately recalls that there are latent problems in the sanctioned force of the sheriff: "*The opportunities for abuse are just about everwhere*" (64). He later gives the example of "*peace officers along this border getting rich off of narcotics*" (215). The juxtaposition between the "*old timers*" and the instances of abuse are "*peculiar*" to Bell, for even the good lawmen "*have pretty much the same authority as God*" while they are paradoxically "*preservin nonexistent laws*" (64). Like Bell's previous inability to explain his unease regarding the execution (63), the role of a Texas sheriff presents him with a contradiction. Those serving the state have unrestrained authority—the same as God's—and thus can use any amount of force

to preserve order. Yet this order is "*nonexistent*," without a definable system of law to determine the civic dimensions of the just, indicating that the force that serves the democratic state is displaced from any ultimate *telos* (64). Like the God-Shepherd of the Psalms, the Texas sheriff protects the herd, but he does not lead them "in right paths" because there are "*no requirements put upon*" him (Ps. 23:3; *NCFOM* 64). For this figure of democratic justice, there are no defined "right paths."

Bell's Uncle Ellis later reinforces this aimlessness when he admits to becoming a sheriff without any reference to the causes of the justice system: "Hell, I didnt have nothin else to do. Paid about the same as cowboyin" (*NCFOM* 267). Bell's uncle admits that he would have gone into the army if he were not "too young for one war and too old for the next one" (267). He is grateful that he did not participate in either of the World Wars, but his statement also suggests that serving in law enforcement functions, at least for him, as a surrogate for war. This disclosure is telling, not because of the questionable reasons behind Ellis's vocational decisions. Instead, it calls into question the assumptions undergirding the benevolent lawman, the meaning of state-sanctioned violence, for liberal democracies are ostensibly founded upon the conviction that the desire for free exchange, not the attainment of power, govern human relations. Jean-Jacques Rousseau says, for example, "War, then, is not a relation between men, but between states" (56). He even claims, "men are not naturally enemies" (55), arguing instead that war "cannot arise from mere personal relations, but only from property relations. Private wars between one man and another can exist neither in a state of nature, where there is not fixed property, nor in society, where everything is under the authority of law" (56).

Yet the rationale underlying Ellis's decision to become a sheriff, along with Bell's earlier reflections, challenges Rousseau's democratic view of the self. Ellis enlists in law enforcement because there is no war to justify enlisting in the military. His aimless life wavers between relations of violence, and he finally chooses the state-sanctioned venue. The nineteen-year-old murderer that Bell sends to the gaschamber similarly admits that "*he had been planning to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember*" (3). The young murderer's *telos* is violence, and juxtaposing Bell's uncle and this murderer suggests that Ellis' aimless wavering between law enforcement and war evokes a fundamental order of human relations that is similar to the nineteen-year-old. Perhaps this "*new kind*" is only redirecting the sublimated cultural habits of his predecessors to an end outside a collapsing authority—the democratic state itself. Ellis seeks state-sanctioned venues for his impulses, but both characters share an orientation toward violence that calls into question the liberal beliefs about human relations underlying the ideal of the democratic lawman.

McCarthy's characters, despite their bucolic and parochial personae, are not ignorant of the national implications that an American history of violence creates. Ellis, for example, believes that "this country has got a lot to answer for" (*NCFOM* 271), and Bell later suggests that the burgeoning violence in America is "*not even a law enforcement problem. I doubt that it ever was*" (303). Instead, he asserts that it is indicative of a larger cultural crisis: "*There's always been narcotics. But people dont just up and decide to dope themselves for no reason. By the millions*" (303). Law enforcement is only one aspect of the democratic society, and Bell believes that another dimension—the cultural underpinnings that shape public identities—is undermining his

enforcement of civic laws. While the "*problem*" is more conspicuous in the area of law enforcement (303), it merely manifests a larger crisis in the democratic state. Bell realizes, in other words, that the people he is "supposed to be lookin after" are part of the problem (194). He says, "*you cant have a dope business without dopers. A lot of em are well dressed and holdin down goodpayin jobs too.* [...] *You might even know some yourself*" (304). He connects the demand for narcotics—a market that pervades the populous "[*b*]*y the millions*" (303)—with the increase in violence. Bell suggests that normal people who are "*well dressed and holdin down goodpayin jobs*" are thus choosing to bring in the violent forces that murder indiscriminately by purchasing narcotics from them. Through the realization that his constituents are supporting the drug trade and that even "[s]choolkids buy" narcotics (194), Bell doubts not only the possibility of accomplishing civic justice but also the ability of the democratic state to foster the good life. He says, "*People think they know what they want but they generally dont*" (91). Bell insists that the tendencies of his constituency are self-destructive, and thus the same citizens he intends to protect are undermining his pursuit of justice.

Bell's disillusionment becomes final when he realizes that justice actually depends upon violent force, not the goodness of the population. He says, "*if you got a bad enough dog in your yard people will stay out of it. And they didnt*" (*NCFOM* 299). The measure of peace, Bell concludes, is the amount of force employed to deter stronger wills. He seems to come to this conviction throughout his recollections. He says, for example, "*I think for me the worst of it is knowin that probably the only reason I'm even still alive is that they have no respect for me*" (217). Carson Wells confirms Bell's fears: he tells Moss, "I dont think of [Bell] at all. He's a redneck sheriff in a hick town in a

hick county. In a hick state" (157). Therefore, Bell's retirement not only expresses his doubts about the democratic state that he represents but also concedes to the Nietzschean view that power and self-interest govern human relations—that the essence of democratic justice is only keeping stronger wills in check in order to preserve the herd's liberty. If justice depends upon "*a bad enough dog*," human nature is more concerned with dominating others than pursuing individual freedom (299).

The version of democratic justice that undergirds the American West is further subverted through the subtle depiction of Bell and Chigurh as inverted but interdependent prophets. For example, the sheriff is "*glad*" of the fact that he has never killed anyone (*NCFOM* 64), while Chigurh is the "*prophet of destruction*" who, in substitution of his conspicuous lack of sexuality, finds pleasure in murdering his victims (Tebbetts 72). Bell cares for his people, but Chigurh dehumanizes them by performing their executions with a cattle gun. Bell is also well-acquainted with the past and discusses it often. He loves stories about the "*old timers*" (*NCFOM* 64), the early Texas sheriffs, and his single conversation with his uncle centers on family history: Ellis' regrets, his tenure as deputy, a relative named Harold who died in the first World War, the Texas Ranger Uncle Mac, and finally Bell's own experience in Korea (273-79). Yet Anton Chigurh has no past, no fingerprints. Bell cannot even find his name: Chigurh is essentially a "*ghost*" (248).

The two characters represent inverted forms of each other—a device that McCarthy's uses for a specific purpose in certain other works. Cornelius Suttree, for example, identifies with his stillborn twin, who is his "[m]irror image" (*Suttree* 14). The immediate death of Cornelius' twin not only represents the inversion of his own instinctual vitality, but it also leaves Suttree feeling as if death "has […] already claimed

him" (Cant 115). When Suttree later meets the twins, Fern and Vern, he again contemplates his identity's connection with a mirror image, and the stillborn death of his sibling leaves Cornelius without a reflective identity to understand his identity over against (*Suttree* 361). Throughout the novel he enigmatically divides his own self into "Suttree and Antisuttree" (28), as if his existence somehow depends upon his nonexistence. These inversions are fundamental to Suttree's self-discovery (Young 101-02).

