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“Between the Dream and Reality”:
Divination in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
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literature, tarot card reading, augury

ABSTRACT

“Between the Dream and Reality”:

Divination in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy

by

Robert A. Kottage

Divination is a trope Cormac McCarthy employs time and again in his work. Augury, haruspicy, cartomancy, voodoo, sortition and oneiromancy all take their places in the texts, overtly or otherwise, as well as divination by bloodshed (a practice so ubiquitous as to have no formal name). But mantic practices which aim at an understanding of the divine mind prove problematic in a universe that often appears godless—or worse.

My thesis uses divination as the starting point for a close reading of each of McCarthy’s novels. Research into Babylonian, Greek, Roman and African soothsaying practices is included, as well as the insights of a number of McCarthy scholars. But the work of extra-literary scholars—philologists, Jungian psychologists, cultural anthropologists and religious historians whose works explore the origins of human violence and the spiritual impulse—is also invoked to shed light on McCarthy’s evolving perspective.

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CHAPTER 1

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: DIVINATION AS TROPE

Cormac McCarthy's work certainly raises more questions than it answers. While the physical world of his first ten novels is described in such vivid detail as to give it a hyperrealistic tinge, another world lurks in each text, continually at odds with the visible. "An oscillation between field and ground is ever at work in McCarthy's fiction" Dianne Luce argues (Luce, *Reading* viii), referring to Gestalt psychology and visual illusions in which the role of subject versus background cannot be conclusively established. The point is well taken: McCarthy's art strives, finally, to achieve a perfect balance between figure and ground—physicality and spirituality, realism and allegory—that might be disrupted by critical overemphasis on either side of the equation.

True to what critics like Michael Guinn have termed McCarthy's atavistic sensibility (Guinn 108), the novels repeatedly imply a return to primitive divinatory practices—toward the esoteric and away from the exoteric—in the apprehension of metaphysical reality. The ancient practice of divination was meant to locate the nexus between the natural world and the divine:

The Babylonians and Assyrians believed that the future could be both controlled and predicted; they thought that everything which happened in the universe formed part of an intricate pattern of cause and effect, and that the meaning of the pattern could be ascertained by observing the course of events, even the most trivial. (Hooke 330)

To the ancients, particularly after the advent of written communication, the world became a divine text that could be read by trained experts. In this world birds did not simply fly, wood did not simply burn, livers did not simply develop cell lines in certain patterns, and lightning did not simply strike in the northeast versus the southwest: all mundane occurrences were potential signs.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of divination as “the foretelling of future events or discovery of what is hidden or obscure by supernatural or magical means; soothsaying, augury, prophecy” (“divination”) clearly leaves much to the imagination. Before considering McCarthy’s perennial use of divination as a trope, it will be useful to expand the term’s definition by briefly examining the topic through the lenses of modern psychology, anthropology and philosophy.

Psychologist Julian Jaynes divides the myriad forms of divination into four distinct types, chronologically listed: “omens, sortilege, augury, and spontaneous divination” (Jaynes 236), arguing that the more complex later types represented a movement by the ancients toward consciousness (Jaynes 236). Jaynes’s fascinating theory is that the primordial gods had their origins in hallucinated voices within the human brain, but the two cerebral hemispheres became more integrated in the course of human evolution and, consequently, the “external” voice of the god disappeared. The result, for a race of creatures suddenly left alone in a silent cosmos, was a need for divination to determine the will of the absent gods (Jaynes *passim*). Jungian psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz discusses divination as the use of “irrational means to get hold of something irrational” (von Franz 17). She continues to clarify the position of divination as essentially anti-science:

“[Divination and the scientific method] are absolutely what in modern scientific language one would call complementary to each other [E]xperiments eliminate chance, the oracle makes chance the centre; the experiment is based on repetition, the oracle is based on the one unique act” (von Franz, 50). The scientific method, with its need to create perfect conditions within which to generate results in a controlled experiment (often employing a reductionist, hypothetical model with which to achieve such results), desperately tries to root out any vestige of chance—the very crux of divination. Acausal, non-chronological thinking which takes place in the subconscious mind—the opposite of the scientist’s logic of causality which makes experimentation possible—is brought to bear by the diviner to discern synchronistic events which, von Franz argues, are the true concern of divination: “[A]s Jung points out . . . there must be a formal factor in nature which coordinates, so to speak, certain forms in the physical world with the psychic world, two incompatible worlds” (von Franz, 106-107). Again, this interstitial world is the realm of figure and ground—the nexus between the physical and spiritual.

Religious anthropologist Walter Burkert agrees with Jaynes on the subject of divination, in some respects, stating:

[T]he supposition that every incoming signal might be a sign conveying sense is regressive—a superstition in the very sense of the word. Characteristically, people tend to believe this especially in states of alarm or panic. As the self-sufficiency of a normal, closed cultural system is shattered, it gives way to uncommon openness to signs hitherto disregarded. (Burkert 161)

Biology, in Burkert's mind, is behind divination. He cites the example of the frog—quite a leap down the evolutionary chain from man—which sees motion across its field of vision and darts its tongue to catch the fly; ancient man's search for signs in an increasingly complicated world were vestiges of this simple sign-reading on the part of lower animals (Burkert 161). Brain development led to a heightened recognition of complexity by human beings, while the regressive brain activity of divination was an attempt to reduce the world back to the bite- (or fly-) sized.

Whereas Burkert's discussion of the subject is obviously somewhat dismissive of divination's merits, his notion that a shattered cultural system naturally "gives way to uncommon openness to signs hitherto disregarded" leads us to the most enlightening student of divination: Friedrich Nietzsche. Ilse N. Bulhof discusses the philosopher's perspective on the subject in her article "Nietzsche: The Divination Paradigm of Knowledge in Western Culture":

Under the impact of logical rational thinking the ancient way of acquiring knowledge, by means of divining (Lat.: *divinatio*) or tracking (*investigatio*, Latin: *vestigium*: trace or track), became increasingly marginalisedThe divination paradigm of knowing is still practiced in certain professions, for example by hunters, detectives and historians, by art connoisseurs, by physicians with their art of diagnosis, by psychoanalysts, furthermore by sensitive readers (Bulhof 938).

Rather than a formal, ritualistic practice that sought to understand the will of God, divination in Nietzsche's philosophy represented receptivity to signs and ways of

thinking that transcend the limitations of the rational. Bulhof's list of divinatory practitioners could easily have included, along with hunters, historians, and psychoanalysts, writers like McCarthy. His novels do not impart morals, nor are they simple entertainments, nor do they strive to plumb the depths of the author's own tortured soul; instead, they place us squarely in the world of "things in themselves," leaving us to interpret the tracks and traces we find there and seeking to impose order. Bulhof continues: "The 'reading' of traces cannot be formalized, *investigare* is a skill, an art—the *ars investigandi*. Tracking and investigating, seeking something with the help of traces, consists of divining, understanding, 'interpreting' or 'reading' of weak, unprestigious signs" (Bulhof 939). Going back to Jaynes, this type of divination would fall into the category of "spontaneous divination"—that most advanced sort, which was not dogmatically formalized in the way earlier types such as augury and omen divination were, but sprang from personal intuition. For Nietzsche, such an alternative mode of thought was a way of life linked, not to the apollonian desire for order, beauty and culture (traits also associated with rationalism) but to the bloody, ecstatic dionysian: "an affirmative loving (dionysian) mood on the part of the knower is in his eyes a precondition for this mode of knowing" (Bulhof 937).

Although McCarthy's famous eclecticism suggests the probability that he is also familiar with Jungian psychology and theories about the evolution of consciousness, Nietzsche represents the most likely connection back to the author. A number of critics have noted the Nietzschean elements of novels like *Suttree* (see Vanderheide's "The Process of Elimination"), *Blood Meridian* (see Schimpf; Frye's

Understanding Cormac McCarthy), the Border Trilogy (see Canfield; Woodson), *No Country for Old Men* (see Flory) and *The Road* (see Sheehan; Patton). McCarthy's primary concern is with life outside the "shattered cultural system" which Burkert identifies as the context for reversion to divinatory thinking—that shattered system represented by the comforting/deadening territories of science, civilization, and religion in Nietzsche. In the same way that McCarthy's novels call our attention to the delusions of American high culture, Nietzsche's writing tore the veil from the eyes of his countrymen as he "divined" sociological truths: "[Nietzsche] interpreted the attempts of his contemporaries to reform and rebuild the world, and to control it by means of science and technology as signs of weakness—in spite of the fact that these contemporaries themselves proclaimed their efforts as expressions of power and idealism" (Bulhof 947). This rejection of science's misguided attempts to control an irrational and uncontrollable universe is in harmony with McCarthy's worldview and with divination's attempts to harness the unpredictable rather than eliminate it.

Divination is a trope McCarthy employs time and again. Ancient arts such as augury (reading the flight of birds), haruspicy (reading entrails), cartomancy (reading cards), voodoo, sortilege (casting lots) and oneiromancy (interpreting dreams) all take their places in the texts, overtly or otherwise. Divination by bloodshed (a practice so ubiquitous as to have no formal name) also permeates his vision, his writing often transubstantiating senseless killing into "sacred violence," as the title of one critical volume posits. But mantic practices which aim at an

understanding of the divine mind prove problematic in a universe that often appears godless—or worse.

A trajectory can be traced in McCarthy's thinking on the subject of mysticism. His earliest works—*Suttree* first (M. S. Bell 2), *The Orchard Keeper*, and *Outer Dark*—all deal, in decreasing degree, with witchcraft. Sarah Iles Johnston defines the diviner as “a sort of failed magician” (Johnston 18), the distinction between the two types being a matter of engagement: the witch claims control, whereas the diviner merely claims vision. In *Witches in Fact and Fantasy*, Lauren Paine argues: “the witch, although interested [in divination], was more concerned with affecting change” (Paine 140). Characters like Mother She in *Suttree*, then, as well as the offstage hag who enlightens Uncle Ather in *The Orchard Keeper*, and even the “geechee nigger witch” mentioned early in *Outer Dark* (10)—all are incarnations of this empowered, world-changing mantic force. Although the role of sorcerer is either muted or lost in the parodic novels *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, it resurfaces with a vengeance in the character of Judge Holden, that supernatural charlatan who bends cosmic forces—as well as coins and tarot cards—to his own ends in *Blood Meridian*. However, the passive power of divination takes over in the elegiac Border Trilogy, as both Mexican mystics and the main characters helplessly watch the disintegration of their worlds, despite the prophetic vision afforded them in dreams. But in the final two novels, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, McCarthy reverts to the most primitive forms of divination found in the Jaynesian model: sortilege and omen reading, respectively. The movement to pre-conscious man is completed in the final novel as we see Ely, the dubious, Chaplinesque post-prophet shake the

dust from his feet and shamle into his brave new world of nihilism. In the spare diction and radioactive irony of these last novels, only the slightest suggestion of mystical power remains.

Divination provides an apt starting point for a close reading of each of McCarthy's novels. Research into Babylonian, Greek, Roman and African soothsaying practices is illuminating in this connection; it will not be used, however, to slavishly construct a detailed and spurious congruence between the novels and such practices. The insights of such McCarthy scholars as Rich Wallach, Edwin T. Arnold, Dianne C. Luce, Stephen Frye, Matthew Guinn, Vereen Bell, Christopher Metress and others also bring his work into focus as they relate to exegesis of the "otherworldly" element of the texts. But the work of extra-literary scholars such as Julian Jaynes, Marie Louise von Franz, Walter Burkert and René Girard—philologists, Jungian psychologists, cultural anthropologists and religious historians whose works explore the origins of human violence and the spiritual impulse—will also shed light on McCarthy's evolving perspective.

When, in her infamous interview, Oprah Winfrey asked McCarthy if he had "worked out the whole God thing," McCarthy replied: "It would depend on what day you ask me. I don't think you have to have a great idea of who or what God is in order to pray . . . you can be quite doubtful about the whole business" (Conlon). The response is startlingly similar to Anton Chigurh's remark that "even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God" (*NCFOM* 256): even a nonbeliever, in essence, might find it useful to model himself after a believer. But it is in this Nietzschean attitude of agnostic flexibility—of humble responsiveness to irrational

signs—that the texts find their enduring strength. And it is through the recurring trope of divination that McCarthy invites us to leave behind the ruins of modern religion in favor of a more perilous and vital spiritual quest.

CHAPTER 2

ARTHUR OWNBY AS COMMUNITY SEER IN *THE ORCHARD KEEPER*

Cormac McCarthy's first published novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), introduces several themes that recur in most of the works that would follow it—antinomianism, civic versus moral law, community and individuality, humankind's complicated relationship with the natural world, religion versus spirituality, the innate power of the quotidian and the mythic backdrop of everyday life. Its lush, sometimes biblical language seeds three distinct storylines which weave together, beyond the understanding of their characters, at the novel's metaphoric core; its meaning springs organically from the dense undergrowth of plot and symbol. And at this obscure center stand the first of McCarthy's visionary characters: an unnamed Tuckaleechee witch and an old iconoclast named Arthur Ownby. They are the hub through which the stories of the entire community pass and the link that binds society to the natural world, if only for a time.

From the first, the detailed setting competes with character and blossoming plot as though trying to assert its prominence. Although the wrought-iron fence of the italicized prologue is said to have "grewed all through the [elm] tree" of the graveyard (3), we understand this as anthropomorphic reversal: the tree has actually subsumed the fence. Personified natural elements continue the struggle against society as characters are introduced: we are told that east of Knoxville "the folded Appalachians . . . contort roads to their liking" (10), that "possum grapes and muscadine flourish with a cynical fecundity" (11), that the forest floor is "peopled with toadstools strange and solemn" (11), that limestone "climbs in ragged

escarpments among the clutching roots of hickories" (11), and that "oaks and tulip poplars . . . brace themselves against the precarious declination" (11). This is no still life, clearly, as all elements of creation vie for prominence like envious children under the blazing watch of an "infernal sky" (11). Even human detritus joins the complicated pile below the Green Fly Inn, as "[t]he refuse collected there cascade[s] down the mountain to a depth undetermined, creeping, growing, of indescribable variety and richness" (13). The relationship between human beings and their environment becomes a metaphoric environment in itself—a backdrop against which the dramas of Ownby, Marion Sylder, Kenneth Rattner and his son John Wesley are played out.

Rattner senior is introduced first, as though he were a problem being posed for eradication by the text. He is a liar and a murderer, taking whatever he can and contributing nothing to society. Marion Sylder's character is more problematic—although he is also a liar, a bootlegger, even a rapist of sorts (20), he is sympathetically portrayed. Whereas Rattner had lied to a suspicious storekeeper that he had "a new Ford. Brand-new thirty-four, V-eight motor. Scare you jest to set in it" (9), when Sylder first appears he is actually driving his own "glistening black Ford coupe It was brand new" (13); later, even the flat tire Rattner fabricated for his imaginary car becomes a real blowout on the actual car (37), and his seating himself behind the wheel and attempting to murder Sylder in order to take the Ford indicate a theme of identity theft or, more appropriately, of usurpation. The patrons of the Green Fly Inn greet Sylder as though he were a conquering hero returning home, a fact which validates him in our eyes: "Where you been?" Cabe exclaims,

“Hey, Bud! Looky here. You remember this young feller” (14). While Rattner does not truly belong to any community, Sylder is embraced by a community of alcoholic delinquents—an honor greater in McCarthy’s hierarchy than that enjoyed by politicians and police.

The titular orchard keeper, Arthur Ownby, stands outside community by choice: “If I was a younger man, he told himself, I would move to them mountains And I wouldn’t care for no man Then I wouldn’t be unneighborly either” (55). When we first encounter him in the text, it is as though we have trekked through a verbal forest to the clearing where he sits, watching Sylder and June drive past, himself unobserved. A boy later looks at his “house on the sidehill, dark and abandoned-looking. He could not see the old man and the old man was asleep” (21). Seemingly outside the action at this point, Ownby is actually at the center of a rather disparate Red Branch community. His mystical vision and connection to wilderness are the forces that maintain the society’s equilibrium.

But it is a society that is under siege from without, a fact which further clarifies Ownby’s mysterious role. Barbara Brickman, in her article “Imposition and Resistance in *The Orchard Keeper*,” makes a compelling case linking the plot of the novel to the historical oppression of Ireland by England. From the setting—Red Branch, an actual Tennessee town that takes its name from a tribe in the Celtic mythological Ulster cycle—to the oppression of a government bent on imposing an artificial order on a primitive culture of woodsmen, Brickman makes numerous connections: “McCarthy, by situating his novel in the neighborhood of Red Branch and by assigning to the community’s traditional order certain central elements of

Gaelic culture, uses the earlier conflict to inform the contemporary one and infuses his own tale with the pathos of the Gaelic oppression” (Brickman 56). Degradation of tradition and community, then, also the fate of the Irish under British rule, is McCarthy’s concern in this, his most romantic novel.