Judge Holden and the idiot are similarly inverted forms of one another. When this pair approaches the waterhole where the kid, Tobin, and Toadvine have met, the group warily observes the grotesque couple: "They lumbered on, the judge a pale pink beneath his talc of dust like something newly born, the imbecile much darker, lurching together across the pan at the very extremes of exile like some scurrilous king stripped of his vestiture and driven together with his fool into the wilderness to die" (*BM* 282). Light and dark, cunning and imbecilic, powerful and crippled—the pair represent antitheses of one another. The kid and Judge Holden also bear inverted features, such as the apparent diminution implied by the kid's name in contrast to the judge's grotesque enormity. These inverted identities suggest that the king requires a fool, the destructive judge a reticent "son" (306, 327).

McCarthy's trope of doubling and inverting identities indicates, among other things, that human relations depend upon opposition. In the case of *No Country for Old Men*, Bell understands Chigurh as the embodiment of "*another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it*," a view that he says "*has done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd come to*" (*NCFOM* 4). By inverting their identities,

McCarthy reveals that Bell's role depends upon Chigurh. This arrangement is therefore not strictly dualistic, for the characters are not discrete from one another. Corey Messler's review of the novel in *The Memphis Flyer* asserts, "Perhaps not since Satan vs. God has the battle been so Manichean, so explicit," yet the interdependence of inverted identities suggests instead that democratic justice exists because of a destructive force like Chigurh. The democratic community requires its peacekeeping force in order to keep a more powerful will at bay.

If this is the case, then Bell's version of justice is founded upon an illusory ideal regarding the goodness of society and its fundamental convictions about individual choice. The respective principles guiding Bell and Chigurh undermine this proposition, for they evoke a final inversion that leaves the sheriff wanting. Bell says that his peacekeeping role is "*peculiar*" because there are "*no requirements in the Texas State Constitution for bein a sheriff. Not a one. There is no such thing as a county law*" (*NCFOM* 64). Bell is instead given nearly sovereign force—"*pretty much the same authority as God*" (64)—to keep people in the "*boat*," preserving the community (295). Yet this lack of determinable direction leaves the liberal democracy afloat. It introduces a state of societal disequilibrium. As Moss says, "Suppose you was someplace that you didnt know where it was. The real thing you wouldnt know was where someplace else was. Or how far it was. It wouldnt change nothin about where you was at" (226). The liberal society has lost not only a sense of its direction but also of its relation to reality. Like the provincial "*old people*" who frequently question Bell, the sheriff's democratic society not only has a lack of direction for its progress but it also "*dont know how [it] got where [its] at*" (304). Despite Bell's assertions that this loss of equilibrium is a recent

phenomenon, the "*old people*" reveal the historical roots of a society "straying as through an infinite nothing" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §125).[13]

Anton Chigurh, in contrast, has a determinable view of an *ought* based on an *is*, to borrow the classical ethical formula. Chigurh's notorious "principles" represent his understanding of an underlying logos, or rational order, that provides and ethic to govern his choices. Chigurh believes that departing from this logos will make him "vulnerable" (*NCFOM* 259). Carson Wells explains that Chigurh's principles "transcend money or drugs or anything like that" (153), and he later suggests that his "one way to live" is supra-human, a mode of existence that the common populace cannot embrace (259-60). Chigurh's principles are of course multifaceted, but they ultimately depend upon a conception of the logos as an order of chance and power governing the world. Things "just are," for Chigurh—"That's the way it is" (56)—so he cannot transgress his commitments to dominate, to his inevitable *doing* (cf. 255).

Chigurh's discussion with Carla Jean reveals both his skepticism regarding the notion of individual uniqueness and his relativization of the volitional will. Before he murders Carla Jean, they discuss her inevitable death: Chigurh says, "I see people struggle with it. The look they get. They always say the same thing," and then Carla Jean, in keeping with her murderer's assertion, says that he does not have to kill her (*NCFOM* 257). This assertion does not provide any comfort to Carla Jean, so Chigurh asks,

> So why do you say it?
> I aint never said it before.
> Any of you.
> There's just me, she said. There aint nobody else.
> Yes. Of course. (257)

Chigurh's "of course" is ironic, for he believes that the majority of human beings respond in the same way to "bad luck" (257): they view it exclusively as a consequence of their free selves, a result of their choices. Chigurh repudiates this naiveté, for it tacitly insists that a person is able to determine his or her own fate, that human beings are sovereign over their lives. Chigurh, in contrast to Carla Jean's pretensions of uniqueness and sovereignty, tells her, "None of this was your fault. [. . .] You didnt do anything. It was bad luck" (257). He suggests that human existence is subject to exterior forces, to the choices of others and the random results of chance. Everyone, for Chigurh, is subject to the logos of luck and power. This is precisely why Chigurh often flips a coin to determine whether he will murder a person: he believes that external forces inevitably impinge upon the volitional will.

Despite his dogmatic adherence to the decisions of chance, Chigurh firmly maintains that human beings have choices. He tells the gas station attendant, for example, "It wouldnt be fair. It wouldnt even be right," when he plays his freakish game of flipping a coin to decide the man's fate (56). Chigurh wants the attendant to choose heads or tails because he retains the idea of human volition. Yet his complex reflections on the instrumentality of all things suggest that the human will navigates a chaotic order governed by luck. He does not advocate, then, for an absolute deterministic world, per se, but he maintains that human beings will choose from among the options that luck presents to them. Chigurh may be splitting hairs—indeed, Carla Jean says, "The coin didnt have no say. It was just you"—but he insists that his "way" of "look[ing] at it" is infallible (258).

Chigurh's complex philosophy further insists that the relativized human will chooses blindly within the chaotic order determining the world. He tells Carla Jean, for example, "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" (*NCFOM* 259). Despite the fact that he believes Carla Jean's death is "not [her] fault" (257), Chigurh maintains that human volition puts the agent on a path that does not change. Luck, for Chigurh, effectively replaces God, becoming the logos that predetermines the universe. Human beings navigate this logos, although it ultimately determines their path. As Chigurh tells Carla Jean, "I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding" (259). Her choice only manifests the chance-logic of external forces that govern the world. Chigurh's philosophy therefore challenges the naiveté of a sovereign self by insisting that chance, the forces exterior to an individual will, shape all consequences, while the will only chooses blindly among those ends.

A governing logos is conspicuously absent from Bell's society. In addition to the "*nonexistent*" laws of Texas (*NCFOM* 64), Ellis says that his youth was without a logos, an order directing it (267), and similarly that God did not "come into my life" in his old age (265). Ellis speaks for others, for Bell says that many people have not had an encounter with God (283). Moss Senior similarly laments that America sent soldiers to Vietnam "*without God*" (295), and there are a variety of other complaints about the waning place of religion. Indeed, despite many critics' view that Bell is a social-conservative who calls for the return of Christianity to society (Oates 44; Ellis 238), he admits that he is not a "spiritual person" (303). He often expresses his ignorance of the

Bible, regarding, for example, Mammon or the Book of "Revelations" (298, 304). Bell seemingly embraces Christianity while remaining ignorant of the religion's actual content. He is therefore another example of the absence of any logos suffusing democratic society.