The romance is not unadulterated, however. The description of Red Branch within the first few pages as “a very much different place” now from what it was “in 1913 when Marion Sylder was born there, or in 1929 when he left school” (11) at first appears to imply an idyllic past; the reference later in the same sentence to Increase Tipton as “patriarch of a clan” and to his shacks “endowed with an air transient and happenstantial as if set there by the recession of floodwaters” (11; Brickman 58) also places us squarely in a world both Celtic and pre-Christian. But while this may be the domain of the Pentateuch, it is not the prelapsarian world of Genesis, but the pestilential one of Exodus: we’re told of those shacks that “[g]angrenous molds” attacked their foundations, and that “[s]ome terrible plague seemed to overtake them one by one” (11). The word “plague” used here as a descriptor of nature is ironic—the scourge might just as easily be mankind as the vegetable world. In the same way that a wrought-iron fence cannot properly be spoken of as having “grewed all through” a tree (3), an idea that humorously substitutes man for God in the biblical “What hath God wrought?” of Numbers 23:23, the narrator cannot speak of the natural world as enemy in light of man’s hostile position toward it—a position demonstrated in the remainder of the novel, even by some of the sympathetic characters. The entire orchard, in fact, may be viewed as a picture of the garden gone to seed at the hands of fallen humankind:

Macrocosmically, the idea of a garden or orchard suggests Edenic beauty, innocence, and plenitude, along with the presence of an omnipotent creator responsible for the maintenance of meaning and order . . . [The novel] depicts the Red Branch orchard as in an advanced state of declension . . . forsaken by its creator and cultivator. (Prather 45)

God and man, once at home together with the natural world, have abandoned it and one another. Humanity is held only by tenuous connection to a romanticized past, like the defeated Irish under British rule.

Brickman refers to Ownby as a “druid,” citing such evidence as the fact that he “carries a staff of hickory, having ‘hewed it octagonal and graced the upper half with hex-carvings—nosed moons, stars, fish of strange and Pleistocene aspect’ (46),” like “[t]he druid staff, used during divinations, [which] was carved from a yew tree and had *ogham* marks cut into it” (Brickman 62). She also notes his reverence for trees:

The old man, who keeps watch over the orchard, gives the appropriate sacred import to trees, which the druids venerated and used in certain pagan ceremonies. He, in fact, lives surrounded by “the silhouette of pines” that stretch upward like “a mammoth cathedral gothically spired” (59), and incorporates the branches of cedars, described as “rotund and druidical” (120), in an important religious ritual, the burial of Kenneth Rattner. (Brickman 62)

The mysteries embodied by Ownby's staff and his private ritualistic acts establish him as that character in *The Orchard Keeper* who fills the essential role of mystic.

Other critics, such as Natalie Grant, shift their focus away from the specifically Celtic by employing the more general term "shaman" in describing Ownby (Grant 63), but in doing so bring to light his particular functions as healer, visionary, and mediator. These were the offices of the ancient druids as well, as the Romans recognized: "Pomponius Mela states that the Druids 'profess to know the will of the gods' which, if we accept the statement, clearly means that the Druids were the 'middle-men' and 'middle-women' between the mortal and immortal world" (P. B. Ellis 115). However, the druidic priesthood did not practice the "holy madness" often associated with the tribal shaman, but were realistic, level-headed patriachs and repositories of culture: "It perhaps goes without saying that the Druids, as the intellectual caste, were also the source of all the wit and wisdom, the poetry and literary endeavor and the history, genealogy and custom of the Celtic people" (P. B. Ellis 199). While Ownby's role incorporates all these qualities, of particular interest is his connection to the spirit world.

Ownby's eyes are opened to mystical visions by a black witch in Tuckaleechee, a woman who had moved to that region "because she felt the movements and signification there" (59). The area, about forty-five minutes south of Knoxville at the feet of the Smoky Mountains, is rich in history—the Tuckaleechee Caverns in Townsend, Tennessee, are estimated to be 20 to 30 million years old, and Tuckaleechee Cove (ctbto.org), excavated in the late 1990s, contains "evidence of [Indian] occupations dating to the Late Archaic through early Mississippian periods

(ca. 2500 B.C—A.D. 1300)” (Marcoux 60). According to a legend McCarthy may have been familiar with, the Cherokee living in this area in the nineteenth century used the caverns to hide from whites who were rounding them up for removal to Oklahoma (ctbto.org)—a story of local resistance to external invasion that resonates with the plot of *The Orchard Keeper*. The witch, a woman evidently in tune with that haunted region, “put three drops of milfoil on the back of [Ownby’s] tongue and chanted over him so that he would have vision” (59), liquid milfoil being the essential oil of the yarrow plant, a substance containing a tannin which can produce psychotropic effects (Duke). Milfoil has a history of practical and mystical use, including “milfoil divination” employed by seers of the Chinese Shang Dynasty of the second millennium B.C., who used it in conjunction with the *I Ching* (Shaughnessy 528). Interestingly, the witch does not apply this herbal psychotropic drug so that young Arthur may have *a* vision, but so that he will have “vision”: his eyes will be permanently opened. And once he has become a seer, the wampus cat will haunt him for the rest of his life.

“Ain’t no sign with wampus cats” the witch tells him, “but if you has the vision you can read where common folks ain’t able” (60). The wampus cat, a.k.a. “painter” (panther), is a subject of mountain legend, with a number of different versions of its characteristics and origin. In one, the creature is half-woman and half-cat, cursed by a medicine man to prowl the earth in the mountain lion skin in which she was caught spying on a male hunting party (Schlosser 94); in a West Virginia variant, it is a witch who kills livestock by night, caught by the townspeople metamorphosing into a cat and subsequently frozen forever in transition from

human to feline (Pickens). In some accounts, looking into its eyes causes insanity (Tabler). The story of the supernatural cat “had its origin among the Cherokee of East Tennessee and western North Carolina at the time of the American Revolution” (Russell viii). It is noteworthy that in each incarnation, the wampus cat is a *disordering* force, and that in some its power includes the ability to disrupt not only human society but the individual mind. The beleaguered mythic painter, which devolves into a common housecat by the novel’s end, is a symbol of Dionysian nature in opposition to society: “The panther, as is well known, appears in descriptions of a later period as the favorite animal of Dionysus . . . because of his intractable savagery” (Otto 111).

McCarthy subtly weaves feline imagery throughout the text. Marion Sylder attacks Rattner with “his fingers cocked like a cat’s claws unsheathing” (38); John Wesley lies in wait for Wanita Tipton, “his nerves coiled and tuned like a waiting cat’s” (68); Sylder’s car, once unburdened of the cases of moonshine in its trunk, stands “with its rear end high in the air like a cat in heat” (165). Almost invariably, these feline images are associated with sympathetic characters—those fighting to defend wilderness. But a shift occurs. Cats have degenerated in the novel until “[t]he only predatory feline left in Red Branch is the half-feral domestic cat who scavenges pork ribs from the Rattners’ smokehouse in a diminished parody of the she-panther’s preying on Ownby’s hogs” (Luce, *Reading* 41). The natural world, symbolic “plague” to Increase Tipton’s shacks at the start of the novel, has been overcome: when Sylder stops at Mr. Eller’s store, he sees a “loosed box of kittens” whose “eyes were closed and festered with mucus as though they might have been

struck simultaneously by some biblical blight” (180). This echo of the biblical notion of blight referenced earlier implies a change of station, even a divine judgment. Wallis R. Sanborn notes in his *Animals in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy* that “[t]he disgusting creatures are runtish and squalling in physical and emotional agony of biblical, Old Testament of course, proportions” (Sanborn 34), and that “as the scene occurs during a flood of biblical proportions, drowning would be a way to stifle and help the little plagued beasts” (Sanborn 34).

But this is not the only indignity cats suffer in the text. Ultimately, whatever power they have is completely transferred. Ownby’s tall tale (that age-old Appalachian institution) involves a hoot-owl whose call is mistaken for that of a painter by his gullible neighbors (148); in the retelling, Ownby is described by the narrator as “an old hierophant” or revealer of sacred knowledge, “savoring a favorite truth” (148), the sun “illuminating his white hair with a prophetic translucence” (150). Since his eyes have been opened, he has no reason to fear a false wampus cat. Later, in awkwardly symbolic moments, that same starving housecat that has been skulking around with “a hunted look about her” (174) for several pages is attacked by four crows (175) before finally being grabbed up by an owl and carried off (217). Although Ownby has had a lifelong fear of the wampus cat, which he always expects to see “coming in the night to suck his meager breath” (59), he manages to tell a humorous story about it, unwittingly contributing to the panther’s diminution from legendary figure to subject of a quaint regional yarn. The owl of his story becomes the literal owl taking away what Luce called “the only predatory feline left” (Luce, *Reading* 41). And it is Mr. Eller, whose boxful of kittens

earlier seemed symbolically plagued, who walks through and shuts “the lionheaded door behind him” before hearing “the thin wail of a cat coming apparently from straight overhead” (217). Humanity has taken control and ousted nature, even appropriating the cat’s image in the form of the lion’s head at the scene of the animal’s dispossession. The narrator’s descriptions both of Ownby’s arrest and of subsequent events reinforce the notion that the old man is witnessing the changing of the guard and the realization of his lifelong fears. When the officer slams the car door shut behind Uncle Ather, we read that “it bounded in snugly upon the old man and all but took his breath” (203), a detail which recalls his terror of being smothered in bed by a painter; the social worker from the Welfare Bureau who interviews him is described walking away afterwards: “his steps were soundless and he moved with a slender grace of carriage, delicate and feline” (222). The government has taken over the land and imprisoned its advocates. There’s a new cat in town. And, like those unfortunate souls who look into the eyes of the mythic painter, Ownby has seen into the soul of the federal government and has come away “crazy”: “I suspicion they think me light in the head is what it is,” he tells John Wesley; “I reckon you knowed this was a place for crazy people” (227).

By introducing the symbolic wampus cat to Arthur through a “colored woman” who “had been a slave” (59) and who appears to be a practitioner of West African hoodoo, McCarthy links several mystically-attuned cultures—African, Cherokee, and Celtic—all of which have endured invasion at the hands of imperialist forces; by making East Tennessee druid “Uncle Ather” both resident mystic and object of governmental invasion, the novel suggests a commonality between the

Tennessee Valley and those defeated peoples. In her book *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*, Dianne C. Luce details the impact of the TVA on Southern Appalachia, and the antinomianism of characters like Sylder, Ownby, and finally young Rattner over the course of the novel: "the TVA was free of state and local oversight and largely free of federal red tape as well. It could do pretty much whatever it thought wise without having to answer to the people it affected" (Luce, *Reading* 20). Such a description obviously could fit the Anglo and American powers responsible for the enslavement of Africans and the disenfranchisement of the Native Americans and the Irish. The culture shock caused by such invasions, with whole communities being disabused of their illusions of universality in all that they held sacred, caused more despair than any casualties of war could. But at the same time it aided in the development of a hard religious core, personified by characters such as Ownby, who appears to practice an inherited form of Celtic devotion in isolation.

Ownby's antinomianism corresponds with the druids' attitude of opposition to their Roman conquerors. As representatives, not of "anti-culture," drunkenness, and illiteracy, but of a fully-developed society which did not desire the so-called education and civilization offered by outsiders, the druids were a dangerous force that needed to be assimilated or eliminated:

The Druids represented an absolute threat to the Roman State, because their science and philosophy dangerously contradicted Roman orthodoxy. The Romans were materialistic, the Druids spiritual. For the Romans the State was a monolithic structure spread

over territories deliberately organized into a hierarchy. With the Druids it was a freely consented moral order with an entirely mythical central idea. (Ellis 16, quoting Jean Markle).

The Jeffersonian notion of government by yeoman farmers appeals to men like Ownby. It is also compatible with the philosophy of a very different character, Marion Sylder, who turns “to the mountain to join what crowds marshaled there beyond the dominion of laws either civil or spiritual” (16). The mountain is big enough to accommodate both worldviews, unlike the procrustean philosophy of the oppressors.

Endurance of tyranny appears to be intimately linked with spiritual consciousness. However, the nature of their causal relationship remains unclear. Walter Burkert, discussing natural selection as a component of the religious impulse in his *Creation of the Sacred*, sheds light on the connection between oppression and religious gnosis:

Although religious obsession could be called a form of paranoia, it does offer a chance of survival in extreme and hopeless situations, when others, possibly the nonreligious individuals, would break down and give up. Mankind, in its long past, will have gone through many a desperate situation, with an ensuing breakthrough of *homines religiosi*. (Burkert 16)

Burkert sees natural selection populating the world with those who are religiously aware, or, more accurately, those who share the religious delusion. McCarthy, on the other hand, approaches the subject with the sensibility of an artist rather than

that of an anthropologist. He privileges Ownby's ability as a seer, which is irreconcilable with the more pragmatic views of characters such as Jefferson Gifford and that ridiculous pissant, Legwater.

Burkert continues:

Heightened anxiety makes us watch out with fearful attention and shiver at every rustling leaf. Periods of crisis are the high time for oracles and seers. There are even recognized forms of frenzy and ecstasy, producing messages bearing a new divine content. The sensitivity born of anxiety leads to an enlargement of the recognizable world, directed by the premise that everything has meaning. (Burkert 162)

Such a theory of anxiety explains the causal relationship between oppression and divinatory leanings. And the impulse for an "enlargement of the recognizable world" in which "everything has meaning" puts apocalyptically-inclined novelists like McCarthy in the category of the mystics, existing in a sort of ecstasy, standing on the mountaintop beyond their shattered cultural systems and reporting on what they see outside.

Ownby's vision allows him to see the import of the disruptive force whose presence is represented by a water tank on his land. He addresses the tank in the same way he addresses the cat from his nightmare: by shooting at it. Sylder bears witness to the event: "The man . . . was making a huge crude X across the face of the tank There was something ghastly and horrific about it and [Sylder] had the impression that this gnostic old man had brought with him an inexhaustible supply

of shells” (97-98). Perhaps witnessing this event inspires Sylder to commit a symbolic act of his own later, when he sneaks into constable Gifford’s house at night and punches him in the face (167). And these seemingly senseless, figurative acts, operating on a metaphoric level, make both Sylder and Ownby fitting role models for John Wesley.

But Ownby’s eyes are opened not only to injustice in his region, but across the country and into the future. Although “his vision is not perfect, and his story encompasses his failure to see soon enough to prevent his own losses” (Luce, *Reading* 39), Uncle Ather is clearly a nascent version of the type of visionary character McCarthy uses time and again in his novels:

[H]e is another character in McCarthy with a mystical ability to map or see beyond the ordinary (60). This ability appears to be with him throughout the novel, as evidenced in his final meeting with John Wesley in the asylum when he states, “I look for this to be a bad one. I look for real calamity afore this year is out” (225). The “calamity” that Ownby foresees here is realized with the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, just before the year in question is out. (Walsh, *In the Wake* 52)

McCarthy’s mystics often dwell in a darker place—not a state of gnosis, but of “agnosis,” as will be seen. Arthur here engages in traditional prognostication, a novelistic device that always runs the risk of appearing contrived. In later novels, McCarthy will continue to employ an enigmatic omniscient narrator, seeming guardian of absolute truth (with its perspective that might be described as “autistic

fascination”) toward which his mystic characters aspire. Divination consists of attaining to the perspective of this omniscient narrator, which the mystics accomplish with varying degrees of success.

One final aspect of Arthur Ownby’s behavior linking him to druids is his cryptic, ritualistic act of hiding Rattner’s corpse. Scant reliable information has survived about the body of druidic custom, as over the centuries it endured first demonization at the hands of Christian Rome, and then—perhaps worse—romanticism by the reactionary Celts. But some particulars, such as these details on the disposal of dead bodies, have survived:

In pre-Christian times the body was usually brought to the grave in a covering of *strophais* or green bushy branches of birch. According to Cormac’s Glossary the Druids used a *fé* or rod of aspen, with an Ogham inscription cut on it, with which they measured the graves. It was regarded with horror and no one touched it except the person whose job it was to measure the grave. (P. B. Ellis 137)

Some comparisons to Ownby’s “burial” of Rattner may be made. Shortly after his discovery of the body, we’re told that the old man “cut a small cedar tree with which to put it from sight” (54). Dianne C. Luce, who sees the entire narrative as a story invented by John Wesley, sees practical and symbolic reasons for such an act: “That he ‘remembers’ Ather’s performing the requisite death-watch rather than reporting the corpse to the authorities accords with Ather’s other characteristics as challenger of impersonal civil law and institutions, champion of human values, and patient repository of the past in John Wesley’s actual knowledge of him” (Luce, *Reading* 28).

Such an act certainly fits with what Luce sees as the antinomianism at the heart of the novel. And yet Ellis' account tells us this tradition was kept in pre-Christian times, when its symbolic value would not have derived from its perception as an act of rebellion. Matthew Guinn's notion of McCarthy's vision as "atavistic" is more apt: the ritual harkens back to ancient pagan practices of sacrifice and atonement, still current even in modern society.

Another striking feature of the historical account is the use of the *ogham* stick to measure the grave. Brickman's observation on the similarity of Ownby's hickory staff to the yew one used by druids for divination has already been noted. However, the fact that such a staff was "regarded with horror" by those outside the priesthood resonates with aspects of *The Orchard Keeper*. Kenneth Rattner is a cursed thing in this forest; he is disgusting to Sylder, who finds "[s]omething loathsome about the seated figure" in his car that keeps "him from reaching for it violently, as a man might not reach for bird-droppings on his shoulder" (33), and later finds that the experience of choking him to death is "[l]ike squeezing a boil" (*TOK* 39). Ownby, on the other hand, has no reason for such revulsion, but intuitively treats Rattner's dead body as anathema. He acts within his rights as orchard keeper and spiritual guide to shelter the world from the taint of death—he absorbs it and allows it to pass back to nature where it belongs. His staff is the emblem of his office in all its aspects, including that of expiation. But when Huffaker finally arrests the old man, one of the outrages he commits is the destruction of the staff: "He slammed the door but the old man's cane was hanging over the runningboard and in mutual defeat the door rocked open again as the cane cracked. The old man pulled it in the car with

him and studied the lower part of it, stooping to examine the whiskers of wood standing up from the break” (203). Whereas Sylder and Ownby unwittingly collaborated in the elimination of “waste” in the form of the malevolent Rattner—a cleansing act which bears a resemblance to the unconscious efficiency of systems in nature—the officious governmental forces have imprisoned them, broken the metaphoric staff, disrupted the system. Evil will be loose in the world again, and it will go unchecked.

Arthur Ownby’s eyes are opened at a young age to the threat of the wampus cat. And yet the sinister cat, bane of existence for East Tennessean settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries, suffers a decline into the starving literal mongrel of the last section of the novel, while at once transmogrifying into that insidious new threat: the federal government. The change is enough to make one long for the days when “painters” roamed the earth, wrecking societies and unseating minds. And yet, despite having mystical vision, Arthur is unable to defend against this menace. His understanding of the wampus cat’s meaning is not fully developed until the end of the novel; however, there is also some question how much he could have done to protect himself. His vision of the future is overpoweringly bleak; the illumination shed by his mysticism highlights only the depth of the darkness of human understanding.

CHAPTER 3

AUGURY AND AGNOSIS IN *OUTER DARK*

With McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark* (1968), we are permanently expelled from the orchard. Themes such as human depravity, malevolent gods, and existential dread—all of which will be revisited in *Child of God* (1973), *Suttree* (1979), *Blood Meridian* (1985), and others—are initially examined in this complicated, nightmarish work. But unlike *The Orchard Keeper* before it, *Outer Dark* conjures no halcyon days to remember and mourn the loss of, no pastoral paradise that is assailed from without—here, the darkness is internal, external and eternal.

Wallis R. Sanborn's *Animals in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy* examines the significance of swine as harbingers of human death in the novel *Outer Dark*, but ignores the proliferation of portentous birds in that text. Crows, cocks, vultures, plovers, hawks, mockingbirds, whippoorwills and others often call or fly during pivotal moments in the novel, but the reader's natural tendency may be to dismiss such signs as details of setting. However, McCarthy suggests a deeper reading of bird behavior when he refers to the morning flights of martins as the "first wan *auguries* of dawn" (97, emphasis mine). In fact, augury may be read as a metaphor for the two main characters' desperate, unconscious attempts to understand their places in the world, with birds serving as signs provided by a mysterious—possibly a divine—signator. The reader, too, effectively becomes augur, sorting through the conflicting religious, philosophical, and legendary meanings in the text—meanings that suggest a familiar, unreal textual world beyond the naturalistic setting. But the

exiled characters, unlettered and ignorant of all signs, must ultimately remain in the outer dark of the world outside human community and understanding.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the ancient art of augury as “the practice of divining by the flight of birds.” Cicero’s ancient dialogue *De Divinatione*, however, recognizes bird signs of two sorts: those found in the flights of a category of birds the Romans called *alites*, which included eagles, hawks, ospreys, and others; and those found in the songs of *oscines*, which included ravens, crows, owls, etc. (Cicero 354). Augury was a complex science developed among the Hittites and passed through them to the Etruscans and Romans. Although *Outer Dark* does not employ the science of augury in detail, it does give evidence of McCarthy’s general knowledge of its practice and aims, of Cicero’s commentary on it, and of modern notions of avian symbolism.

As the novel begins, protagonist Culla Holme is introduced as the cause of the “nameless weight” in the belly of his nineteen-year-old sister, Rinthy (5). He lives in a state of guilty anxiety, waiting for the community to learn of his incest and to cast him into the biblical “outer dark”—a fate he expects despite his ignorance of the Bible. In his essay “Cormac McCarthy’s Unholy Trinity: Biblical Parody in *Outer Dark*,” William C. Spenser enumerates several scriptural references in the text, including the fact that “the ritual sacrifice of [Culla’s] son,” followed by an episode of cannibalism, is an allusion to Christ’s martyrdom (Spenser 87). Christopher Metress also notes “McCarthy’s conjunction of the Holy Trinity and the three outlaws, or the nameless son whose blood they drink with the blameless one whose blood Christians drink” (Metress 151). Although it is not clear from the outset—the

reader cannot possibly divine the gruesome fate awaiting the infant—all the scriptural pieces fall into place at the climax of the novel, when the child is unceremoniously slaughtered.

Given the role this son is to play, then, even if merely as a parodic placeholder where an actual Christ belongs, the first bird mentioned in the text comes as no surprise: “Doves were crossing toward the river. He could hear them calling. When he went in again she had crawled or fallen from the bed and lay in the floor” (13). Just before the birth, a dove both flies *and* calls, inaugurating the novel’s conceit of the bird as indicator of future events. Doves, of course, are steeped in Christian tradition: “Some iconographers show Mary being blessed by a dove at the Annunciation, and Jesus was blessed by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at his baptism” (Murphy-Hiscock 61). Modern symbology carries on the tradition of associating the dove with purity even without Christ: “Let your sighting of a dove remind you to reconnect with the spiritual aspect of your life,” Murphy-Hiscock’s new-age “spiritual field guide” advises (Murphy-Hiscock 62). But such a message is lost on Culla, whose state of ignorance regarding his spirituality, let alone external holy texts and traditions, is profound. Yet that profound state of ignorance is just what the novel seems to impel us toward, even with the stock of “knowledge” we are privileged to have acquired as educated members of a community. As Dianne Luce contends in her gnostic reading of the novel: “Culla, the dreamer, knowing nothing, is paradoxically most ‘aware’ of the gnostic cosmos: most entangled in the tangible experience of its darkness” (Luce, *Reading* 72). This awareness, even though

awareness of ignorance, is a step away from smug dogmatism and toward knowledge.

When Culla brings the newborn into the woods with the intension of leaving it for dead, he encounters another bird: “[From] a small pothole . . . a heron exploded slowly and rose before him with immense and labored wingbeat” (16). Herons are symbols of “patience, self-reliance, observation, focus, and concentration” (Murphy-Hiscock 97), all qualities Culla sorely lacks in this scene. Instead, the infanticide staggers and plunges through the brush hysterically, accidentally turning himself around after a long, disoriented flight and falling down right beside the squalling child. During this whole scene a “spectral quietude” has set in, “[as] if something were about that . . . nightbirds held in dread” (16). This is a moment even more dreadful than the moment of the child’s conception, or of its birth: now Culla is no longer an innocent victim of illicit desire, but a murderer. Nightbirds are silenced in the presence of the pariah, with nothing to communicate. He lies in terror on the forest floor through the beginning of a thunderstorm, and “a far crack of lightning went blue down the sky and bequeathed him in an embryonic bird’s first fissured vision of the world . . . a final view of the grotto” (17). The act has placed him in outer darkness, permanently beyond the pale; his horror is that of the newborn—whether human or bird—who is left alone to make sense of the hostile wilderness that is the world.

In a lighter moment, we get more evidence that birds (and, incidentally, the hogs Sanborn examines) have a message to offer within the text. The privileged squire with whom Culla finds day work begins expounding on the value of hard

labor. His character, in fact, appears to be a parody of the cruel taskmaster of Matthew chapter 25, who gives “talents” (quantities of gold) to three of his servants and punishes the one who does not return his money with a profit; the episode concludes with a condemnation which lends the novel its title: “And cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 25: 30, *American Standard Version*). When the squire in the novel admonishes Culla, saying that “shiftlessness is a sin . . . the Bible reckons. Everything I got I earned They ain’t a man in this country to dispute it” (47), a dispute *does* come immediately after his remark—not from a man, but from the squire’s livestock: “There was a commotion of hens from beyond the barn, a hog’s squeal” (47). Later, the anti-trinity of murderers will come to cut this squire down, acting in their role as manifestation of Culla’s dark desire (51); but for now, Culla just stands with “one hand crossed over the back of the other the way men stand in church” (47). There is certainly no indication that he reads anything into the voices of the animals, and there is only the barest evidence that we as readers should do so. But his stance indicates the grudging respect a parishioner might pay a priest during a pointless sermon.

Rinthy’s experiences with birds are quite different from Culla’s. In fact, it appears that the “omniscient” narrator—who seldom gives direct indication of the characters’ interior worlds—has an entirely different focus during the passages involving Rinthy. After she is healed from her difficult childbirth, she and her brother are separated; she spends the remainder of the novel looking for her baby, whereas Culla apparently spends the rest looking for her. While staying with a

family that has taken her in for the night, she hears a meaningful birdcall: “a whippoorwill calling from nearby for just as long as [she] passed through the open and hushing instantly with the door’s closing” (61-62). It is as though the bird has a message to convey, speaking to her only as she walks outside from house to outbuilding. She later hears “the bird once again more faintly, or perhaps some other bird” (62), an ironic remark that places the narrator’s voice somewhere between the certainty of omniscience and the indeterminacy of a character to whose thoughts we are not privy. Later, as Rinthy lies in bed, we read: “She listened for a bird or for a cricket. Something she would know in all that dark” (65). Rinthy is more in harmony with the natural world than her brother is, although she may still not know what she should read in it. Her attendant bird here, the whippoorwill, is one that “is always in tune with lunar cycles. The moon is associated with feminine energy, cycles, intuition, psychic energy, emotions, receptivity,” and similar traits (Murphy-Hiscock 207). This lunar association is perhaps due to the fact that young whippoorwills are most often hatched during a full moon (Martin 216). But it is the call of the whippoorwill that is charged with significance for the superstitious single woman: “The unmarried woman used to listen carefully for the call of the whippoorwill. One call meant she wouldn’t marry for at least a year. If it called three times or more, it meant she was destined to be a spinster” (Martin 214). Although marriage at this point is, for Rinthy, a secondary concern at best, the whippoorwill’s message is a cruel reminder of the permanent damage her brother has caused her. A young would-be beau who asks if she’ll go with him to a show is

told, “I just caint” (74)—the answer the whippoorwill would have provided anyone listening for it superstitiously.

The threat of future violence constantly hangs over the text. Culla’s conscience has unleashed itself on the world in the form of the evil triune, those horrific murderers who destroy nearly everyone who crosses the “penitent’s” path. And yet, once the brother and sister’s paths diverge, neither Culla nor the triune meets with Rinthy throughout the remainder of the novel. Given the brutality Culla is capable of, there is some question what his purpose is in seeking his sister, who is the only other living witness to his crime. That question is perhaps answered by the appearance of another bird: the hawk. The hawk is “a highly intelligent bird of prey frequently used for hunting” (Murphy-Hiscock 94). When Holme meets a beehiver on the road who asks him where he’s going, he replies, “I’m looking for my sister,” (81) after which we see “the slow wheel of a hawk” (81) reflected in the glass of a tipped whiskey flask. Later, as he is communing with the sinister triune, he tells Harmon: “I been *huntin* her since early spring They aint no tellin what all kind of mess she’s got into. She was sick anyways. She never was a real stout person” (177, emphasis mine). Not only is his use of the word “hunting” unintentionally ambiguous, but his assessment of the state of Rinthy’s health sounds eerily similar to his earlier pronouncement about the newborn son he would abandon for dead: “It’s puny I don’t look for it to live” (15). The appearance of the predatory hawk in connection with Culla’s search for Rinthy may be another projection and incarnation of his interior world, much as the unholy triune appears to be. However, while the three brutes kill several of the characters Culla comes in contact

with, they never meet Rinthy to do her harm—and neither does Culla. She appears to be shielded from their dark designs.

The birds of another scene are appropriated, if ironically, from the pages of Cicero's *De Divinatione*. After Culla has fled from a lynch mob seeking him for desecration of graves, he gets a day job painting a roof. While he begins working, an artificial bird on the roof seemingly stimulates the activity of a flock of real ones: "a rusted weathercock cried soft above him in the morning wind" (91), after which "a chorale of screaming cocks waned and ceased and began again" on the ground below (91-92). The eerie landscape, so charged with meaning, now indicates a change in the way the wind blows, and thus a change in Culla's brief good fortune. And the irony of following the artificial cock's crowing with the squawking of real ones may also be a sly commentary on the tendency of superstitions to gain real-world credence once voiced. After this almost imperceptible portent, the lynch mob finds Culla again, and a brief "battle" ensues, which Culla wins by escaping.

Crowing cocks had divinatory meaning for the ancient Romans, as indicated by a passage in Cicero:

[A]t Lebadia, in Boeotia, while divine honours were being paid to Trophonius, the cocks in the neighborhood began to crow vigorously and did not leave off. Thereupon the Boeotian augurs declared that the victory belonged to the Thebans, because it was the habit of cocks to keep silence when conquered and to crow when victorious. (Cicero 305).

This example is one of many provided by Cicero's brother Quintus as evidence for the effectiveness of augury. Priests assembled at the cave in Lebadia, where the oracle of Zeus Trophonius was located, read the crowing of cocks as indicating the impending victory of Thebes over Sparta in battle (Cicero 304). However, the logic of Cicero's rejoinder is irresistible: "Oh! that was a 'portent,' you say. A fine portent indeed! You talk as if a fish and not a cock had done the crowing. But come; is there any time, day or night, when they are not liable to crow?" (Cicero 435). Although Cicero did believe in some forms of divination on some occasions, *De Divinatione* is his attempt, as he writes, "to weed out every root of superstition" (Cicero 537)—the invalid forms of divination, in other words. But *Outer Dark* depicts a closed world entirely constructed of dead, cultural superstitions—a world in which reversion to augury may actually be a key to understanding.

The crucial aspect of augury in the text, including the crowing of cocks, is the suggestion of predestination. If the course of future events can be read in nature, then the gods—or the God of the Bible—have predetermined those events. Human free will must then be a fiction. We recognize foreshadowing as a literary convention, and take it in stride; but if cocks in the real world are used as proclaimers of events, their message is the death knell of human choice. Cicero's healthy disdain for the doctrine, and all forms of superstition, inform *Outer Dark's* satire of religious and philosophical dogma.

While Culla flees his attackers, Rinthy gets closer to finding her living child. She awakes to the "first wan auguries of dawn" (97) and finds that "birds dusting in the road did not fly up when she passed" (98), again indicating a sympathy with

nature not shared by her brother. Shortly, however, birds provide an ominous sign: “If crows had not risen from a field she might never have looked that way to see two hanged men in a tree like gross chimes . . . while all about sang summer birds” (100). These are men who have been lynched by an angry mob led, ironically, by Harmon, the leader of the trio of murderers that this posse actually seeks (95). Crows are considered harbingers of death and “serve as psychopomps, or guides between the living world and the afterlife” (Murphy-Hiscock 54). Their locations and the directions of their flight have been considered ominous for centuries: in a play by third century B. C. Roman playwright Plautus, one character says, “The woodpecker and the crow on my right, the raven as well on my left. They are persuading me to do it” (Martin 37). In modern times, New England superstition maintains it is “unlucky to see two crows flying together toward your left” (Martin 37). Although the symbolic meaning of crows may be lost on Rinthy, the reader may take their presence as an instance of foreshadowing—the lost child, whose reunion with his parents the reader anticipates, is doomed to die. Those psychopomp crows are not finished with her. Even clearer is Rinthy’s vision, at the tinker’s shack, of “[d]ark little birds . . . crossing the fields to the west like heralds of some coming dread” (188), and the fact that she finds a dead bird on his floor (189). When the tinker refuses to help her, telling her before he returns to her infant child, “You foller me and I’ll kill ye,” he leaves the house to the sound of her keening, which sounds “lost as the cry of seabirds in the vast and black solitudes they keep” (194). The narrator here likens Rinthy to birds in darkness, as Culla had been compared to an “embryonic bird” during his fateful night in the woods. And we are reminded that

Rinthy, also, has been compared to birds before: during her labor, she is described as “coming tautly bowed and slowly up with her breath loud in the room and then subsiding back among the covers like a wounded bird” (11). The “solitudes” that seabirds keep are also a reminder of her lonely place in outer darkness, existing as an outcast. Both the birds and the protagonists share this state of exile from human community. However, the question remains whether their exile engenders freedom—as birds are normally symbolic of freedom—or imprisonment.