The crisis that Bell identifies is of course more significant than the superficial loss of religion from society—taking God "*to war*," for example (*NCFOM* 295)—or the recovery of hollow bourgeois morality. These facile proxies for a societal logos create the problems that often lead Bell to confess despairingly, "*I dont know what to make of that*" (3). Bell's inability to reflect substantially on society is indicative of a general cultural displacement. His disillusionment with democratic justice is thus only one dimension of a larger societal malaise. As W. B. Yeats describes European civilization in the wake of World War I, "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" ("The Second Coming," 187). The civic *and* cultural pretensions of liberal democracies are collapsing, and Bell unwittingly chronicles the crisis. The only principles that exist in his American West are Chigurh's, and this leads Bell to his resignation. He retires from his post as sheriff because "*I'm bein asked to stand for somethin that I dont have the same belief in it I once did. Asked to believe in somethin I might not hold with the way I once did. That's the problem. I failed at it even when I did. Now I've seen it held to the light. Seen any number of believers fall away*" (296). "Things fall apart," as Yeats says ("The Second Coming," 187), and Bell cannot conceive of an alternative.

Bell's resignation completes the inversion of his identity with Chigurh. Whereas the psychopath refuses to depart from his "one way to live" (*NCFOM* 259), the sheriff

finally abandons his "way" and experiences "defeat" (306). Chigurh loyally and solemnly orients his life according to his principles, yet Bell only waivers. This inversion thus fulfills Yeats' dire description, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" ("The Second Coming," 187). Indeed, if there is a logos throughout Bell's reflections, it is a despairing one. He says, for example, that he lost belief in Satan as a boy, but "[*n*]*ow I'm startin to lean back the other way. He explains a lot of things that otherwise dont have no explanation*" (*NCFOM* 218). Bell is unable to stop evil, which apparently governs society, and so he abandons this losing battle in contrast to the "*prophet of destruction*," who is incessantly violent. Therefore, as the inverse of Chigurh, Bell's hopeless jeremiads and final retirement make him the prophet of despair, the harbinger of resignation.

The realities of self-interest and the exterior forces that impinge upon the sovereignty of the human will thwart Bell's commitment to justice. The liberal democratic state that sanctions his position defines his role as a protector: insofar as he keeps peace, liberal democratic justice is achieved. Yet the naiveté and banality of this view of justice is undermined by the fact that human relations are not so simple. In McCarthy's vision, human beings are political animals—they are oriented towards power and they bring this interest with them as they structure society. The democratic refusal to debate the substance of the "good life" beyond individual freedoms leaves justice without an order, a logos for the just to labor after and institute. In Bell's case, this arrangement eventually leads to the collapse of the democratic order, and competing wills-to-power fill the vacuum. Covert interests, such as the unnamed Man-Who-Hired-Wells, or chaotic dominating forces, such as Chigurh, begin to direct society. Even if Bell's Texas

government is formally democratic, he concludes that competing wills, the logoi of self-interest, are actually determining "*where we're headed*" (*NCFOM* 303).

"Hay justicia en el mundo"

McCarthy challenges a democratic view of justice by exposing it to the power politics that actually govern human relations and the nexus of exterior forces that impinge upon the individual will. A liberal democratic definition of justice is only one vantage point for viewing the larger social order, and McCarthy explores the crisis underlying this society through Shefiff Bell's reflections on the justice system. Yet, on the other side of the author's critique, he offers a complex alternative view of justice. McCarthy's alternative derives from his tragic view of life, and in this vision he maintains that there is in fact a transcendent order, a logos governing the world. Justice is grounded within this order, being an earthly reality that is only a metaphor or "image" of the order itself (Plato, *Republic*, 510e). The just is therefore not an ideal but a transcendent reality, a state to which public and private realities can conform. However, for McCarthy, human beings cannot fully know this order, and their knowledge of it derives only tentatively from dreams and metaphorical stories. Even as a blind man (who is likely an allusion to the wise Theban prophet Tiresias) tells Billy Parham, the contingent things of the world "[a]t best […] are only tracings of where the real has been" (*TC* 294). In McCarthy's tragic vision, the real—the logos that provides meaning and order to the world—exists incompletely "en el mundo" (318), being only tracings of transcendent reality. The logos grounds the virtues, he suggests, by providing a reality to which these states may tentatively conform.

McCarthy only depicts the "tracings" of this transcendent order underlying reality in both rare and incomplete ways (*TC* 294). Many of McCarthy's characters encounter it through dreams or stories told by enigmatic sages. When John Grady is wounded during his recovery of the stolen horses, for example, he dreams of these horses moving among ancient tilted stones. Cole elliptically compares these dream-horses to "real" horses that have

> come upon an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed and if anything had been written on the stones the weathers had taken it away again and the horses were wary and moved with great circumspection carrying in their blood as they did the recollection of this and other places where horses once had been and would be again. Finally what [John Grady] saw in his dream was that the order in the horse's heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it. (*APH* 280)

In this dream, the horses become mediators and representatives of the transcendent. Like the destruction of prior cultural traditions in *Blood Meridian*, John Grady's horses walk among a wasteland, a failed order. Yet these horses also transcend temporal human constructions, persisting beyond the failed anthropocentric orders of the elided markings on the stones. John Grady has this tentative glimpse of a transcendent order—a "place where no rain could erase" the real that exists beyond the world (280)—while attempting to correct past injustices. Even though his errand apparently fails and his vision is obscure, he nonetheless encounters a reality that validates his tentative and tragic effort. Like the "order in the horse's heart" (280), Cole strives to recover something essential to the world that has been lost. He strives, in other words, to conform the world according to an "order" of justice that is "more durable" than the failed human realities around him (280). Yet his ill-fated pursuit of recovering the stolen horses only evokes "tracings" of

the just, the real (*TC* 294): John Grady's vision grounds his virtuous pursuit, but his behavior is subject to failure and his own contingency.

Even as the horses are the representatives and mediators of the transcendent in Cole's dream, they also evince that the realities of the world can take their forms from the reality of the transcendent. A horse has a nature that grounds it to the logos—"where horses once had been and would be again" (*APH* 280)—and, for McCarthy, virtue is similarly a shape that earthly reality ought to have, an imitation of the transcendent order. John Grady's dream recalls the assertion of Luis, the old *vaquero* on Rocha's hacienda. Luis insists on the reality of a horse-nature, an enduring ontology that provides the forms of earthly horses. Cole asks Luis "if it were not true that should all horses vanish from the face of the earth the soul of the horse would not also perish for there would be nothing out of which to replenish it but the old man only said that it was pointless to speak of there being no horses in the world for God would not permit such a thing" (111). Luis claims to have seen "the souls of horses," which are actually shares of a "common soul," the creature's essential nature (111). The life of a single horse, Luis insists, proceeds from this nature. His metaphysical reflections, along with John Grady's dream, illustrate a belief that appears elsewhere in McCarthy's work: an essence to existence undergirds reality, providing it with the inherent inner-form or transcendent narrative that all other manifestations of life and story follow.[14]

These two examples in *All the Pretty Horses* are analogous to the description in Plato's *Republic* of the forms that ground Socrates' understanding of justice.[15] Socrates' analogies regarding transcendent forms that ground the just provides a helpful metaphysic for juxtaposition with McCarthy's, allowing for a more precise understanding

of the logos implicit in the latter's vision. Socrates provides three complex metaphors for his belief in transcendent forms: the Sun analogy (507a-509c), the Line analogy (509d-511e), and the famous Allegory of the Cave (514a-518a). These metaphors are complex, but they vividly communicate Platonic convictions about knowledge and virtue. Socrates says, "we customarily hypothesize a single form in connection with each of the many things to which we apply the same name" (596a). He insists that the epistemological grounds for justice, for example, lies in its single transcendental form. Each nameable thing—or, in Socrates' view, each thing that shares a common function and essence—has its own form, which is a transcendent reality that constitutes the essence of the thing itself. Socrates says, "we speak of beauty itself and good itself," and each thing-in-itself has "a single form" that is also its "being" (507b). There is, on the one hand, the real form of justice or beauty. These forms are "intelligible but not visible," meaning that humans may understand them by the intellect but not by their senses (507b). Yet, in the Platonic view, earthly beauty and justice are the opposite: they are "visible but not intelligible" (507b). Socrates apparently means that when humans reflect on earthly properties (i.e., trying to understand them according to the intellect and not the senses), they actually contemplate their transcendent forms. An earthly thing is only an "offspring of the good" (506e), and humans may only know it through the senses.