Those critics who cite the many gnostic images of the novel would argue the latter. In her consideration of those passages connecting Culla with shadows, Luce contends: “As the fleshly stain, the shadow expresses the earthly body in which man is imprisoned” (Luce, *Reading* 76). The gnostic universe, perpetuating itself by the cruel joke of human lust and procreation, generates more and more fleshly shadow to swallow up the true light of the spiritual world. Luce continues:

Shadows most emphatically have agency or reflect some cosmic aspect of the self in the novel. That is, they are not mere illusion, as we might find in Platonic myth. Rather, they seem a literal manifestation of Jung’s concept of the shadow, that archetypal dark side of the self deriving from the collective unconscious that complements yet is not acknowledged by the ego. (Luce, *Reading* 76)

And so those passages that depict Culla in shadow—as he is speaking to the doomed squire and “their shadows canted upon the whitewashed brick of the kitchen shed in a pantomime of static violence” (47), or when he walks “shambling, gracelorn” and “his shadow be-wandered in a dark parody of his progress” (241-42)—associate

him with the true state of humankind: imprisonment in fleshliness and guilt. Luce's observation that these shadows are "not mere illusion, as we might find in Plato's myth" sheds light on that earlier passage in which Culla beheld "in an embryonic bird's first fissured vision of the world . . . a final view of the grotto" (17). That grotto, or cave, existing in a text composed of other philosophical and religious texts, is not unaware of Plato's famous metaphor; Culla stands outside that cave, however, experiencing reality without mediation, as the birds do. He is ignorant of Plato's "grotto," and of all other doctrines that might ameliorate his painful situation.

Culla and Rinthy, within the universe of the novel, never see one another again. Their worlds, as Vereen Bell contends, are self-created and separate: "Rinthy and Culla each inhabit a world that the other cannot be aware of and that each to some extent makes. This division remains purposefully absolute. A union is anticipated but never realized" (V. Bell 35-36). Culla slinks about in darkness and is recognized as a criminal wherever he goes. Rinthy, on the other hand, exists in an "amion of light" which "links her with the gnostic Uthras, comparable to the angels of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Luce, *Reading* 80). While Culla subscribes to the determinism of the blind prophet at the novel's end, who declares, "What needs a man to see his way when he's sent there anyhow?" (241), Rinthy apparently asserts her free will, responding to a prospective employer's question, "Who was it told you I needed a girl? Nobody sent you?" by saying, "No mam. I just come by myself" (99). These two opposing philosophies exist side-by-side, and the physical world the characters inhabit is the exact same. The siblings' paths even intersect at a number of points, as evidenced by their encounters with some of the same characters, such

as the store clerk, the man whose daughters have died of plague, and the tinker. Yet the birds they happen upon are completely different, with one significant exception: Tennessee's state bird, the mockingbird.

After Culla's trial by the evil triune of his conscience, he is left alone in the darkness of the forest: "After a very long time he could hear the river again and even though the fire had died he did not move. Later still he heard a mockingbird. Or perhaps some other bird" (183). It is unclear whether this bird is identical to the one Rinty hears within a few pages, possibly at the exact same time: "The flowers in the dooryard have curled and drawn as if poisoned by dark and there is a mockingbird to tell what he knows of night" (209). Rinty is comforted by the call of the bird, as she has been earlier when "she listened for a bird or for a cricket. Something she might know in all that dark" (65); although its message is bleak—it tells her what it knows of night—she is open to it. Culla, sitting in blackness, is unsure whether or not he is hearing a mockingbird. Or perhaps, again, it is the narrator who is unsure. The divinatory significance of the mockingbird is telling, and supports Vereen Bell's contention that the characters' worlds are self-created: "The mockingbird can . . . offer a message of reflection. You reflect your environment (mental, emotional, physical, and otherwise), and *your environment also reflects you*, although this can be harder to see" (Murphy-Hiscock 121, emphasis added). In the end, the narrator's remarks, the light and shadow of the descriptions, and the benevolence or malevolence of minor characters—all are projections of the interior worlds of the two protagonists. Free will and predestination are laid side-

by-side in an unreadable world, with neither worldview privileged as the more realistic.

The final bird image of the novel is a culmination of all the others. The tinker's bones hang from a tree after his murder, and "his bleached and weathered brisket hung in that lonesome wood like a bone birdcage" (238). Jarring as that picture is, it also serves an important, summarizing function: it employs a human concept—that of a cage—imposing it upon the freedom of the natural world. Birds, of course, do not choose to live in cages. And as they are traditionally symbols of freedom, their act of freely entering a cage is significant. Rinthy's agitated freedom is overlaid with Culla's guilty determinism, and both are revealed to be matters of faith, or superstitions. As such, they take their place in a textual world *constructed* of superstitions—for example, the idea that people might be healed during an eclipse (5), that an ax kept under a pregnant woman's bed eases her labor pangs (12), that snakes are bad luck (124), that the call of whippoorwills can tell a woman about her marriage prospects (64), that there is a purpose to everything (124), that lactation is a supernatural sign indicating that one's child is still alive (155), and that the mandrake grows where the seed of a hanged man falls (238). In an uncertain universe, assertions of freedom or predestination have the ring of pseudoscience. And yet this is not the criticism it might seem: "The psychologist Gustav Jahoda now suggests that people can never be completely educated out of superstition, because 'superstition is an integral part of the adaptive mechanisms without which humanity would be unable to survive'" (Smith 33, quoting Jahoda). The dangerous

outside world is visible in *Outer Dark*, but it is not unmitigated—it is seen from the safety and equivocation inherent in McCarthy’s brand of parody.

But parody is only one aspect of the text: divination is also a metaphor for sincerely seeking truth in a world of deadening culture and pre-packaged doctrine. Walter Burkert discusses the biology of divination, bringing evidence to bear that is useful in the interpretation of any McCarthy novel:

[T]he supposition that every incoming signal might be a sign conveying sense is regressive—a superstition in the very sense of the word. Characteristically, people tend to believe this especially in states of alarm or panic. As the self-sufficiency of a normal, closed cultural system is shattered, it gives way to uncommon openness to signs hitherto disregarded, which may offer a chance for reorientation. Heightened anxiety makes us watch out with fearful attention and shiver at every rustling leaf. Periods of crisis are the high time for oracles and seers. (Burkert 162)

All of McCarthy’s characters find themselves in such “periods of crisis,” existing outside the comforts of society, whether by choice or otherwise. While Rinthy and Culla are both in situations that engender “alarm or panic,” and drift about outside the “normal, closed cultural system” which is “shattered” for them, we are not privy to their thoughts and cannot know if they strive to interpret the signs in the text, as readers necessarily do. But the contrast between their worlds seems to indicate that the objects in those worlds spring from within their minds.

McCarthy leads the reader into a quagmire of doctrine—what is called in deconstructionist criticism an “aporia.” If free will exists, Culla bears responsibility for all he has done, but is not at the mercy of a cruel demiurge toying with his creation in a cold, gnostic universe; the contrapositive means he is innocent, but trapped. Neither Culla nor the reader has any absolute knowledge to bring to bear—everything is a matter of faith. Perhaps if the protagonist had some scriptural knowledge, he would recognize the reference to Mark 5:13 in the death of hundreds of hogs which plunge off a cliff in his presence. But his ignorance leaves him in a state of agnosis which is recognized by the reader—a state to which the text aspires to lead us as well.

Christopher Metress ties together the nihilism Vereen Bell recognizes in *Outer Dark* and the spirituality Edwin T. Arnold see there, arguing that the two incompatible notions may be thought of in terms of the *via negativa* outlined by medieval mystics:

Though it has had less influence in Western Christianity than cataphatic theology—which emphasizes God's "knowability" and characterizes Him as “light”—the *via negativa*, also known as apophatic theology, has been championed by some very prominent theologians. In a work that rivaled *The Canterbury Tales* in popularity and import, the anonymous author of the fourteenth-century classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* advised his readers to think of God as “shrouded in darkness.” (Metress 148)

Such an approach puts unlettered Culla closer to God, if indeed God exists—no knowledge and no civilized niceties can stand between him and an agnostic embrace of the unknowable deity. Metress avers that this point, lost on the characters, is meant for the reader: “McCarthy has fashioned the novel in such a way as to make it a kind of *via negativa*, a road down which we travel as readers as we learn to unlearn our assumptions about God and embrace unknowing as ‘the most goodly knowing’ of the metaphysical” (Metress 149). This “way of unknowing” is the mystical version of textual aporia. Its doctrine is in harmony with paradoxical remarks the old snake hunter makes to Culla: “Study long and ye study wrong I know things I ain’t never studied. I know things I ain’t never even thought of” (115). Rinthy, on a path of free will lit as though by a “lamp [she holds] votively before her” (62) crosses her brother Culla’s predestined wandering in shadow; the former is asked by a benefactor, “Was they anything you needed?” before going to bed (62), while the latter is asked, “Is they anything you need?” by a destitute, Calvinist pauper who is not in a position to provide anything (240). The answer in both cases should be “yes,” although neither can answer what that “something” is. However, despite their poverty of knowledge, one philosophy feeds on hope while the other starves in despair.

Near the end of *De Divinatione*, Cicero finally asks his Stoic brother Quintus: “Of what advantage to me is divination if everything is ruled by Fate?” (Cicero 391). It is a question strangely similar to that of the blind man to Culla: “What needs a man to see his way when he’s sent there anyhow?” (241). However, the blind man appears to be in earnest, whereas Cicero is employing the Stoic belief in fate to

expose the inconsistency of that philosophy's belief in divination. It is the benighted perimeter of the world, beyond society's comforting light, that interests McCarthy; it is there that his characters find themselves joining the community of superstitious, mystified *homo sapiens* in a line that leads back, not just to the Romans, Greeks, and Etruscans, but all the way back to the caves. The contrived world of *Outer Dark* finally renders the novel an anti-text, with the contradictory symbolism of its birds—both free and determined—collapsing to make it as resistant to interpretation as our own world.

CHAPTER 4

ASTROLOGY AND HARUSPICY IN *CHILD OF GOD*

Astrology and haruspicy are divinatory arts focused in opposite directions in the physical world—the former looks as far from humankind as can be imagined, while the latter looks at the internal organs of animals and human beings. Neither discipline would be considered a science by modern standards, of course, but both would technically have been considered sciences in that they were attempts to increase human knowledge. And both are metaphors which inform McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God* (1973).

A definition of haruspicy is in order. Known to the ancient Romans as the *Etrusca disciplina* or "Etruscan art" (P. B. Ellis 221), haruspicy originally included all three types of divination practiced by the Etruscan hierophant: interpretation of *fulgura* (lightnings), of *monstra* (birth defects and unusual meteorological occurrences), and of *exta* (internal organs) (Hammond). Of these, the practice still commonly associated with the term is the examination of organs, as evidenced by its OED definition: "The practice or function of a haruspex; divination by inspection of the entrails of victims" ("haruspicy"). A detailed science of liver divination developed in the ancient world, and instructional bronze liver models formed by the Etruscans—as well as those made by their predecessors the Hittites and Babylonians—have survived (Hammond). Any unusual features were noted and interpreted by those trained in the esoteric art: "Significant for the *exta* were the size, shape, colour, and markings of the vital organs, especially the livers and gall-bladders of sheep, changes in which were believed by many races to arise

supernaturally . . . and to be susceptible of interpretation by established rules” (Hammond). Julian Jaynes, in his book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, comments on the unique quality of haruspicy as a form of divination, arriving as it did at the dawn of written language: “Extispicy [divining through *exta*] differs from other methods in that the metaphrand is explicitly not the speech or actions of the gods, but their writing. The *baru* [Babylonian priest] first addressed the gods . . . with requests that they ‘write’ their message upon the entrails of the animal” (Jaynes 243). Jaynes also remarks that organs found to contain messages of import would sometimes be sent to kings, like letters from the gods (Jaynes 244). Primitive man sought (and found) meaning everywhere.

The logic behind the belief was simple: the whole universe is a single, harmonious organism, with the thoughts and intensions of the intangible gods reflected in the tangible world. For those illiterate to such portents, a lightning bolt or the birth of a hermaphrodite would have been untranslatable; but for those with proper training, the cosmos were as alive with signs as any language:

The Babylonians believed that the decisions of their gods, like those of their kings, were arbitrary, but that mankind could at least guess their will. Any event on earth, even a trivial one, could reflect or foreshadow the intentions of the gods because the universe is a living organism, a whole, and what happens in one part of it might be caused by a happening in some distant part. Here we see a germ of the theory of “cosmic sympathy” formulated by Posidonius. (Luck 230)

This view of the capricious gods behaving like human kings is reminiscent of the evil archons of gnosticism; however, unlike gnosticism, the notion of cosmic sympathy implies an illuminated and vastly “readable” world, even in the darkness of matter. The Greeks viewed *pneuma* as “the substance that penetrates and unifies all things. In fact, this tension holds bodies together, and every coherent thing would collapse without it” (Lawrence)—a notion that diverges from the gnostic idea of *pneuma* as spiritual light temporarily trapped in the pall of physicality.

Proper vision, then, is central to all the offices of the haruspex. The world cooperates with the seer by being illuminated, readable. And fittingly, despite its dark subject matter, *Child of God* is not set in blackness in the way that *Outer Dark* is. On the contrary—as Andrew Bartlett notes, vision and point of view are employed as metaphors throughout the novel. “The text,” Bartlett writes, “is concerned not with a theological question, as the title might suggest, but with a problem of vision: how does a man such as Lester Ballard see the world? How might we, how ought we to see Lester Ballard?” (Bartlett 3). In order to achieve such an effect, McCarthy lights up Ballard for the reader—lights his perversion, his voyeurism, his cross-dressing, his masturbation, his necrophilia and finally his homicidal mania—leaving nothing in the dark, save his thought processes. Indeed, Dianne C. Luce remarks on the cinematic quality of the novel and its subtle revision of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (Luce, *Reading* 146-53). But nothing in the dialogue, no “pop” psychological explanations will help us to relieve ourselves of Lester Ballard: we must look, like the protagonist who “leaned his face to the green water and drank and studied his dishing visage in the pool” (127), the text becoming a “Narcissan mirror for the

reader” (Luce, *Reading* 169). We must stare into the face of our own potential malevolence, Ballard having been established at the outset as “a child of God much like” ourselves (4).

A sort of desperation pervades the various perspectives in the novel—a desperation to gain understanding not provided by the surface of things, although all we can do is look. The reader initially sees the vividly described “caravan of carnival folk” come to the auction of Ballard’s family home (3), and immediately after, sees him seeing it: “To watch these things issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning is a man at the barn door. He is small, unclean, unshaven” (4). The camera then moves over his shoulder to show “a rope hanging from the loft” (4)—the same one with which “his daddy killed hisself” (21). And the reader, who has already been addressed by the narrator once, is then told: “through the thin and blueveined lids you can see the eyeballs moving, watching” the dumbshow of his undoing (4).

The desperation is not Ballard’s alone. McCarthy’s technique of presenting us with the disembodied perspectives of various local simpletons in Part I of the novel indicates a frantic need on their part to explain—and so dismiss—Ballard’s warped psyche. In much the same way that interviews with neighbors of serial killers seldom shed light on the depths of psychological horror to which human beings can descend, the passages in which McCarthy’s gallery of nameless commentators speak serve as ironic devices for engendering empathy in the reader. The first speaker is somewhat sympathetic toward Ballard, saying that he “never could hold his head right after” being hit with an ax by someone named Buster (9),

but then indicting the man who purchased Lester's house, John Greer, for being an outsider: "John Greer was from up in Grainger County. Not sayin nothing against him but he was" (9). And so evil is explained away—it is the thing that intrudes from outside the community. The second narrator relates a story of bullying in grade school—a story told in great detail, in which a boy named Finney gets a bloody nose, after which the storyteller tells some unknown interviewer: "I felt, I felt . . . I don't know what it was. We just felt real bad. I never liked Lester Ballard from that day" (18); it is another pointless hindsighted tale that only appears to discuss the nature of the murderer. A third man wishes Ballard's father had spared the community the discomfort of dealing with his mode of suicide, although he is capable of recounting the sight in great, gory detail: "The old man's eyes was run out on stems like a crawfish and his tongue blacker'n a chow dog's. I wisht if a man wanted to hang himself he'd do it with poison or somethin so folks wouldn't have to see such a thing as that" (21). The next recounts a scene of mere stupidity on Ballard's part—an attempt to move a cow with a tractor that results in her death—and is reminded of a similar stupid story about another man (presumably someone who does not turn out to be a serial killer) lighting a fire under some stubborn oxen until they drag his wagon over him (35-36). The final section of Part One involves more hearsay, this time about Ballard's father and grandfather before him: "They wasn't none of em any account that I ever heard of," the speaker asserts, later adding, "I'll say one thing about Lester though. You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn't outstrip em all" (81)—in other words, no one

else in his family was a murderous necrophile, a bland enough observation which could apply equally well to nearly anyone.

If Lester's modern evil outstrips any since Adam, one might infer universal degeneration over time. Yet there is disagreement on this subject in the text. When a woman tells Sheriff Fate that she "never knew such a place for meanness," he replies that it "used to be worse" (164); later in the same chapter, the sheriff's deputy asks old Mr. Wade regarding the days of the White Caps: "You think people was meaner then than they are now?" and he responds, "No . . . I don't. I think people are the same from the day God first made one" (168). All three possibilities are posited, then: things are either worse than ever, better than ever, or exactly the same. It depends upon whom you ask. All three assertions imply a sort of divination—they are attempts by people to read the signs of the times in order to determine what the future may hold. Ironically, Sheriff Fate, who appears to believe in human advancement, is the one who divines Lester's future—after releasing him from jail, he asks:

What sort of meanness have you got laid out for us next . . . I figure you ought to give us a clue. Make it more fair. Let's see: failure to comply with a court order, public disturbance, assault and battery, public drunk, rape. I guess murder is next on the list, ain't it? Or what things is it you've done that we ain't found out yet. (56)

The aptly-named Fate perhaps utters a self-fulfilling prophecy here, indicating a cynical view of individuals despite a rosy conception of humanity generally. The same kind of ambiguity governs the auctioneer's speech to the crowd at the

beginning of the novel, when he declares: “They is real future in this property. As much future as you’ll find anywheres in this valley” (5)—as though “future” were an actual commodity to be bought and sold—before making the contradictory remarks that “[a] dollar might not be worth fifty cents a year from now” and that real estate is an investment that is “the soundest you can make. Sound as a dollar” (6). In an uncertain world, this auctioneer might stand in as a kind of secular seer, if only he could be trusted. All that this one can do, however, is help to wrest Ballard’s future from him and hand it over to Greer.

Astrology of a sort is suggested throughout the novel as a means of divining the future, although there is never a specific application of the signs of the zodiac. The narrator informs us of Ballard that “[a] malign star kept him” (41), mysteriously asserting what might be considered a superstitious opinion about the influence of the heavens on terrestrial life. Chris Walsh also remarks, not only on Ballard’s practical use of the stars to orient himself once he is dispossessed, but also on the emotional aspect of their “witnessing” the injustices he endures:

Significantly, such ancient cartographic markers prompt Lester into one of his few considered, albeit rather limited, introspective moments, and it is the closest he gets to metaphysical contemplation of what he and the natural world are made of: “When they [bats fleeing from the cave] were gone he watched the hordes of cold stars sprawled across the smokehole and wondered what stuff they were made of, or himself” (141) . . . [Ballard’s] increasing existential sense of his own insignificance (and kinship with inanimate matter) is

reinforced by these uncaring astrological phenomena that have taken millions of years to form and have looked down on other Lesters, and will do so again. (Walsh, *In the Wake* 151)

The sort of “looking” these stars engage in—stars McCarthy previously termed “lidless” (133) just as he described the eyes of the asphyxiated girl as staring at Ballard “with lidless fixity” (86)—is distant, dead. The heavens stare as unsympathetically as do his neighbors.

After his escape from the underground caves, Ballard again turns to the night sky for help: “He cast about among the stars for some kind of guidance but the heavens wore a different look that Ballard did not trust” (190). The look is not one that he does not recognize—not one that would not be useful in establishing his direction, that is—but one that is not trustworthy generally: he has a presentiment that the whole of the cosmos is hunting him. He has had similar feelings before and saved himself, as when his roof catches fire while he sleeps: “He woke in the night with some premonition of ill fate” (104). The illegibility of the stars is conspicuous, evidently a change from the ordinary; toward morning of the day of his rebirth from underground, “roosters were calling. Perhaps they sensed a relief in the obscurity of night that the traveler could not *read*, though he kept watch eastward” (191, emphasis added). This notion of “reading” the heavens for signs is one with strictly practical implications, of course—just as the purposes of divination are strictly practical.

Walter Burkert addresses the origin of the zodiac in modern, pragmatic terms:

[B]irds as well as humans cannot help seeing the stars as forming shapes and patterns—constellations, memorable icons rather than single interrelated dots—and they derive their orientation from them in the dark. If the ancients spoke of “animals” in the sky, the *zodia* of the zodiac, they were using the primitive hunter’s eye, trained to distinguish, first of all, the different animals in the surroundings; they were also relating these “animals” to the main repertoire of meaning, to mythology. This is projection, in the sense of producing a world picture that is not “real” but that easily assumes the character of familiarity; it keeps the subject tied to the external world observed in its details. (Burkert 156-57)

For simple organisms like birds, the stars can be used strictly for navigation. But for slightly higher ones, such as Ballard, the stars are vested with significance, orienting them not just in space, but in time. Of course there is always the danger of misinterpretation, and there is Burkert’s suggestion that the whole enterprise is a sort of Rorschach test. But the linguistically-oriented human brain is ever prepared to read itself through the mysterious typography of the zodiac.

Ptolemy’s view, in his *Tetrabiblus*, is quite different. He “believes that astrology is a divine art, and that it is revealed to mankind as a special favor of the gods” (Luck 344), if one that does go wrong occasionally: “Ptolemy argues . . . that the fault lies with the imperfect human beings who practice it. To illustrate the problem, he compares astrology with the art of navigation and with medical science,” arguing that imperfect practitioners of such sciences do not belie [those

sciences'] validity (Luck 344). Ancient scientists like Ptolemy, continuing to accept the notion of an all-powerful *signator* in the universe (Burkert 160), argued for a purely objective, absolute truth contained in the signs of the heavens. Science was called upon to look and interpret, but was incapable of looking at itself and determining its own validity as science.

In *Child of God*, McCarthy satirizes the scientific community—specifically medical science—employing his typical method of atavistic implication. The broad comedy of the incestuous dumpkeeper who “had spawned nine daughters and named them out of an old medical dictionary Urethra, Cerebella, Hernia Sue” (26) begins the parody—the nadir zone of the dump, fenced off and beyond the pale, is also, by way of these unfathomed names, ironic home to the zenith of scientific thought. The primordial dump spawns pretty, prolific girls who perpetuate all its highest and lowest qualities “like cats in heat” (26), ad infinitum. This is the fecund landfill of human endeavor and community, forever sinking to its most comfortable level despite the aspirations of science over the millennia.

In a more sublimely satiric moment, the narrator sets science up beside the ancient art of the *haruspex*. The effect can be read in opposite ways, with the text privileging neither of them: either modern science is debased, or ancient science is elevated. As was the case in *Outer Dark*, McCarthy indicates the significance of a method of divination by way of a metaphor found in a single passage in the novel. After the death of Lester Ballard, the subsequent autopsy is described in terms that ironically associate modern medicine with pagan natural science:

He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. (194)

A number of important themes reach their culmination in these few sentences. First, we see science staring objectively at Ballard's physical makeup in order to understand it. Such activity recalls Ballard's own musing about the stars and "what stuff they were made of, or himself" (141), as well as Ballard's treatment of that first "windfall" corpse, whose body he "inspected . . . carefully, as if he would see how she were made" (92). He has also already had a vision of himself as "stuff," the unconscious residue of a soul: "He heard the mice scurry in the dark. Perhaps they'd nest in his skull, spawn their tiny bald and mewling whelps in the lobed caverns where his brains had been. His bones polished clean as eggshells, centipedes sleeping in their marrowed flutes, his ribs curling slender and whitely like a bone flower in the dark stone bowl" (189). The suggestion of a physical world reduced to nothing by the absence of mind—the dispassionate, clinical treatment of the enormity of death—is horrifying in itself. But the fact that these students are likened to haruspices means this is more than the ordinary autopsy: this is an attempt to "read" Ballard, to understand the text of his physical body and thereby decode his deviant behavior. It is an approach doomed to fail, limited as it is to viewing Ballard objectively rather than empathetically reading the text of the

human heart. Such an attitude is dangerous, of course, in that it discards the duality of the enlightened mind studying the benighted subject, replacing it with a philosophy of universality. And one final item is addressed: the issue of how to understand the progression of evil. The narrator tells us these men “perhaps saw monsters worse to come” in Ballard’s entrails, suggesting degeneration as the final answer to the question posed repeatedly in the novel. But the fact that this is only “perhaps” the case, just as Ballard was “a child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4), puts us back where we started, in a world shrouded in mystery.

The derivation of the word *haruspex* also proves significant. McCarthy is famously cautious about his word choices—hierophant, priest, even *auspex* might have served here. But the word used is *haruspex*, based on the Latin words “spec” (to look at, to see) and “haruga” (a victim) (Anthon 488, quoting Donatus). And, although he is not killed by his enemies, Ballard is clearly a victim. Twice over the course of the novel, Lester responds to orders from the authority figures who browbeat him—first Fate and then the leader of the lynch mob—with the cryptic remark, “You got it all” (50, 182). And of course they do, by comparison with him. Lester has no house, no job, no wife, no friends, no sense—all he has is the gun he totes everywhere, and the stuffed bears and tiger he won at the fair. Late in the novel, we see him “going across the face of the mountain to review the country he’d once inhabited” (169), the passage ending: “he let his head drop between his knees and began to cry” (170). His monstrosity is a product of his treatment by nearly everyone he meets—he is permanently locked out of the world of those who have “got it all.”

But Ballard is not the only victim. If the reader is also a child of God, he or she is also in danger of being judged a monster in the future. The Spanish title of the book, *Hijo de Dios*, might also be viewed as complicating matters with its gender simplification: Lester may be thought of as *the* son of God. Once the reader has gotten past the shocking suggestion of Christ's being likened to a murderer and necrophile, another meaning surfaces: society relies on destroying its scapegoats in order to thrive. Lester takes away the sins of the world—the sins of loneliness, selfishness, lustfulness, wrath, murder—so that the good people can believe themselves stainless. In the second passage in which the narrator directly addresses the reader, after linking him or her to Ballard, he advises:

See him. You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. But they want this man's life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with lanterns and cries of execration. How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him? (156)

Now it is not Ballard who is "like you," but his fellow men, those who are sustaining him. If society "gives suck to the maimed and the crazed" but also "want[s] this man's life," it is because it needs its beloved anathema, its Christ. The lynch mob and the sacrificial victim are at once elements of the community and elements of the individual. During his three days underground (mirroring Christ's three-day harrowing of hell in Christian tradition), Ballard is viewed by the narrator as "this

drowning captive [who] looked so inculpate in the fastness of his hollow stone you might have said he was half right who thought himself so grievous a case against the gods" (189). This rare glimpse into the consciousness of a McCarthy character is seemingly tempered by the oddity of the thought—is Ballard a case against the gods because he is so utterly impoverished, or because he is allowed to continue living despite the damage he has inflicted? What does he think?

While Lester may be a victim, a fact associating him with the Christ of the gospels in a general way, he is more similar to the Christ of the bloody book of Revelation, with the sword of his word protruding from his mouth to strike down his enemies (see Revelation 19:15). Lester carries his gun everywhere, of course. Other details link him with the sword-wielding assassin savior—when he discovers the suffocated couple in the car, he hears two lines from a song on the radio before shutting it off: "Gathering flowers for the master's bouquet. / Beautiful flowers that will never decay" (86). Although the corpses that are eventually found by the authorities in Sevier County can hardly be termed "beautiful flowers that will never decay" in a literal sense—we read that "the bodies were covered with adipocere, a pale gray cheesy mold common to corpses in damp places" (196) and that "[g]ray soapy clots of matter" and a "gray rheum dripped" from them (196)—Ballard's ironic role as messenger of heavenly injustice is confirmed.

Child of God, while containing some elements of biblical parody previously seen in *Outer Dark*, is most concerned with skewering modern sensibilities. Scientism is lampooned in deft strokes, first with the allusion to the old medical dictionary in the dump from which spring those nubile daughters like fornicating

furies, and finally with the allusion to the medical students who are akin to haruspices. Rather than advancing human knowledge, medical science, with its tendency to fetishize the visible, is portrayed as though it were a hindrance to wisdom. Between the Christs and the Ballards of the world lies a whole spectrum of possibilities, none of them comprehensible by the oversimplifications of modern science:

The French psychologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl . . . suggested that primitive man indulged in “pre-logical thought,” which he described as mystical, emotional, and not embarrassed by contradictions. The weight of anthropological evidence today, however, favors the view that pre-logical thought develops concurrently with logical thought and is never completely displaced by it. The Belgian anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has suggested that magic and science are “two parallel modes of acquiring knowledge.” (Smith 13)

Ballard and the medical students are related in their atavistic, divinatory “looking.” But Ballard is the one who seems “not embarrassed”—locked in a mode of “pre-logical thought,” he is in opposition to the “logic” of society and science. The delusion of rationality and rejection of divination is what causes the blindness of the medical students.

More so than in any of his other works, McCarthy uses the trope of divination satirically in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, associating the practice with the Judeo-Christian tradition and with medical science, respectively. But it is science’s erudite

blindness—its insistence upon continuing to gaze without comprehension,
“lidlessly”—that seals it away from the wisdom of the ancients.

CHAPTER 5

IMAGE-MAGIC AND BONE DIVINATION IN *SUTTREE*

In “A Writer’s View of Cormac McCarthy,” Madison Smartt Bell lists the order of McCarthy’s first novels as *Suttree*, *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and then *Suttree* again (M. S. Bell 7). Although it was not published until 1979, placing it at the end of the Southern novels and right before *Blood Meridian* (1985), *Suttree* was a project twenty years in the making—McCarthy was working on it even before he began his first published book. Several of its most notable characteristics make it unique among his works: its allegedly autobiographical “plot,” its detailed depiction of life in a single city (Knoxville, Tennessee), and the philosophical interiority of its protagonist. In a sense, to read *Suttree* is to plunge into the primordial soup from which sprang the “three perfect little books it encloses” (M. S. Bell 8)—that is, the first three published works.

One enigmatic figure appearing in both *The Orchard Keeper* and *Suttree* is that of the potion-making black sorceress. Here, her name is Mother She, and her plot function is similar to that of the character who opens young Arthur Ownby’s eyes. However, unlike the witch in *The Orchard Keeper*, her presence here addresses all of the novel’s major themes: healing, religion, control, sexuality, inscrutable femininity, existential absurdity, and death. She stands at the center of this remarkably decentered work, her influence radiating far beyond the handful of scenes in which she appears. She is responsible, in her grotesque way, for pulling Suttree himself from a boundless, cavernous, subterranean depression, back up to street level.

“A black witch known as Mother She was going along Front Street toward the store, a frail bent shape in black partlet with cane laboring brokenly through the heat” (65). So she first appears: a creature displaced in time, as evidenced by her “black partlet,” a remnant of sixteenth-century fashion (“partlet”), and one who is deceptively weak in appearance, as indicated by the descriptors “frail,” “bent,” “with cane,” and “laboring brokenly.” Her later role will reveal her to be anything but powerless.

McCarthy, although he is arguably dealing with a stock character in Mother She, makes his entire description of her resonate and work throughout the text, even down to his use of the word “shape” here to describe her. The omniscient narrator’s introduction to the city of Knoxville raises the subject of shapes, forms, and shapelessness repeatedly, before the introduction of Cornelius Suttree, or Mother She, or anyone else: the city itself is “*constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture*” (3), as is the novel, and it is a “*carnival of shapes*” (3); from a “*moonshaped rictus in the streetlamp’s globe*” fall the “*forms burnt and lifeless*” of dead insects (4); the inhabitants of the city appear “[*illshapen or black or deranged*]” to the good people driving by (4); “[*fourfooted shapes*]” cross our line of vision (5); we read that that the mystery of evil has been shut inside the city “*and can you guess his shape?*” (4-5); finally, we are told that “[*ruder forms survive*]” (5). And so the terror of grotesque shapes and forms, of which Mother She is a prime example, sets the stage for Suttree’s existential musings, as acceptance of “illshapen” existence will prove crucial in his final epiphany. Just after his first visit with her, Suttree goes to Howard Clevenger’s; sitting down and leaning back, he sees that “[o]n the ceiling

were tacked odd-shaped bits of paper” (230). This symbol of strangely-shaped forms lying impaled becomes increasingly meaningful as the notions of formlessness, stillness and impaling are repeated throughout the text.

The witch’s archaic clothing also brings to mind the first line of the novel: “Dear friend now in the dusty clockless hours of the town” (3). The oxymoronic “clockless hours” of that Dantean inferno which is 1950s Knoxville imply a brief reversal of the norm—rather than stand corpse-still while time flows around us, it is time which is briefly fixed while we take a guided tour of death. Suttree will shortly see a suicide’s corpse fished from the Tennessee River with a grapnel hook through his cheek, and will notice “with a feeling he could not name that the dead man’s watch was still running” (10)—a reminder of the absurdity of day-to-day life. Disinterested time continues flowing, like the foul river, sometimes producing a dead fish and sometimes a dead man: “Time is of the world, too, like death, and has no designs on us flowing past, not even punishment; nor does it call us into question. We call ourselves into question thinking of it, watching a man’s watch suddenly become mere time” (V. Bell 90). It is in her timeless demeanor and her embracing of death that Mother She is the tranquil antithesis of Suttree.