Plato distinguishes transcendent reality from their earthly things, and he insists that only philosophers may know the former. Philosophers have tentative access to these life-giving forms, such that they develop partial hypotheses regarding their nature (510c). Philosopher-kings can use these hypotheses to shape the "likenesses" of these forms on earth (476c, 510d), and they thus "make or draw" only "shadows and reflections in

water" of the forms themselves (510e). For Plato, everything apparently has a form from which it derives its nature and earthly shape (596a), and thus only those who know how to use their intellect properly—the men and women who practice the contemplative life—are able to create the things of true beauty and justice in the world because they can perceive the "intelligible but not visible" forms (507b).

Like Plato's distinction between the intelligible form of the good-itself and the visible earthly reflections or offsprings of transcendent reality, the metaphysic underlying McCarthy's vision suggests that human constructions of virtue are incomplete, being only partial and tentative creations of the real. Plato relies on metaphors to describe this reality, insisting that these venues for intuiting the real are not the things themselves. "Sight," Socrates explains, "isn't the sun" (508a). John Grady's vision is similarly *not* the real itself: he only encounters the transcendent "order" of horses, while he wakes to the earthly creatures that find their beauty and life in a logos beyond the world (*APH* 280). Like Socrates' reliance on metaphor, John Grady can only encounter this logos through non-logical venues. Because rationality is a human construction (see chapter one), the logos exists beyond the anthropocentric orders brought to the world "like a string in a maze" (*BM* 245). Dreams, visions, stories, and metaphors are necessary to discern the real, although these moments of transcendence are not "the sun" (Plato, *Republic*, 508a): they are only glimpses and sparks of illumination.

Even as Socrates later grounds justice in his reflections on these forms, John Grady's dream validates his pursuit of justice. He vows to "make it right," referring not only to his relationship with Alejandra but also to the corrupt captain's murder of Blevins and theft of their horses (*APH* 215, 251, 293). Cole believes that there is a right and

wrong order, as if justice has its own reality, and he tries to institute such an order through recovering the stolen horses. Yet John Grady's final pursuit of justice is nonetheless not "the good itself," as Plato says (507b). McCarthy's metaphysic affirms the distinction between the good and its earthly shades, but he also maintains that attempts to pursue virtue are tragic in the sense that they are doomed to fail. Cole, for example, encounters the transcendent horse-reality in dreams, while the animals he tames are only ephemeral creatures subject to manipulation. In an analogous way, his pursuit of justice does not bring about a complete, certain, or immutable state of virtue. It is subject to the failure and corruption that characterize the world. Because of the tentative nature of his pursuit, John Grady's journey persists "into the darkening land, the world to come" (*APH* 302). This ambivalent ending suggests that Cole's venture is hopeless, but he nonetheless commits to the pursuit of the just based on his hope in a reality beyond the present world.

McCarthy's metaphysic, much like Plato's, insists that transcendent reality encompasses earthly existence, such that the real provides the earthly order with a transcendent inner-form. One of the most vivid but enigmatic instances of this dimension appears in the unnamed traveler's story in *Cities of the Plain*. The traveler recalls a dream to Billy, and in this dream he enigmatically envisions a man who is also dreaming. Billy responds to this dream-within-a-dream with skepticism, and he and the traveler debate whether this dream-man's vision is "real" (*CP* 284). The unnamed traveler protests (to Billy's consternation) that the man exists outside his mind, even outside the dream-world, and he thus evokes a "history [that] is the same as yours or mine. That is the stuff he is made of" (285). The traveler argues that there is an essence that provides

the story even for dream characters, a narrative that encompasses each human story. Every person's life takes its inner-form from this "stuff" (285).

The traveler's claim recalls the metaphysical discussion in *The Crossing* between Billy and the priest of Huisiachepic, who says, "all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one" (*TC* 143). There is a narrative-logos that provides the order for earthly tales, encompassing their infinite diversity within its transcendent meaning. McCarthy's vision of the world, as Dianne Luce says, is thus "a matrix of intersecting stories, partial or complete, often competing, with varying relationships to truth […]" ("The World as Tale in *The Crossing*" 196). This matrix is subsumed, however, under the pursuit to communicate "the thing itself: the world which is a tale" (208). For McCarthy, human narration—indeed, each human life—is a tentative participation in and partial understanding of "truth, ultimate essence, the sacred heart of things that inspires reverence" (208). McCarthy provides the contours of what this logos is *like* through tales, dreams, and metaphorical uses of figures, such as horses. He thus shares Plato's conviction that the only adequate way to discuss the real is through analogy, indirect metaphors about caves and fires that suggest only the "form of the good" and not the thing itself (*Republic* 508e).

Yet McCarthy's view of the way in which humans perceive the logos is also distinct from Plato, for the author is less optimistic about the degree to which any human beings may understand it. The priest of Huisiachepic, for example, relays his narrative yet also insists, "This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised. Because the seams are hid from us, you see. The joinery. The way in which the world is made. We have no way to know what could be taken away" (143). There is

an obscure interconnectivity within the transcendent logos that humanity perceives as chaos, as "joinery" that is impenetrably convoluted. McCarthy narrates a world that is in fact governed by an order, woven together with "seams" (143), yet this logos is obscure. The tragic reality, he suggests, is that human beings cannot fully know the just or the good, despite the existence of these fundamental realities.

McCarthy's conviction that "the seams are hid from us" derives from his well-known interest in chaos theory and his association with the Santa Fe Institute, the independent research center in New Mexico where physicists, economists, and other researchers contribute advanced innovations in their respective fields (*TC* 143). One member of the institute, W. Brian Arthur, postulates the theory of *increasing* returns as a significant factor in emerging global economies. Arthur demonstrates the effects of obscure or marginal ideas and technologies as contributions to the shape of economies. One implication of Arthur's argument is that complicating factors exists, and these elements destabilize systems, predictions, and equalities within economies. Arthur's thesis not only illustrates the factors of interconnectivity that complicate human understanding of the world's order, but also it is important because it acknowledges McCarthy for discussing the ideas in the paper (109). McCarthy's stint at the Santa Fe Institute clearly involves participation in discussions regarding the effects of chaotic factors in human realities. An article by the physicists Cherkashin, Farmer, and Lloyd explores the dynamic between chance and reality, and these scientists even quote McCarthy in their epigraph in order to frame their argument.[16]

Chaos theory was first formulated in the early 1980s, and its current applications range from economics to fractal geometry that only computers are able to map. While

there is no single "chaos theory," the various applications broadly suggest that many complex phenomena "exhibit a very rapid growth of errors that, despite perfect determinism, inhibits any pragmatic ability to render accurate long-term prediction" (Feigenbaum 6).[17] The deviations from a constant become chaotic when exterior factors contribute elements of change and thus unpredictably alter the future. This theory is important for McCarthy because it suggests the radical interconnectivity and dynamism of the world. Chance events can alter the shape not only of a snowflake but also of a human life. Because the smallest factor can radically influence an outcome, chaos also suggests that both the past and the future are not fully comprehensible to the human mind:[18] one cannot understand completely the logos governing human history.

Chaos theory appears often in McCarthy's Western novels as a trope indicating the suffusion of meaning in the created order, not its absence. Chigurh believes, for example, that "Anything can be an instrument" (*NCFOM* 57), and seemingly random objects become as significant as the coin that keeps him from killing the gas station attendant. This attendant stands to win or lose "everything" through one coin (56), despite the fact that he does not recognize the momentous import of the decision that Chigurh presents to him. In *All the Pretty Horses*, Lacey Rawlins articulates a cruder version of the import of minor events when he says, "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" (*APH* 92). These evocations of chaos theory always serve to demonstrate that reality is suffused with significance, even if that order is not always discernable. McCarthy's characters navigate this chaotic order governing the world without the ability to recognize the significance of common objects and decisions.

McCarthy's interest in chaos theory thus contributes to his metaphysic in the sense that it illustrates the mysterious as well as revelatory dimensions regarding humanity's relation to the transcendent logos. The gypsy, who tells Billy a series of spurious tells in *The Crossing*, describes the possibilities that obscure humanity's understanding of this logos. Three other Institute members, Cherkashin, Farmer, and Lloyd, quote from this conversation in their article's epigraph to illustrate the relation of chance and perception. The gypsy surmises,

> if a dream can tell the future it can also thwart that future. For God will not permit that we shall know what is to come. He is bound to no one that the world unfold just so upon its course and those who by some sorcery or by some dream might come to pierce the veil that lies so darkly over all that is before them may serve by just that vision to cause that God should wrench the world from its heading and set it upon another course altogether and then where stands the sorcerer? (*TC* 407)

While the gypsy's view of the transcendent contradicts other characters' statements, he reveals the chaotic dimension of McCarthy's metaphysic. Human beings cannot know the logos completely, for a "veil lies so darkly over all" (407). And if they do perceive the order—the story that encompasses their own—this perception may paradoxically lead to a chaotic error, a change that alters their path.

In addition to revealing the chaotic nature of knowing the logos, the gypsy's open view of a dark God also begs the question of whether McCarthy understands this logos to be a benevolent and sentient force. When asked in his only televised interview about his beliefs regarding the divine, McCarthy responded, "it depends on which day you ask me" (Winfrey). He explains that it is not necessary to understand a determinable divine character—that is, "who or what God is"—in order "to pray." The context of his disclosure is a discussion on luck and "blessing," and the author explains that he is not

"superstitious" about why good things have happened in his personal life. He does not dismiss faith in God, although he seems hesitant to make definitive statements about the divine. While these answers are only partial disclosures (in response to perfunctory questions), they illustrate that the author's vision of the world affirms that the transcendent logos is apparently impartial. "Good things" do not equate to God's blessing but only an impartial series of chance events (Winfrey). Like the "right and godmade sun" that rises at the end of *The Crossing*, McCarthy's metaphysic thus maintains that the transcendent is an impassible, indiscriminate reality (*TC* 426). It rises "for all and without distinction" (426), grounding the world in an order subject not only to tragedy but also to impartial chaos. McCarthy's characters therefore live in a world where a coin can become the instrument for their destruction, but, as the Dueña Alfonsa says, "the coiner cannot" be "flattered or reasoned with" (*APH* 231).

Despite its similarities with Platonic realism, McCarthy's understanding of the logos is distinct in the sense that he associates this order with tragedy, not philosophy. Plato argues that philosophers are the only ones who have access to transcendental forms through the rigorous training of their intellects, and thus the good—the logos beyond the world—is "intelligible" (*Republic* 509d). He insists that these forms are not only discernable through the intellect but also definite (see Plato, *Euthyphro* 6d-e). Thus, for Plato, these essential forms may be defined and even understood by philosophers because of their relation to wisdom. That Plato conspicuously associates forms with wisdom reveals his presupposition that the essence of the world is its *sophia*. McCarthy's vision, in contrast, most often articulates the transcendental logos through the dreams and stories of those who have experienced loss, tragedy, and disinheritance. The Dueña Alfonsa's

understanding of the world avowedly derives from her story of the Madero brothers and specifically the death of her lover, Gustavo (*APH* 237). The homeless narrator at the end of *The Cities of the Plain* articulates a dream-within-a-dream, and the gypsy in *The Crossing* is similarly accustomed to penury and dislocation. Indeed, John Grady's dream about the "order in the horse's heart" comes only after Alejandra has left him and he commits to his pursuit of the just (*APH* 280). McCarthy's vision thus associates the transcendent logos with tragedy, even as Plato associates the real with wisdom.

McCarthy's vision thus insists that the disinherited validate the existence of virtue, for their lives accord more with the transcendent order than those who exploit and never suffer loss. While some of McCarthy's disinherited characters are rapacious and violent, such as the Native American who takes advantage of Billy and Boyd and possibly even murders their parents,[19] there are many more who conform their behavior to a virtuous order. There are dozens of examples in the Western novels of indigents and impoverished people not only living virtuously but also affirming belief in a transcendent order. The "wild Indians" who, despite their penury, give food and clothing to Billy Parham evoke this order (*TC* 133), and John Grady similarly meets poor workers who invite him to dinner. Before they eat, an "old man" among the workers prays "that the corn grows by the will of God and beyond that will there is neither corn nor growing nor light nor air nor rain nor anything at all save only darkness" (*APH* 221). Despite McCarthy's ambivalent views of God, he nonetheless maintains the validity of this belief through his characters who are continually subject to loss. These workers suffer because of a lack of rain, sparse crops, and the absence of a just order that would prevent them from being exploited. Yet, if tragedy and loss characterize the world, their daily

experience enables them (and not Platonic philosophers) to discern both an earthly as well as a transcendent order.

McCarthy's tragic vision thus affirms, as the Mexican workers say in *The Crossing*, that "[h]ay justicia en el mundo" (318), even if this existence is incomplete. Virtue proceeds from tragedy, and Billy's "path of justice" is no exception (318): it leads him to the discovery and grotesque attempts to retrieve his brother's bones. Yet McCarthy's affirmation of a metaphysic nonetheless suggests that, despite its incomplete and tragic nature, virtue is not a fool's errand. Human beings may tentatively shape the world in ways that are *like* this logos.[20] The personal "tales" of the virtuous are admittedly "one" in the same tragic way as those who reject this order (*TC* 143), but this only reinforces McCarthy's vision: virtue does not correspond to material success. McCarthy's transcendent logos is thus characterized by tragedy—not wisdom, wealth, or power.

McCarthy's tragic vision thus recalls certain aspects of Chigurh's understanding of the logos, his "*view of the world*" (*NCFOM* 4), while he also departs from the "principles" that the prophet of destruction follows (153). In particular, Chigurh's view depends upon principles that he believes are supra-human. Speaking of himself, he tells Carla Jean, "Most people dont believe that there can be such a person" (260). Chigurh is a "*ghost*" who does not leave behind fingerprints (248). The only sign of his existence is the destruction left in his wake—the *doing* or performance that is ostensibly constitutive of his identity (cf. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, I §13). Indeed, as Tebbetts observes in his contrast and comparison of Chigurh with Faulkner's Popeye in *Sanctuary*, "Chigurh shows no interest in women, no sexual interest at all throughout the novel" (72). This

lack of sexual interest renders Chigurh "impotent" in the sense that he is "uninterested or incapable of using sexual expression as a means of relating to and bonding with other human beings" (73). Violence and relations of power are his only outlets for pleasure, but this ironically leaves Chigurh, as well as Popeye, "locked into themselves" (73). In his lifestyle oriented to becoming supra-human, Chigurh essentially strives to become other-than-human: he lacks "an essential quality distinguishing human life" (74).