Clocks, sometimes stopped for the living and in motion for the dead, are recurrent symbols in the novel, always taking us back to this anonymous suicide of the first chapter. Suttree is reminded of the passing of time by “the old tin clock on [his g]randfather’s table” that “hammered like a foundry” while the old man was on his deathbed (13), by that same grandfather’s earlier timing of a racehorse and declaring without irony that its perfect performance is “a thing against which time

would not prevail" (136), by the illuminated courthouse clock in the blackness of 2:00 AM as it hangs disembodied above lifeless Knoxville like a "cheshire clock" (29), by his imagination of the "clocklike blade of the cradle" (80), by the "ferris wheel turning like a tiny clockgear" while he gazes at a fairground from the distance (408). At moments when it appears that the living have been permanently pinned in a deathlike state, clocks are seen to stop: on his way to prison Harrogate views from the train window a "midnight café, empty stools, a dead clock on the wall" (439), and part of Suttree's typhoid nightmare includes the paranoid hallucination that he is responsible for clocks stopping: "Coming to rest. The clock hands too. He looked at his face in the glass. On the wall beyond other clocks are stopping. Me?" (454). His final "me?" is ambiguous, either indicating that Suttree thinks he might be guilty of stopping time, or that he suspects he himself might be stopping, or dying. Perhaps both possibilities apply. His despair over death, attended by the grinning absurdity of the cheshire cat clock, is always in front of him; as Dianne C Luce observes, "he cannot repress his hyper-awareness of the body's death and decay" (Luce, *Reading* 231). Even in the presence of Mother She, with her transcendent power, the ever-present clock is heard to make an ironic comment: when Suttree implies that the witch's divination is not the same as controlling events, She responds by saying, "To know what will come is the same as to make it so," after which we read, "Suttree smiled. Somewhere in the house clockgears clacked" (423). The sardonic observer (either Suttree or the narrator) remains unconvinced for the moment, hearing the reminder of death via the clock as though

it were a rejoinder, an argument for all human impotence, even for those with supernatural influence.

In her second appearance, the hag's symbolic role is further developed by her surroundings:

Mother She has come from upcountry with sacks and jars of the season's herbs. Her little yard lies deep with sere brown locust pods. In the trees small victims struggle, toad or shrewlet among the thorns where they have been impaled and the shrike who put them there trills from a nearby lightwire and it has begun to rain again. (145)

The ominous shrike appears once again when Suttree goes to visit the witch, being colloquially referred to as a "ninekiller" (227), but this time it is "tents of newsprint and trash and the ruins of kites" that are "impaled upon the locust spikes" (227)—struggling animals have been replaced with the inanimate refuse that is yesterday's news, a morose symbol of human lifelessness and absurdity. The final view of this scene occurs much later, after Suttree's potion-induced epiphany, when he sees Mother She's front yard one last time: "He could see the stalks of dockweed dead in the yard and beyond them the barren and pestilential locust wood and the trashpapers and newsprint among the boughs like varied birds illshapen pale and restless in the wind" (429). The impaled animals of the first scene become the trash of the second, both images merging to become trash that looks like birds in the third, and all "illshapen." And the predatory shrike, "called the 'butcher bird' because of its habit of impaling its prey on a large thorn or point of barbed wire to hold it until it gets hungry again" (Martin 169), is a fitting symbol for Mother She as

murderer: she is the one who threatens to freeze Suttree in absurd formlessness. It is interesting to note the divergent views on the shrike as symbol: “[A]s Thoreau renders it [in his “Natural History of Massachusetts”] . . . the shrike possesses a power that brings about the turn of seasons: ‘with heedless and *unfrozen* melody bringing back summer again’” (Belknap 179; see Thoreau 7; emphasis added). Despite the fact that it is a carnivore that pins and kills its prey in graphic manner, Thoreau associates the shrike with the world coming “unfrozen” in rebirth.

The seeming contradiction of the witch’s offices as both healer and killer also remains unresolved throughout. When Abednego Jones, who lives in a state of perpetual rebellion against Tarzan Quinn and the Knoxville Police Department, seeks Mother She, the hag knows exactly what he wants; although Jones has been healed by her in the past—“[s]he’s sewn him up like a hound with carpetthread and the blood beading very fine and bright from the pursings of black flesh, stanching lesser holes with cataplasms of cobweb, binding him in bedlinen” (279-80)—a fact which causes Suttree to say “He got beat up pretty bad down at the jail last week. I guess that’s why he wants to see you,” Mother She knows what sort of service he is really seeking: she replies, “He dont care nothin about that. He want to kill his enemies is what he want” (229). And clearly she can provide such a service:

She has bored a keep in a treebole and hid therein the dung of her enemy and plugged it shut with an oakwood bung. She leans to them in terrible confidence. His guts swoll like a blowed dog. He couldnt get no relief. His stool riz up in his neck till he choken on it and he

turn black in the face and his guts bust open and he die a horrible death a screamin and floppin in his own mess. (280-81)

Although the claim may be somewhat questionable, coming as it does only from Mother She herself, the novel does later give evidence that her powers are very real.

Mother She is here practicing a form of image-magic, such as that employed in voodoo rituals. Although it has become something of a Hollywood cliché, the practice of image-magic is a central part of the belief system imported, by way of the slave trade, to the United States in the nineteenth century from Haiti and West Africa (Long 3). It employs the use of everyday objects, transmogrified by way of personal power, to become malevolent fetishes: “The *maleficia* commonly required something personal. A proper hex or curse could be cast without anything more than a black prayer, but generally, cast spells required something more tangible. Hair from the victim to be cursed was useful, a fingernail paling, some clothing” (Paine 80). Heike Behrend traces the use of photographic image-magic as practiced in Kenya and Uganda to European missionaries and discusses the notion of fetish photographs as “variations on the Eucharist” with its “paradoxes of presence and absence as well as substance and representation” (Behrend 130). Image-magic is based on the age-old notion that there is a secret sympathy between things that resemble each other, or have been in contact with each other, and that, because of this, a man can be physically or mentally affected by the treatment given to a figure made in his likeness, or to some other object temporarily identified with him. (Hole 80)

Even this notion of “secret sympathy” between identical things is relevant to Suttree’s story in a number of ways: the somewhat comic passage concerning Vernon and Fernon, the twin brothers who “can tell what one another is thinkin” (360); Suttree and his own stillborn twin brother (17); Suttree and his imaginary doppelganger Antisuttree (28), later called his “ghosty clone” (287); Harrogate and his doomed image staring back at him on the train to the penitentiary (439)—all are instances of the complementary double. The witch herself represents a synthesis of two selves—the conscious and unconscious, the living and the dead, the healer and the murderer—which is implied in the redundancy of her name, Mother She. Like Doll Jones’ dead eye, which is “like the pineal eye in atavistic reptiles watching through time, through conjugations of space and matter to that still center where the living and the dead are one” (447), Mother She stands calmly and powerfully at the center of the birth-death cycle. Hers is an attitude toward which Suttree aspires.

When Suttree goes to visit Mother She, requesting that she pay Ab Jones a house call, the witch begins to turn more human. However, she is still suffused with mystery and menace for Suttree: “She came to him and took his head in her hand and held up something small and oddly shaped and wrapped in an old socktoe. Suttree fended it off . . . Hold still, she said” (228). He has sustained an injury—a visible welt on his forehead caused by a slung rock—and it is this hurt that Mother She is focused on healing: “Aint a fool a wonderful thing, she said. It’s ice, boy” (229). Suttree misinterprets the motherly gesture as something more sinister, the ice as something from the witch’s supernatural bag of tricks, and is put off as well by the fact that the item is “oddly shaped,” a characteristic generally found in those

objects reminding him of his deepest fears. Another fear is also raised—that of “holding still,” i.e., in death. Suttree’s nagging existential questions are all addressed in *Mother She*, although he is not yet prepared to recognize the role she will have in his spiritual and psychological healing.

Despite this kindly, restorative role, however, in her next appearance the pendulum of her persona swings back to danger and death. “Suttree would see her in the street, dawn hours before the world’s about” (278) we read, reminding us of the clockless hours of our introduction to deathly Knoxville, during which “*no one shall walk save you*” (3). She wears “a shapeless frock of sacking dyed dead black” (278)—reintroducing odd shapes and death once again—and “a shawl of morling lamb” (278), morling wool being that “taken from the skin of a dead sheep” (“morling”). Once he and Ab Jones are in the witch’s house, his attention is drawn by the pictures on her walls, those “portraits of blacks, strange family groups where the faces watched gravely from out of their paper past . . . [h]anging in the dark like galleries of the condemned” he’d seen on his previous visit (228). *Mother She* informs him of her grandmother in one of the photographs, a woman who “was born in seventeen and eighty-seven” and who is one hundred and two years old and “dead in the picture” (279). Suttree then descends into one of his typical morose meditations, seeing “[t]he hands at the neck of the creature” that “seemed to be forcing her to look at something she had rather not see and was it Suttree himself these sixty-odd years hence?” (279). The math allows this statement to remain ambiguous: is this dead grandmother the image of a future Suttree being forced to face death some “sixty-odd years hence,” or is she being forced—from within a

death that is sixty-years past—to face Suttree in the present? Either interpretation is valid; Suttree sees in the grandmother who “gazes at him from her vantage point of death” his “mirror image . . . a projection of his own obsessions” (Luce, *Reading* 224-25).

What he does not see, however, is the elusive sorceress. She tells him: “I was there. I never come out in the picture. I was there when it was took but I never come out” (279). She is ironically “in that dead place” in the photo (279)—“a grayed-out patch” (279) which Suttree might well believe to be the only *living* place in a catalogue of morbid images stuck upon a wall. Like the shrike, the ninekiller that Suttree previously saw fly away from its impaled prey, Mother She is too quick to be held fast like those around her. But she is not the subject, of course.

“She said: I dont know which of these souls is the worst troubled” (280), that is, Suttree or Ab Jones. She begins with a reading, not of the future, but of Jones’s past: “She began to recount for him aspects of his past. Legends of violence, affrays with police, bleeding in concrete rooms and anonymous coughing and groans and delirium in the dark” (280), all of which she apparently reads from his palm. But Jones is not there for a reading of his past, nor even of his future: “I aint interested in all that, he said. I just dont want to leave Quinn here and me gone” (280). But she refuses to grant Jones’s wish of retribution, as “silver seals but cannot buy such powers” (280). Instead, she moves on, intending to read his future:

Suddenly she opened her eyes and looked about and with a motion almost violent raised the leather bag and upended it over the table.

Out clattered toad and bird bones, yellow teeth, frail shapes of ivory

strange or nameless, a small black heart dried hard as stone. A joint from a snake's spine, the ribs curved like claws. A bat's skull with needleteeth agrin, the little pterodactyl wingbones. Tiny pestles of polished riverstone. These things lay shapen still and final upon the black damask . . . (281).

The practice Mother She engages in here is known as “throwing the bones,” an ancient African method of divination. It is not merely about prediction of the future, however—a wider definition acknowledges its diagnostic role: “Throwing of bones is a means of divination, that is to say, a means by which a diviner or medical practitioner determines, or attempts to determine, who or what caused an illness or other misfortune complained of by an individual or a group” (Chavunduka 131).

Swiss anthropologist Henri Junod, who lived among the Thonga of southeast Africa at the close of the 19th century, provided the world with copious details about the reading of divination bones, or *hakata*: “[S]hould a serious disease occur, one of those evils which are generally attributed to the buloyi [i.e., witchcraft], the first thing to do is to detect the culprit . . . Should [a witch's] bone fall in a certain way near the bone representing the patient, or near his amulets which have been placed on the mat, it shows that his disease is the outcome of buloyi [for example]” (Junod 479). The diviner would make note of which way a given bone was facing—whether it landed with its concave or convex side facing upwards, or its right or left side (Junod 502). Different bones were designated to indicate various individuals and stations within the village (with one associated specifically with the person whose fortune was being read), and other objects such as gemstones, river stones, shells,

etc., represented various potential future states, or answers to posed questions (Junod 499-502). The result was a sort of cosmos containing all possible concerns:

It is a form of wisdom in which reality is broken down into as many as 205 elements, each of which is represented by a bone, a piece of wood, or other object in a winnowing basketThe possible number of interrelationships between 200, or more commonly 100, symbols is obviously enormous [The reading of] the bones is integrated into a universal classification, one that embraces the entire cosmos.

(Zuesse 164-65)

In a sense, then, the diverse world of Knoxville and the interconnected fates of the novel's laundry list of characters—all are on display here for the witch. Although Mother She is attempting to heal Jones and obviate his quixotic plunge into death in the form of Tarzan Quinn, the reading does not turn out to be about about Jones, or even about Quinn: it is about Buddy Suttree. He is evidently the most troubled of the three.

After this harrowing scene, Suttree shuns the witch whenever he sees her. But, seemingly as a result of his worrying the subject in his subconscious mind, he begins to become unhinged. In the next chapter he hikes up into the mountains of Gatlinburg—an episode which resembles the Native American vision quest (O'Gorman 90, quoting Spencer). It's the first of three hallucinatory experiences he will have throughout the remainder of the novel, all triggered by Mother She's unrevealed knowledge of his spiritual distress.

Interestingly, passages in this Gatlinburg chapter resemble episodes later used in *Outer Dark*, particularly the one in which Culla wanders through the woods to deposit his nameless son and leave him for dead. In the “earlier” novel, during that act of communion with the depths of his culpability, Culla is able to see by cracks of lightning which give him “an embryonic bird’s first fissured vision of the world and transpiring instant and outrageous from dark to dark a final view of the grotto” (*OD* 17); he accidentally doubles back on the wailing infant and, having fallen, “[lies] there gibbering with palsied jawhasps, his hands putting back the night like some *witless* paraclete” (*OD* 18, emphasis added); in the next chapter, the tinker comes upon Culla’s confused tracks, which terminate in the same spot twice from two different directions, “[a]s if their maker had met in this forest *some dark other self* in chemistry with whom he had been fused traceless from the earth” (*OD* 10, emphasis added). Suttree’s experience in the mountains parallels Culla’s. We are told that Suttree “passed through a children’s cemetery” (286), raising the subject of the haunting stillborn twin again in his mind, the doomed baby that plagues him as the newborn does Culla. He also sits in darkness, watching a lightning storm: “That night he did not even make a fire. He crouched like an ape in the dark under the eaves of a slate bluff and watched the lightning,” that illuminates a hallucinogenic scene in the sky “between the dark and darkness yet to come [a] vision in lightning” (287). However, the most significant resemblance to *Outer Dark* comes with the imagined confrontation with “othersuttree”:

In these silent sunless galleries he’d come to feel that another went before him and each glade he entered seemed just quit by a figure

who'd been sitting there and risen and gone on. Some doublegoer, some othersuttree eluded him in these woods and he feared that should that figure fail to rise and steal away and were he therefore to come to himself in this obscure wood he'd be neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling with his ghostly clone from sun to sun across a hostile hemisphere forever.

(287)

This “mindless” and “drooling” composite of Suttree and his Jungian shadow self, othersuttree, forced to make its joint way across a “hostile hemisphere,” is the picture of “witless” Culla joined with his “dark other self” and facing the world’s opposition after his consummation of virtual infanticide. The death of the infant is the guilty secret of the survivor. This sheds light on Suttree’s sickness: it is not just a morbid terror of death and its attendant absurdity, but it is fear of personal guilt—the guilt of the lapsed Catholic, of the failed father and husband, of the prodigal son, of the surviving twin. Perhaps death is even preferable to the horror of facing the true self, an act which is sure to leave him insane and, essentially, permanently ill-formed rather than “mended” and “made whole.”

Mother She presumably sees all this in the positions of the bones, if we accept the idea as valid at least within the novel. But whatever her actual power may be, her imagined insight continues to work on Suttree’s imagination and psyche. After the death of the ragman, whose pathetic corpse he reprimands by telling it, “You have no right to represent people this way A man is all men. You have no right to your wretchedness” (422), Suttree immediately returns to Mother

She. It is as though he has hit bottom himself and has heard his own admonition in its application to him; if he—formless, unresolved, and wretched as the ragman—is waiting for death to come transfix him in that state, he is no better. His only hope is to turn back to that which he most fears. Ironically, the witch’s stated credentials in this next meeting highlight the opposite power she has emphasized when speaking to Ab Jones—instead of telling about feats of image-magic and fatal constipation, she speaks of healing: “Merceline Essary that they said would not never walk on this earth again by men was doctors come under me and I rewalked her in three days” (423). But now she will immerse Suttree in death, just the dose he needs to heal. While she heats oil and prepares philters, we read that “Suttree seemed unalarmed” (424)—a strange, objective observation coming from an omniscient narrator whose point of view has coincided with that of the protagonist throughout. This is a prelude to a further division to come: “he realized that this scene was past and he was looking at its fading reality like a watcher from another room. Then he was watching the watcher” (426). Here, then, is Suttree’s psychological disintegration, a process that clearly begins before he is invited to swallow the witch’s potion. With her guidance, he will find his way back into the source of his obsession with death, a source that lies in childhood memories:

[H]e was lifted in his father’s arms to see how quietly the dead lay. Suddenly Suttree sat upright. He saw in a small alcove among flowers the sleeping doll, the white bonnet, the lace, the candlelight. Come upon in their wanderings through the vast funeral hall. And the little girl took the thing from its cradle and held it and rocked it in her arms

. . . . The little girl was crying and she said that it was just lying in there by itself and the little boy was much afraid. (429)

As Thomas D. Young, Jr. points out, “the ‘thing’ the little girl takes from among the flowers is not a ‘sleeping doll’ at all but, as Suttree now realizes, a dead baby [T]here is no question with whom Suttree associates it: it calls to consciousness the key event of his mental life, as he believes, the stillbirth of his twin brother” (Young 101). There can be no question that this memory finds its way to daylight thanks to Mother She. Her role as therapist is firmly established.