While Chigurh correctly relativizes the human will to chance, he neglects to relativize his own identity to the human predicament. Chigurh's adherence to supra-human principles is thus distinct from McCarthy's transcendent order governing the world in the sense that the latter envisions the earthy forms to be wholly contingent, completely human. Humanity not only has incomplete access to this logos, but, in McCarthy's vision, there are no possibilities for being anything other than human. The failure of Chigurh's supra-human aspirations becomes apparent in his final appearances during a car wreck, which occurs after he murders Carla Jean. He even has principles for such an occurrence: "Chigurh never wore a seatbelt driving in the city because of just such hazards" (*NCFOM* 261). Despite his cunning, Chigurh nonetheless leaves the accident with a broken arm and ribs as well as deep cuts in his head and legs. These injuries separate Chigurh from his gun, which David DeMarco and his friend later sells. This impairment subjects him to the contingency of human relations. He needs the shirt off DeMarco's back in order to create a sling for his arm and bandages for the cuts. He cannot *take*. In the least, Chigurh tries to locate the exchange on a purely economical level by paying DeMarco one hundred dollars, and in fact this appears initially

successful. DeMarco later refuses to provide Bell with a description of Chigurh (289-90), and Bell remains uncertain about whether "*he's a man*" or something more (282).

Yet through the accident Chigurh is unwillingly removed from a realm of pure *doing* and enters the realm of human exchange. He not only bleeds—an indication that, contrary to Bell's doubts, he is in fact only a man (*NCFOM* 282)—but Chigurh also becomes subject to the human predicament of being "vulnerable" to contingency, the state he purports to avoid by following his principles (259). Chigurh refuses to "second say the world" by departing from the decisions of chance, yet he also strives to live a life that transcends the possibilities of "[m]ost people" (260). The car accident challenges Chigurh's supra-human lifestyle, although not definitively for his death or capture would undermine McCarthy's view that justice is never a complete reality in the world. If Bell were to arrest Chigurh, it would compromise the subversion of the sheriff's democratic view of justice. Chigurh thus leaves wounded, bound to contingency, and subject to human relations—yet he nonetheless escapes the reach of the just. This, for McCarthy, demonstrates that the consequences human beings suffer are never commensurate with their virtuous or malevolent behavior. The present world is instead unjust, but Chigurh's supra-human principles nonetheless devolve into grotesque dehumanization, not transcendence.

McCarthy's vision, in contrast to Chigurh's, retains the realities of the good life—the just and the courageous—by making them tragically human. McCarthy's vision admittedly relativizes anthropocentric orders, as I demonstrated in the first chapter. The logos or essential narrative of the world is consequently not fully intelligible to human beings. For McCarthy, the human situation is bound within contingency and can make

no pretenses to represent a universal rationality or moral order. Human beings simply cannot conform the world to the logos that they incompletely perceive. Yet, for McCarthy, the obscurity of this essential order does not correspond to despair or an underlying nothingness. Although these structures are largely beyond comprehension, their existence makes it possible for contingent expressions of virtue.

Bell's final vision of his father illustrates McCarthy's commitment to virtue in the midst of obscure chaos and inevitable tragedy. The sheriff's dream preserves him from settling conclusively into his role as the prophet of despair. He dreams that he and his father are riding through a pass in the mountains. Bell's father rides beyond him "*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*" (*NCFOM* 309). Bell's dream overtly alludes to the Prometheus myth—a significant subtext in *The Road*—but this vision provides a unique turn on the bearer of the human spark. Instead of being a demigod or even Bell's progeny, the bearer is a figure of the past. Bell continues, "*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*" (309). The dream is a poignant reversal of the relationship to the past that Judge Holden establishes in *Blood Meridian*. Instead of eliding prior traditions, Bell encounters hope for finding the spark, the contingent expression of the logos, by following his father into the darkness. Unlike the ignis fatuus of *Blood Meridian*, this dream-encounter does not offer "fraudulent destinies" (*BM* 120). It is instead a legitimate fire, one that illuminates a path to the good life. Indeed, Bell describes it as "[*a*]*bout the color of the moon*" (*NCFOM* 309), comparing it to the

satellite that illuminates the night by reflecting a true fire, the sun itself (cf. Plato, *Republic*, 508a). Bell's vision, although not fully unveiling the logos, suggests that such an encounter causes him to "*w*[*a*]*ke up*," to move beyond his despair by glimpsing a reflection of the transcendent.

The conclusion to *No Country for Old Men* also echoes Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium." The novel takes its title from the poem's early despondency, but neither Yeats nor McCarthy's work finally affirm that "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" (lns. 9-10). Instead, Bell's dream signals the hope "Of what is past, or passing, or to come" (ln. 32). Facing the world's chaos and violence requires virtue—a distinctly human disposition to endure in the face of tragedy. Bell encounters the possibility of the virtuous life through the promise of a fire that is paradoxically found in the past, a reflection of reality encountered "*somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold*" (*NCFOM* 309). Bell's vision, like McCarthy's, suggests that the good life lies on a dark path through an inevitably tragic world.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The ethics of the virtuous life that emerges from Cormac McCarthy's tragic vision is complex. It repudiates the poles of redemptive illusions and meaningless despair. McCarthy narrates a world that frustrates human aspiration while he also affirms the pursuit of the good. Indeed, as Simone Weil says in *Oppression and Liberty*, "The essential contradiction in the human condition is that man is subject to force, and craves for justice. He is subject to necessity, and craves for the good" (150). McCarthy's vision forcefully and vividly asserts this contradiction, affirming the ill-fated pursuit of the good within human "necessity" (Weil's term that most often refers to fleshly contingency). One of McCarthy's most paradoxical features is thus his concession on the one hand that, as Judge Holden claims, "the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way" (*BM* 245). He insists that a virtuous life cannot codify a putative universal rationality.

Yet, on the other hand, McCarthy paradoxically affirms that the real—the transcendent logos that grounds earthly reality—also makes the virtuous life possible. (The fact that the Greek term "logos" can be translated as "reason" as easily as "word" is illustrative of the problem.) McCarthy depicts this logos as an essence that encompasses the world. The paradoxical beliefs in human contingency and a transcendent order suggests that, in the ethics of McCarthy's vision, human beings begin and end from the point of their own constructions. As John McDowell's Aristotelian view articulates this

contradiction, "The rationality of virtue […] is not demonstrable from an external standpoint" (137). If virtue were a derivation from a universal rationality, then it would only be a procedure for behavior. Yet the communication between the transcendent and the virtuous does not depend upon the articulation of an external standard. The logos, in McCarthy's metaphysic, remains transcendent while human virtue is irremediably finite. McCarthy's metaphysical explorations suggest that the way in which the transcendent informs the virtuous life is not by reference to ubiquitous rationality (at least not in the Enlightenment sense of rationality). As John McDowell clarifies, Plato and Aristotle do not locate virtue in a modern rational view of knowledge, but they suggest instead that virtue comes from a knowledge that develops from practice (138-39). McCarthy's affirmation of the tragic pursuit of the good similarly suggests that the virtuous conform to the logos only through lived-behaviors. When John Grady rides off into the "world to come" or Billy continues on his "path of justice" (*APH* 302; *TC* 318), these are tentative imitations of the good in a world of suffering and loss. Their tragic pursuits are metaphors that suggest what the real is *like*, while the journeys also paradoxically validate themselves. This is akin, in other words, to Plato and Aristotle's claims that virtue is a thing that is good in itself. McCarthy's view of the virtuous life, like theirs, finds its as a lived-ethic, a practice that conforms to a deeper reality.

McCarthy's Western novels suggest that the virtuous life is necessary to avoid the illusions, despair, and dehumanization of alternative views. Yet, for McCarthy, the virtuous life never attains the certainty of beatitude. Like Black in *The Sunset Limited*, McCarthy's tragic virtue ends on uncertainty—"Is that okay? Is that okay?"—while nonetheless committing to the pursuit itself: "If you never speak again you know I'll keep

your word" (60). McCarthy recovers the tragic ideal by locating his ethic in the void between the reality and pursuit of substantive happiness, by committing to a logos—a word—even if it never speaks and cannot be fully known. Virtue, in McCarthy's vision, is thus only possible through the unavailing pursuit of humanity's craving for the good.

NOTES

Chapter Two

[1] Cormac McCarthy's four previous novels are *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974), and *Suttree* (1979)—all of which are set in Tennessee. He also wrote a screenplay called *The Gardener's Son*, which aired on PBS in 1977, although this work is set in South Carolina. As many critics have noted, the kid's flight from Tennessee to the American Southwest was written simultaneously with McCarthy's move to that region and his transition to Random House from Alfred A. Knopf (Cant 157). For a study of the characters' flights in both the early and later novels, see Jay Ellis' *No Place for Home*.

[1] I use the term "genesis" with both its mythological and temporal connotations in mind throughout this thesis.

[1] Globalization obviously expands modernity and the influence of the Enlightenment beyond the countries of its historical origins. Therefore, references to European and American culture not only recognize the complexity of modernity but also its diverse trans-national scope.

[1] McCarthy often employs the mythological allusion to Jason's friends on the ship *Argo* as a descriptor for bandits wandering throughout the borderlands (a trope that becomes important in the second chapter). Argonauts, whether in search for a metaphorical Golden Fleece, lovers, or capital success, offer subtle commentary on the underpinnings of the journeys of John Grady Cole, Billy Parham, and Llewelyn Moss.

[1] Phillips cautions against identifying the "author's view of life" with *Blood Meridian*, the judge, or Glanton (437). She further warns against rigidly conflating the judge's position with the group's actions. This interpretive matter is admittedly a complex issue, but the remainder of my argument demonstrates, I think, that the consequences of the judge's philosophical inquiries undergird Glanton's band. They share a common but complex disorientation from a *telos* while simultaneously advancing the individual will-to-power in the place of the void that the judge uncovers (*BM* 250).

[1] As a representative of the so-called "Southern" school, Edwin Arnold says that the nihilistic forces in McCarthy's work evoke the need for a moral order and point toward "the possibility of grace and redemption" ("Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness" 31). Phillips views Vereen Bell as the primary proponent of the "Western" vein of interpretation. Although Phillips himself admits that these categories are simplistic, they helpfully distinguish between a third critical view, which I am arguing against: that is, the instance that McCarthy's work is non-moral. The nihilistic/redemptive binary is too simplistic to explain McCarthy's tragic view.

[1] For example, I am not suggesting that non-moral values and human actions are completely non-existent. Such actions may theoretically exist, although only in rare cases. Instead, I am arguing that amoral interpretations falsely assume that complex human actions and values—e.g., aesthetic or artistic products, such as novels and poems—can exist regularly or in a sustained narration within the moral/non-moral binary. Such a view is, in fact, another product of the Enlightenment search for an independent rational justification for morality that would provide ubiquitous ethical authority—a search that has failed.

[1] MacIntyre defines a "living tradition" as a "historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (*After Virtue* 222). MacIntyre's reference to "goods" invokes the teleological ethics of Aristotle, (c.f., *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a13-14).

[1] McCarthy does in fact maintain that "things" have "essences." As Cant says, McCarthy is consequently not "postmodern," whatever that may mean, because he is an essentialist (5). This issue becomes central to the third chapter, where I describe the metaphysical underpinnings of McCarthy's tragic vision.

Chapter Three

[1] McCarthy's protagonists are conspicuously male, as are the majority of Western heroes. The necessity of using only the masculine pronoun is therefore as much an indictment on the set of values that McCarthy depicts as well as the author's own tendency, as James Wood says, "to omit half the human race from serious scrutiny" (88).

[2] Weber's readings of Luther, Calvin, and Catholicism are simplistic, often reducing complex religious systems into misinformed categories. Despite these deficiencies, Weber's analysis of the vocational calling is useful for its *descriptive* force. For example, Weber seems wholly unaware that Catholic teaching before the Protestant Reformation included a notion of the Christian *vocatio*. This *vocatio*, or vocation, was admittedly not of the individualized kind that Weber examines in Calvin, the English Puritan Richard Baxter, or, in its epitomized form, Benjamin Franklin. Broadly speaking, Catholicism maintained that the Church has a *vocatio* from God, and the believer shares in this calling through the Church, yet not in a personal occupational sense.

[3] Weber's thesis is admittedly totalizing in its explanation of history. For this reason Donald A. Nielsen calls Weber's argument a "grand narrative," yet he insists that (*pace* Jean-François Lyotard) one must read *The Protestant Ethic* as an all-encompassing explanation regarding the change from medieval to modern cultures (53-76). To do otherwise, Nielsen insists, would easily lead one to misunderstand the work "as a narrow 'thesis' in historical sociology" (54). Nielsen's argument is helpful in the sense that it allows for the adaptation, not rejection, of the totalizing elements in Weber's analysis.

[4] Significantly, Captain White's filibusters are distinct from McCarthy's later Western protagonists, as well as judge Holden and Anton Chigurh, in the sense that they are purely "adventure" capitalists. Holden and Chigurh do in fact have an ethic, a set of beliefs for ordering society, whereas White simply embodies the "*auri sacra fames*" (craving for gold) that has seemingly always been a part of human experience (see Weber 75).

[5] John Cant also views Alejandra's response as sexually suggestive (182).

[6] Hemingway corroborates this quasi-apocryphal story in his posthumous *A Moveable Feast* (29-36), which is a series of reflections written about Paris in the 1920s. Although many scholars debate the veracity of Hemingway's reflections, it is best to view these memoirs as an amalgamation of fiction and historical memory.

[7] Vince Brewton convincingly argues that McCarthy's early novels (ending with *Suttree*) have a "clear and discernable correlation" to the "era of American history defined by the military involvement in Vietnam," whereas "the novels of the Border Trilogy exhibit a similar imaginative and thematic debt to the changing political and cultural landscape of America beginning in the 1980s, a landscape best evoked by the Reagan presidency and the Gulf War in Iraq in 1991" (121-22). Brewton argues that McCarthy's novels implicate an underlying culture of war. Although it is beyond the purview of the present argument, I believe that McCarthy's novels suggest that the cultural wasteland of the American West, as I have characterized it, is recapitulated in increasingly devastating ways throughout the nation's history.

[8] Joyce Carol Oates asserts an opposing claim in a 2005 review of the novel. She says that the author is fundamentally "conservative" and that Bell "speaks for McCarthy" (41-44). As Cant argues, however, this is clearly a simplistic reading (238-40; see n. 4, p. 323).

[9] The American West was declared "closed" in 1899, yet McCarthy has in mind an ecological and cultural dimension to the "winning" of the West that are not present in the nineteenth century territorial decrees.

Chapter Four

[1] As in the first chapter, I am referring to classical liberalism—the social, moral, and political philosophy formulated by Enlightenment thinkers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, and later John Stuart Mill.