Another aspect of her role, however, is more problematic. The “rape” scene appears too vividly described to be mere sexual nightmare. In it Suttree feels “a laying on of hands” (426), an expression which parodies the role of the healer by conflating it with that of the rapist; he sees “the black and shriveled leather teats like empty purses hanging”; feels “the plaguey mouth upon him”; finally sees “[h]er shriveled cunt puckered open like a mouth gawping,” and “flail[s] bonelessly in the grip of a black succubus” (426-27). After we read that “[i]n the yard he heard a bird scream” (426), narrator-Suttree leads us through a brief meditation on the birds we’ve seen pinning down prey out in the yard: “They are not rooks in those obsidian winter trees but stranger fowl, pale lean and salamandrine birds that move by night unburnt through the moon’s blue crucible” (426-27). These last words recall the introduction, in which the “moonshaped rictus” of a broken streetlamp draws insects to their deaths: “there drifts down through the constant helix of aspiring insects a steady rain of the same forms burnt and lifeless” (4). The latter description is yet another symbol of gnostic tragedy, with life being attracted to the false light of

the world (like the false moon of a broken streetlamp) only to be “burnt” by the impulses that pin it to physicality and keep it from attaining spiritual wholeness. Mother She, however, like the shrike, passes through the world and remains “unburnt” by physical desire and fear of death.

Suttree, on the other hand, has been anesthetizing himself by sating his physical desires, particularly after the earlier meeting with the witch—he has run deliriously in the opposite direction of introspection and understanding. He plunges into a relationship with young Wanda, the mussel hunter’s daughter, although he knows “[t]his is nothing but trouble” (352), which it proves to be. His second attempt at a relationship, this time with the prostitute, Joyce, is even more numbing: as he contemplates purchasing a Jaguar with her money, he feels “himself being slowly anesthetized” (405). Time and again, the narrator’s descriptions focus on the ice in the couple’s drinks, and cold skin: “Suttree got two paper cups of ice and poured the ice from the cups into the glasses she had brought and poured the whiskey over the ice” (399); “He reached to pluck small icicles from the rocks until he’d filled his glass with them . . . You’re icy cold, she said” (400); “Suttree held a piece of ice against his tongue till it was numb with cold, then leaned and licked her nipple” (407); “he thought she was cold” (409); “the city seemed frozen in a blue void” (409). His spiritual desensitization through alcohol, and more significantly through sex, is no solution to his problem, as he realizes whenever he’s left alone: “He surveyed the face in the mirror, letting the jaw go slack, eyes vacant. How would he look in death? For there were days this man so wanted for some end to things that he’d have taken up his membership among the dead” (405). Although

intercourse is perfectly natural, of course, its use as a desperate shield against death is counterproductive for Suttree in his quest for wholeness. Viewed in this way, the “rape” performed by Mother She is all part of the healing process, an attempt to bring the reality of death even into the act of coitus, where it can be confronted and overcome.

Vereen Bell, whose consideration of Suttree is otherwise astute, misreads the significance of Mother She, especially the meaning of this sex scene:

The whole episode with the old woman is reported with such solemn extravagance, and she herself is so preposterously arcane, that it is hard to know whether we are supposed to take the occasion seriously—especially given the faint implication that the old woman’s behavior all along has been an elaborate scheme designed simply to get Suttree into bed. (V. Bell 97)

Despite the extremity of Mother She’s characterization, she is not the opportunist Bell believes her to be. To cynically read her behavior as an “elaborate scheme” is to discount her more sublime qualities, even to explain away the disconcerting role of the supernatural in the novel. Another, more blatant error on Bell’s part may betray a similar sensibility: he tells us of the identical twin possum hunters that they “communicate telepathically. To demonstrate this mystery to the skeptics, one of the twins whispers a word *into Reese’s ear* that the other is to guess” (V. Bell 101, emphasis added). But this is not what happens at all: “*Reese* leaned and cupped his hand to the *possumhunter’s ear* and then sat back again. The possumhunter mouthed the word to himself, his eyes aloft . . . You got it, Fernon? he cried out . . .

Brother, he said” (361, emphasis added). This trick seems irrational—such mystical sympathy between twins, or anyone, does not make logical sense. But it clearly makes even less sense to think that one of the twins whispers a word into *Reese’s* ear, as Bell argues—that is no trick at all. A procrustean, rationalistic reading of the novel does not allow its enigmas to breathe. And Mother She is nothing if not an enigma.

At the beginning of his psychotropic trip, Suttree sits up and asks Mother She, “What do I do?” to which she replies, “You don’t do nothin. You will be told” (425). It is a cryptic statement, elucidated somewhat by John Vanderheide’s analysis:

Suttree is never told anything by anyone, real or hallucinated. Does this mean that Mother She’s prediction failed to come true? Not necessarily. Perhaps she did not mean to say that someone would be telling Suttree something; rather, she meant that Suttree would literally be told, that is, transformed from a material subject into a discursive one. Therein lies the manner of his resurrection and his redemption. (Vanderheide 179)

Mother She informs him, using the passive voice, that “he” will “be told”—that the novel *Suttree* will be written, and not solely by the active will of someone named Cornelius Suttree. In a nightmarish amalgam of court and carnival, Suttree is forced to defend himself against a valid charge:

[Y]ou betook yourself to various low places within the shire of McAnally and there did squander several ensuing years in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons,

spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds,
whores, trulls, brigands, toppers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks,
smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other felonious debauchees. (457)

The charge comes from within his own mind, of course, although its roots lie in the letter from his attorney father that says that life is to be found “in the law courts” and that “[t]here is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent” (14). Suttree’s only defense, for the moment, is to cry out, “I was drunk.” (457). But the clearheaded, knowing narrative, unflinchingly honest even in its “wasteful” moments, is part of Suttree’s telling. The story may be read as the birth of an author, even if we are not prepared to assume that the name of that author is Cormac McCarthy.

Another semi-autobiographical novel often compared to *Suttree* is Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Stephen Dedalus is a drunk wastrel with dreams of fame, a lapsed Catholic, an exile living under the noses of his own family, an insightful and aimless wanderer in his home city. Primarily, he is a writer, if only in his own mind. As is the case with Suttree, his coming to grips with the tragedy of his dissipation does not mark his repentance and the return of the prodigal son, but his growth into wholeness. The maturing Dedalus chastises himself for his past hubris, thinking in self-satire:

I was young. You bowed to yourself in the mirror, stepping forward to
applause earnestly, striking face. Hurray for the God-damned idiot!
Hray! No-one saw: tell no-one. Books you were going to write with
letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W
is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies on green oval

leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara. (Joyce 40)

Stephen's immature idea that this immortalization would occur "if" and not "when" he died is telling. Suttree, who has not spoken specifically of writing but has viewed the world with a writer's eye throughout, chastises himself similarly when he self-confesses: "I spoke with bitterness about my life and I said that I would take my own part against the slander of oblivion and against the monstrous facelessness of it and that I would stand a stone in the very void where all would read my name. Of that vanity I recant all" (414). Suttree has not given the reader any indication from whence this immortal fame was to have originated, but the world does not remember even the most skilled of fishermen; this passage contains the clearest indication that Suttree considers himself an unrealized artist. And Mother She has been instrumental in his recovery from profligacy.

Suttree may be difficult to place chronologically in McCarthy's *oeuvre*, having taken several years to complete. However, it does represent his perennial concerns in their rawest form: the search for control, meaning, and wholeness in a modern world divorced from God. Mother She's function as diviner is reprised in all McCarthy's subsequent novels, but never again after *Suttree* and *The Orchard Keeper* do we see the high degree of control a witch exhibits on her environment (that is, unless we consider Judge Holden to be a magician). Witchcraft is focused on harnessing the energy of the physical world in a way that is out of the diviner's depth: "To the witch all things had power: stones, trees, rivers, fens, mountains.

Witchcraft's world-view was of a planet teeming with power" (Paine 75). The diviner, however, could only hope to discover the immutable will of the gods by way of signs in his environment: "[T]he diviner was a sort of failed magician—the magician promises to change the future whereas the diviner, having realized that he cannot change it, promises only to predict it" (Johnston 18). Despite its problematic dual role, highlighted in the text by the curative and killing roles of both Mother She and the shrike, sorcery represents a much more sanguine perspective than the mere passive divination depicted in the remainder of the novels.

CHAPTER 6

THE QABALISTIC TAROT AS ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE IN *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

Widely regarded as McCarthy's most successful work, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985) is a phantasmagoria of revisionist American history. Unlike any of his other novels, it is peopled with actual historic figures, as John Sepich has noted—characters such as Reverend Green, John Joel Glanton, Albert Speyer, Governor Angel Trias, Sarah Borginnis, and Judge Holden (Sepich 13-48). Even the novel's laconic, nameless kid may be loosely based on Samuel Chamberlain, author of an account of the Glanton gang's exploits titled *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue* (Sepich xii). Plot incidents, 19th-century attire and firearms, the habits of Indian tribes, the Mexican-American political climate of 1849, and even a recipe for gunpowder—all are woven into a fiction so taut and lucid as to seem a sort of cinema of the actual.

In *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*, Barclay Owens suggests that the cultural referent of the novel is the infamously aimless violence of the Vietnam War:

A brief overview of the violence of the Vietnam era will place *Blood Meridian* more clearly in its social context. The official search-and-destroy tactics of our troops in Vietnam, especially in free-fire zones, regressed into primal violence as bands of loosely disciplined men took the war into their own hands American soldiers routinely tortured, killed, and maimed not only Vietcong but also innocent villagers. (Owens 20)

The fact that American soldiers might behave in such a way as to tarnish the glorious dream of American imperialism, killing babies and raping innocent South Vietnamese villagers—surely that must resonate with anyone who has endured the stylized torture of *Blood Meridian*. Whereas the novel's Captain White refers to the Apache as "a heathen horde [which] rides over the land looting and killing with total impunity" (33), the barb is clearly directed at more recent transplants to the Americas.

Presiding over the chaos of *Blood Meridian* is the enigmatic Judge Holden. A character of endless contradictions (artist and destroyer, scholar and savage, rhetorician and barbarian, moralist and pedophile, God and devil), the judge smiles and dances his way throughout the bloody text in Shiva-like fashion (Wallach 128), committing much of the novel's most senseless and indiscriminant butchery. From his introduction, in which he needlessly turns a devout audience into a murderous mob, the judge may appear to be an avatar of anarchy. However, in his final interview with the kid, he speaks of the realities of "order," "orchestration," "the plan," "destiny," and "fate"; and of blood as "the tempering agent in the mortar which bonds" (328-31). This vaunted order is a product of war's chaos. The implication is that the judge, rather than a force for pandemonium, has been an instrument of organization all along.

Substantial as his character is, however, the judge is merely part of a larger order within the novel: an order informed by the esoteric art of the tarot. A number of critics have examined the tarot as it applies to *Blood Meridian*. Within the novel, two blatant references to this divinatory art provide clues for interpretation: one in

which the kid finds “a gypsy card that was the four of cups” (59); and another in which the kid draws that card during an extended reading which also involves the fortunes of Black Jackson, Glanton, the fortuneteller, and the judge (91-96). John Sepich makes a number of connections between the novel and a variety of tarot trump cards such as Strength, Temperance, the Moon, the Star, and Death (Sepich 112); he also notes those associations that are harder to deny, such as that between the novel’s hermit and the tarot’s, between the fortuneteller and the High Priestess card, and between the judge and both the Magician and Fool cards (Sepich 106-112). However, critics have generally treated the evidence of tarot symbolism in the novel matter-of-factly, as though its significance were self-evident. Cards in a traditional tarot reading are seldom analyzed in isolation—although they have individual meanings, their relationships and the order in which they are drawn contribute to the interpretation. McCarthy’s repeated use of divinatory tropes to suggest an obscure and terrible order to the cosmos recommends that we sort through the wreckage of *Blood Meridian*, using the tarot as organizing principle.

Chapter Seven contains the extended tarot reading scene that suggests this form of divination as a key to understanding the novel. The chapter’s subject headings include “Hiccius Doccus,” denoting a cant formula used by jugglers in the same way that “abracadabra” or “presto” might be (“Hiccius doccus”); and “Tertium quid,” literally “third thing,” which is defined as “Something (indefinite or left undefined) related in some way to two (definite or known) things, but distinct from both” (“Tertium quid”). What begins with subtle mockery from the narrator, then, turns into a ceremony with universal philosophical implications: “[B]eyond will or

fate [man] and his beasts and his trappings moved both in card and in substance under consignment to some third and other destiny” (96). Critics of the gnostic camp such as Dianne Luce and Rick Wallach would identify this third thing as the demiurge, exercising his malevolent whim on humankind. But the definition, in light of the text, seems to indicate some compound of human will and cosmic fate that is beyond knowing.

Although it is Black Jackson who draws “El Tonto” or the Fool card, the traits associated with that card all point to Judge Holden. Emily J. Stinson asserts: “While depictions of the Fool vary in different decks, so do the roles of the Fool. Not only does the Fool play the role of the wanderer, but he also plays the roles of creator, destroyer, and trickster. A close examination of each of these roles reveals parallels between the judge and Tarot’s Fool” (Stinson 15). The judge is an artist, sketching the likenesses of artifacts and faces; he is a destroyer, as is clear to anyone who has read the book; and his role as trickster is also evident throughout, as in the incident with Reverend Green, his creation of gunpowder for the surprise massacre of Indians, and his discussion of God’s communication through “the bones of things” which makes the men “proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools” (116). When asked by Jackson to interpret the gypsy’s words about the card, the judge responds: “I think she means to say that in your fortune lie our fortunes all” and “I think she’d have you beware the demon rum” (93); both notions evincing an understanding of the card, as it is associated with both the initiation of creation or Cause of Causes (Wang, *Qabalistic* 246) and with intoxication (Huson 76).

But Robert Wang's interpretation of the Fool card as expressing "the relationship of the animal nature to the higher spiritual processes" certainly has application to the judge in a way that it cannot have to Jackson:

The implication is that the Creator's will to self-expression holds in check that counter-energy which would otherwise destroy creation as it happened. Yet the wolf must eventually be unleashed, freed back into nature, destroying creation and returning it to the state from which it originally emergedThe child and wolf are the balance of creator-destroyer, and are the first statement in the Tarot of the principle that every thing contains its opposite, the real key to esoteric studies. (Wang, *Qabalistic* 249)

No character in the novel manifests so many contradictory characteristics as does the judge. McCarthy describes him initially as "serene and strangely childlike" (6) and later as "outsized and childlike" (79), but his behavior is opposite to that of a child: he has all the savage innocence of a wolf. He is the "puer aeternus, a youth of immortal vigor" as he is depicted on an old Swiss Fool card (Stinson 17, quoting Nichols). His activities of simultaneous creation and destruction are the balanced facets of his nature, and they occur outside the domain of ethics—beyond good and evil, like the activities of gods.

Wang elaborates further on the role of the Fool card: "The Fool demands multi-faceted and fluid interpretation. It is certainly the most difficult and profound card of the entire Tarot deck Somewhere in our basest and most comprehensible existence, we find a correlate to the upper activity of the fool"

(Wang, *Qabalistic* 246-47). Wang discusses the seemingly opposite Qabalistic notions of Malkuth, “the earth on which we walk” (114), and Kether, “The Source of Energy from the Infinite Unmanifest” (53); he then concludes regarding consideration of the Fool: “We look deeply into Malkuth and find Kether!” (Wang, *Qabalistic* 247)—that is, the deepest spiritual truths are found in meditation on the mundane. Hence, both high spirit and low matter are integrated in the Fool. Éliphas Lévi, the 19th-century writer who drew elaborate connections between the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the twenty-two Tarot trump cards, also interpreted the Fool as representing both the flesh and eternal life (Huson 76)—a connection which becomes clear in the judge when, after spending the entire novel in a way that reveals him to be pragmatic and earthly, he spends the end dancing and exclaiming that “he will never die” (335). Tobin’s assessment of the judge as some otherworldly being seems to be borne out in the end.