[2] As most commentators observe, Nietzsche's writings reveal a large degree of development and change. Even within the same work there may be contradicting or paradoxical beliefs. Although it is easy to view this as a fragmentation that undermines the philosopher's thought, Gary Shapiro suggests that Nietzschean themes, such as eternal recurrence and his epistemological skepticism, unite through his narrative mode

of writing, such that there is continuity. I agree with Lawrence Hatab, who concedes, "There are indeed different 'Nietzsches' operating in the texts" (12), and therefore recognize that certain aspects of my overview are convenient and do not do justice to Nietzsche's complexity. The following summary, however, adequately represents Nietzsche's critique of democratic values, particularly as it participates in his larger analysis of Western civilization's morality.

[3] Nietzsche later collapses various ethical positions under the critique of "transcendentalizing doctrines," dismissing, for example, "feminism, which likes to go by the name of 'Idealism'" (*Genealogy*, III §19). He insists that feminism, Marxism, Christianity, liberalism, and Platonism all commit this error.

[4] Nietzsche finds confirmation of the normalized herd instinct's enforced conformity in the fact that "in all the principal moral judgments, Europe has become unanimous, [...] people evidently *know* what Socrates thought he did not know, and what the famous serpent of old once promised to teach—they 'know' today what is good and evil" (*Beyond Good and Evil* §202). In his era, Nietzsche says that European democracy pretentiously insists upon the superiority of its moral and social vision.

[5] In keeping with Nietzsche's writings, I use the masculine pronoun, for he apparently views the formative tension between slave and master as a male phenomenon. Nietzsche's refusal to view women as prominent forces in the formation of society is obviously problematic.

[6] Nietzsche's totalizing view of the will-to-power is a "grand narrative," as Jean-François Lyotard describes it (*The Postmodern Condition*, esp. 60-67). Nietzsche even describes this force as the "essence of life" (*Genealogy*, II §12). It is ironic that Nietzsche's analysis is, at least in the terms of Lyotard's argument, redolent of modernity. Yet it is important to note that Lyotard's view of modernity is not coterminous with Nietzsche's, for the latter does not undermine narratives of authority and power shaping society. Instead, Nietzsche observes the "true" undercurrent among all the other competing descriptions of civilization's origins. Therefore, insofar as the will-to-power serves as the force underlying and directing human history, Nietzsche's view is clearly an example of Lyotard's "grand narrative," a totalizing view that explains history. While Hatab argues that Nietzsche's perspectivism subverts "the hope that thought can be governed by some unifying metanarrative" (161), Nietzsche grounds his epistemology in the will-to-power, in the form-giving capacity of force (e.g., *Will to Power*, II §461; *Genealogy*, II §11; *Beyond Good and Evil* §257). He is therefore best viewed as both a product and critic of modernity.

[7] Nietzsche restricts individual liberties and unqualified self-creation to a select few. He refuses to universalize freedom to the herd, to every member of society, while reserving this right for the strong who are able and intelligent enough to become supra-moral and withstand the difficulties of creating one's self in the world (e.g., *Genealogy*, II §2; *Will to Power* §287). Nietzsche's restriction is based on his belief that the majority of people will misuse universalized freedom, leading to nihilism and not vital life.

[8] Nietzsche's conclusions regarding the nihilistic possibilities of democracy conflict with the popular misunderstanding that he promotes unqualified nihilism. In fact, Nietzsche's views of this term are quite complex. He argues—at least in most cases—that nihilism is only one necessary step in humanity's development. He looks forward to a time beyond nihilism, for a "man of the future, who will redeem us as much from the previous ideal [i.e., slave morality] as from *what was bound to grow out of it*, from the great disgust, from the will to nothingness, from nihilism, this midday stroke of the bell […] this Antichristian and Antinihilist, this conqueror of God and of nothingness—*he must come one day*…" (*Genealogy*, II §24).

[9] Vince Brewton persuasively demonstrates the "political" subtexts in McCarthy's early Tennessee novels, such as *Child of God*, but he uses the term more as a reference to 1970s and 80s American foreign policy, not in regards to the internal structures of power (cf. Brewton 126).

[10] McCarthy's Tennessee novels so clearly evince the influence of the Southern Agrarians that this connection is self-evident. McCarthy of course is not an uncritical heir of these writers, but he conspicuously shares their lament for the industrialization of the South.

[11] Nietzsche's own reflections on genealogies and origins suggest that the evolution of ideas, customs, and systems are so radical and dynamic as to obviate definition. He says, for example, "all concepts in which a whole process is summarized in signs escape definition; only that which is without history can be defined" (*Genealogy*, II §13). If Nietzsche is to be taken at his word, then the same dynamism applies to democracy: it is possible for it to change. In *Democracy and Its Critics*, for example, Robert A. Dahl claims to transform democracy in light of its most forceful critiques (esp. 311-42).

[12] Bell admittedly does not say that the "*prophet of destruction*" is Anton Chigurh (4). It is conceivable that Bell has in mind a cosmic force, such as Satan or the embodiment of evil, but this is not likely. He says, "*I know he's real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once*" (4). This "*once*" is presumably Bell's return to the hotel where Moss is murdered. In this episode, Chigurh hears the cruiser pull into the parking lot, but then, like a "ghost," he disappears (243-45). Bell's vague description of Chigurh as the "*prophet of destruction*" therefore serves as a rhetorical introduction to the dramatis personae, the "*ghost*" who is only known by the desolation he leaves behind (248).

[13] This loss of equilibrium features centrally in *The Road*—McCarthy's post-apocalyptic reflections on a world that has destroyed itself. Like the society that has shaped him, the father often experiences the disorientation of the vestibular nerve in his inner ear (15, 98). This disorientation of up and down, left and right, mirrors the world's moral disequilibrium, as McCarthy explains in his only televised interview (Winfrey).

[14] McCarthy therefore believes that the human animal, along with the rest of the created order, has an essential nature. For this reason, descriptions of McCarthy as "postmodern" are mistaken.

[15] I am not the only reader to establish connections between McCarthy and Plato. Carole Juge has explored Plato's Allegory of the Cave as the subtext for the father-son relationship in *The Road.*

[16] This article, called "The Reality Game," considers the relation of chance to perception, and its primary instance is the game of tossing a coin. This article, published on the Santa Fe Institute's website in 2009, has significant similarities between Chigurh's dark game of tossing a coin to determine the fate of a potential victim. The similarities may even derive from McCarthy's conversations with some of the authors of "The Reality Game."

[17] By "errors," Feigenbaum means those minute changes in a formula or developmental pattern. The Mandelbrot set is the most popular example of chaos theory, and it evinces the phenomenon of changing slightly a constant in the discs of the pattern to create complex deviations from the constant.

[18] Technically, computers are able to discover the deviations and errors that create quantitative geometrical figures, so the past is open regarding the formation of certain phenomena.

[19] The "indian" learns where Boyd and Billy live (*TC* 7), and the boys never return with the promised coffee (11-13). This unnamed character wants rifleshells and anything else he can take from the boys. McCarthy admittedly does not identify the band that first steals the Parhams' horses and sells them in Mexico. Billy's encounter with the unnamed Native American bookends the novel along with his displacement of the hound from a shack. His intrusion into the land scares away the Native American's game and forces him to leave.

[20] McCarthy's view of conforming the world to a transcendent order is distinct from philosophical Idealism in the sense that he is not advocating for the realization of mental constructs. Instead, McCarthy's idea of justice, for example, is the conformity of earthly reality to a transcendent order. The real is not dependent upon the mind, nor does it derive its reality from the world. Virtue, for McCarthy, is instead a state of character (whether public or personal) that conforms to the real, the good, or the just.

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