But the cards also have relationships to one another, relationships that are represented in the novel. Whereas the Fool represents energy and potential, standing “outside the social order” and being represented by the number zero (Huson 74), the Magician card presents an aspect of that energy made manifest in the physical world. Stinson argues that the judge’s coin tricks are links to the Fool archetype, but it is the Magician, “depicted [as] a medieval street entertainer . . . performing his sleight of hand and tricks of legerdemain” (Huson 77) that aligns with the judge’s avatar as performer. The distinction is a fine one, as Wang notes: “The Fool and the Magician are separated by only a slight degree, a fact not obvious in the anthropomorphized symbolism of the cards . . . The Magician is a channel

through which the energy of the Fool is organized and passes downward The Fool activates the Magician” (Wang, *Qabalistic* 240-241, 247). The Magician is not a symbol of potential, but of actual energy. In the Qabalistic tree of life, an arrangement of symbolic Hebrew letters and their connecting Tarot paths, the highest point is Kether or “The Crown,” from which stem the paths of the Fool and the Magician (Wang, *Qabalistic* ii). All the rest of creation descends on the tree, the lowest forms appearing at the bottom and demonstrating strong polarization; here at the top, however, differences between opposing branches such as the Fool and the Magician are almost nil.

Aside from the Fool and Magician paths, one final path descends from Kether, the ultimate source of energy on the Tree of Life: the path/card of the High Priestess. This is the card the narrator associates with the gypsy fortuneteller in the tarot-reading chapter of the novel: “The woman sat like that blind interlocutrix between Boaz and Jachin inscribed upon the one card in the juggler’s deck that they would not see come to light, true pillars and true card, false prophetess for all” (94). This notion of the fortuneteller as “false prophetess” is not in harmony with what we know to be the accuracy of her predictions; however, it fits as a Judeo-Christian designation given to the character on the card historically, as she was apparently a false prophetess who installed herself outside Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem (Sepich 109, quoting Cavendish). The readings themselves might be a hoax at first—the blindfolded reader may be fed signals by the other gypsies that help her to identify the “querent” who draws the card in each case. But the reading of Glanton’s card is too accurate to be a mere trick.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the High Priestess card as it relates to *Blood Meridian* is summed up by Wang: “The High Priestess must be studied in terms of the Magician, in that she carries out what he initiates” (Wang, *Qabalistic* 236). As the third of three paths radiating from Kether, she joins the judge in both his Fool and Magician offices. But the gypsy in this scene is apparently carrying out that which the judge initiates, much as the Magician acts upon the impulse of the Fool. When Holden insists twice that the cards be presented to “el jefe” (95), the final fortune of the whole group is revealed in Glanton’s lost card: “La carroza, la carroza, cried the beldam. Invertido. Carta de Guerra, de venganza. La ví sin ruedas sobre un rio obscuro . . .” (96). Sepich translates this passage as follows: “The coach, the coach. Inverted. Card of war, of vengeance. I saw it without wheels on a dark river” (Sepich 108). The card must be the chariot—a card that stands for war and vengeance, but when inverted, stands for defeat or the condition of being “[o]verthrown, conquered by obstacles at the last minute” (Huson 100). Sepich goes on to interpret the card’s meaning in light of Glanton’s actual history:

McCarthy’s choice of this card inverted, in the gypsy reading, is an appropriate assessment of Glanton’s ‘luck’ at the Yuma ferry. The cards drawn in this pivotal reading leak their symbols and allusions into the whole of the story. If there is any doubt that in the universe of *Blood Meridian* divination by cards is possible, this blindfolded, night-darkened, yet accurate reading of an absent card should dispel it. (Sepich 109)

The parlor trick of fortunetelling has given way to a true oracle. Glanton's defeat at the hands of the Yuma Indians—his murder by Caballo en Pelo, whom he had tricked into a feigned alliance to take over the ferry—has appeared in the cards, long before he could possibly know about that ferry. And if the judge influenced the choice of the card, or the gypsy's reading, then he truly is a supernatural figure.

Wang warns regarding the perplexing, abstract nature of the three archetypal figures emanating from Kether: "Let it be clearly understood that the Fool, the Magician and the High Priestess (paths touching Kether) must be approached with a certain good natured whimsy. As we realize that the experience of Kether means the total annihilation of Self as we conceive it, we also see the irony of our attempt to grasp such refined principles from an earthly perspective" (Wang, *Qabalistic* 246). While worldly cards depicting chariots, towers, hanged men, lovers, etc. have their abstruse meanings as well, they are easier to grasp, appearing as they do in the reified region toward the bottom of the Tree of Life. But these spokes radiating from the highest point on the tree are, according to the tradition, essentially beyond human understanding.

It is interesting to note Glanton's role in the whole fiasco with the jugglers, especially in light of the "tertium quid" passage mentioned previously. Remarkably, it is Glanton who asks the leader of the gypsies, "You tell fortunes? . . . Para adivinar la suerte [for divining luck]" and initiates the scene that he dreads. In a rare moment of introspection recounted by the narrator, we later learn Glanton's position on the subject of fate:

He'd long forsworn all weighing of consequence and allowing as he did that men's destinies are given yet he usurped to contain within him all that he would even be in the world and all that the world be to him and be his charter written in the urstone itself he claimed agency and said so and he'd drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkenment as if he'd ordered it all ages since, before there were paths anywhere, before there were men or suns to go upon them.

(243)

In language that “ups the ante” on Ahab’s promise to strike the sun if it insulted him, Glanton simultaneously acknowledges fate and claims agency. Given the fact that he nearly kills the gypsy to stop her inspired prattle, however, we may wonder how confident he really is in his own free will. The tableau that then forms between gypsy, Glanton and judge may shed light on the “tertium quid” or third thing that is beyond both will and fate, according to the narrator. If the fortuneteller represents unbending fate and Glanton represents this “usurpation” that is the exercise of will—two irreconcilable concepts in philosophy—the judge, who “like a great ponderous djinn stepped through the fire and . . . put his arms around Glanton” to stop the gypsy’s murder (96) represents the tertium quid. He is the third thing, the Fool/Magician at the gates of the potential and actual, standing at the wellspring where agency and fate split. No practical reason can be detected within the text for the judge’s saving act here—the gypsy’s life should be no more valuable than any of those Holden takes throughout the rest of the novel. It is only in his capacity as orchestrator of this sublime event—the evil archon, as Wallach terms him (Wallach

125)—that he might be “possessed” to step djinn-like through the fire and save this mysterious figure, part of the esoteric triune at the top of the Qabalistic tree.

Before considering the kid and his symbolically rich *cuatro de copas* card, one more figure should be noted in relation to the judge’s Fool avatar. Long before the kid meets up with the Glanton gang, he spends the night in the hovel of a hermit. The Hermit card in the tarot trumps represents “the Wise Old Man who intervenes when the hero is in a desperate situation from which he cannot extricate himself alone. He provides something missing” (Huson 134). But it is not just water, food and shelter that the hermit provides the kid—it is something else that he is missing. “A man’s at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with,” the hermit advises (19). This notion of imprisonment in subjectivity is reflected later in one of the judge’s lectures to Glanton’s men, when he says: “[E]xistence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others” (245). It is an idea that seems to contradict his earlier claim that “only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before [man] will he be properly suzerain of the earth” (198)—if he is forever barred from knowing his own mind, he cannot hope to dominate everything in creation (assuming the judge’s hubris here is to be taken literally). However, assuming that the kid undergoes a sea change over the course of the novel, the lesson is not lost on him. Wang writes: “The Hermit . . . represents the first point of awareness by the Higher Self of the Supreme Spiritual Self” (Wang, *Qabalistic* 202). Recognition of an absolute world independent of the self may be a first step on the road to empathy and spirituality.

The parallel between the hermit's words and the judge's is no mere coincidence. An esoteric connection between Fool and Hermit exists: "The Hermit is an expression of the same energy as the Fool The idea that the Fool (child) is at the same time the Hermit (old man) may best be understood by meditating on the snake which holds its tail in its mouth, the traditional symbol of wisdom" (Wang, *Qabalistic* 202). Paradoxically, then, the symbols of transcendent wisdom and of vulgar pragmatism are conjoined in the Fool and Hermit. The archetypes are flip sides of the same coin. The Hermit even contains some of the malevolent energy that can be found in the Fool: "The hero must always be on guard. There is a dark side to the Wise Old Man. He may be an evil sorcerer; he may be a deceiver; he may be the instigator of great harm" (Wang, *Jungian* 136). The fact that he is associated with sexual love by virtue of his Hebrew letter *yod* adds another dimension to the nature of the danger (Wang, *Qabalistic* 203)—when the kid wakes in the night to find "the hermit bent over him and all but in his bed" (20), we can assume that some of the prurient energy which manifests itself as active pedophilia in the judge is seeking outlet here; however, the Hermit's qualities of "prudence, circumspection [and] . . . caution" (Huson 106) win out.

Unlike those Qabalistic Tree of Life paths previously discussed—that of the Fool, the Magician, the High Priestess, and the Chariot—the path of the Hermit leads directly to the "four" cards in the tarot deck: the fours of Wands, Swords, Coins, and Cups. Here, outside the archetypal trumps, the kid dwells. The first time he sees his four of cups card (and the second time, in fact) he has no idea what it is, although the narrator does: "There was . . . a gypsy card that was the four of cups" among the

detritus in an abandoned village (59). This first incident foreshadows and lends credence to the gypsy card reading event that takes place in chapter seven, when the kid sees his four of cups once again: “He took one. He’d not seen such cards before, yet the one he held seemed familiar to him. He turned it upside down and regarded it and he turned it back . . . The juggler took the boy’s hand in his own and turned the card so he could see. Then he took the card and held it up . . . Cuatro de copas, he called out” (94). McCarthy’s description cleverly evades the issue of inversion, with all this turning of the card: reversals of tarot cards, such as Glanton’s “invertido” war card, imply a reversal of the fate pictured. So the kid’s card, according to Waite, means either “weariness, disgust, [and] aversion” or “novelty, presage, [and] new instruction” (Huson 184), depending on which way it was facing when he drew it. The fours are also connected with the Hebrew letter *chesed*, translated as “mercy”—a fact that sheds light on the judge’s accusation that the kid “reserved in [his] soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (299; Sepich 106).

Although it is something of an anachronism to consider the image from the popular Rider-Waite tarot deck’s four of cups in connection with *Blood Meridian* (the deck came out exactly sixty years after the 1849 scalp-hunting expeditions of the Glanton gang) its imagery is undeniably linked with the novel. Prior to Rider-Waite, the cards simply depicted stylized cups, the suit cards not employing involved images in the way the trump cards did (Wang, *Qabalistic* 81). The Rider-Waite card, however, depicts a young man seated beneath a tree with three empty cups before him in the grass, and a fourth being extended to him by a “fairy hand” that is materializing from a cloud. The boy’s body language conveys the meaning of

boredom or ennui that has always been associated with the card in any deck (Huson 184); however, this added notion of the extended cup—an offering that may bring pleasure or may be refused—is reflected twice in the novel, reinforcing the Rider-Waite picture as the one McCarthy had in mind to characterize his kid.

The kid's first exposure to the four of cups card occurs when he is wandering through a Mexican village just after the massacre of its inhabitants. In one house he finds "a man, the charred flesh drawn taut, the eyes cooked in their sockets" along with "figures of saints dressed in doll's clothes, the rude wooden faces brightly painted," and "pasted to the wall. . . a gypsy card that was the four of cups" (59). This juxtaposition of quaint Catholic images with an occult one, and both joined by a blackened corpse, will have particular resonance with respect to both Mexico and the kid. Mexico is here portrayed as a half-pagan, half Christian nation, a self-deluded sacrificial lamb. This interpretation becomes clearer in light of the scene at the church that follows: the kid finds the corpses of "some forty souls who'd barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen" (60), a scene which evokes the comment from McCarthy's narrator that "the great sleeping God of the Mexicans [was] routed from his golden cup" (60). This appears to be a reference to Quetzlcoatl and "the ceremony of Montezuma wherein Montezuma and his court drank. . . out of golden cups that were used only once before being discarded" (Schimpf 113). The irony lies in the fact that this pagan reference comes in the middle of a description of the slaughter of Catholics and just prior to the observation of "a dead Christ in a glass bier" which "lay broken on the chancel floor" (60).

Ancient pagan and Christian gods are subtly equated and prove equally impotent in the face of the war god.

From the moment we first see him, the judge is oddly connected to the kid. After the kid and Toadvine set fire to the hotel in chapter one, the judge is mentioned, and he is at this point a minor character in the crowd: "A few men sat horseback watching the flames and one of these was the judge. As the kid rode past the judge turned and watched him. He turned the horse, as if he'd have the animal watch too. When the kid looked back the judge smiled" (14). It's unclear what the attraction is, although Holden is later shown to be particularly merciless toward children. Perhaps he is offended by their freedom and innocence, just as he is by that of birds: "The freedom of birds is an insult to me," he says; "I'd have them all in zoos" (199). The kid is unburdened by conscience at first, too, despite his "taste for mindless violence" (3): "The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent" (4). When Holden next sees the kid, the former is riding with the Glanton gang, the latter being rescued from a Mexican jail: "The kid was watching the judge. When the judge's eyes fell upon him he took the cigar from between his teeth and smiled. Or he seemed to smile" (79). In this passage it is plain that the kid is struck in some way by Holden; perhaps it's merely that his face is familiar, just as the four of cups looks familiar to him when he sees it a second time.

Tobin, the ex-priest, recognizes that Holden has power over the kid. "Pay him no mind lad," he says, knowing the impossibility of this (219). Indeed, Tobin himself is in part responsible for the judge's mystique: he begins his long story

about the gunpowder and Holden's saving act of alchemy by saying, "You wouldn't think to look at him that he could outdance the devil himself now would ye?" (123). As the Catholic Church perpetuates the myth of the devil, Tobin perpetuates the myth of Holden. But the ex-priest is a hypocrite, and the judge recognizes it:

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. . . . But what says the priest?

Tobin looked up. The priest does not say.

The priest does not say, said the judge. *Nihil dicit*. But the priest has said. For the priest has put by the robes of his craft and taken up the tools of that higher calling which all men honor. The priest also would be no godserver but a god himself. (250)

Rather than the voice of faith, the ex-priest is the voice of weakness and duplicity. When he and the kid have the upper hand on Holden, Tobin puts his faith in violence: "You'll get no second chance lad," he says; "Do it. He is naked. He is unarmed. God's blood, do you think you'll best him any other way?" (285). Indeed, what other way could there be? a victory in debate, or in a game of chance? But the kid balks. Later, the hypocrite puts his faith in his other god, Jesus: "[The kid] saw the expriest . . . holding aloft a cross he'd fashioned out of the shins of a ram and he'd lashed them together with strips of hide," after which the judge promptly shoots him in the neck (289-90). And so the priest is forced to witness the impotence of his god as a protector, just as those faithful Mexicans have been forced to do earlier.

The kid is ultimately faced with a choice. The exact nature of that choice is summed up in an interpretation of his tarot card, the four of cups. According to Arthur Edward Waite's book, *The Key to the Tarot*, the card represents "weariness, disgust, aversion, imaginary vexations" (Waite 132). On its face, "a young man is seated under a tree and contemplates three cups set on the grass before him. He expresses discontent with his environment. An arm issuing from a cloud offers him another cup" (Waite 132). In the picture, the young man is facing away from the mysterious arm and the cup it offers. Waite's interpretation continues: "[It is] as if the wine of this world had caused satiety only. Another cup of wine, as if a fairy gift, is now offered him, but he sees no consolation therein" (Waite 132). McCarthy's kid is too reticent for us to know his feelings on the subject. But the judge is unequivocal: "I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me," he says, "then and now" (328). Holden recognizes something worthwhile in the kid early on, but his hopes are dashed when the kid doesn't fully commit to the cause. "Don't you know that I'd have loved you like a son?" he says to the imprisoned kid (306); "our animosities were formed and waiting before ever we two met. Yet even so you could have changed it all" (307).

That "arm issuing from a cloud" can be no other than Judge Holden's; his "fairy gift" is an invitation to absolute war. He recognizes in the kid the same malaise that is evident in the young man on the face of the four of cups: "You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness and despair. It is that which we take arms against, is it not?" (329). Such a sentiment triggers the initial commitment a young man makes to war—his first communion, so to speak, which

the judge recognizes needs to be followed up by the adult's confirmation: "Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance" (331). In this test, the kid has failed.

A comic parallel to the battle between the forces that would take the kid's soul is that fought over the idiot. When first we see him, we read that "his face was smeared with feces and he sat. . .silently chewing a turd" (233). He is wild and uncivilized, incapable of putting on airs or adopting religions. We see him repeatedly staring through his cage bars, always either at the sun or at a fire, fascinated (241; 243; 251-52; 258). He is humanity in its purest state: a natural pagan. And yet Sarah Borginnis and what appears to be a women's temperance league adopt his cause and baptize him: "They led James Robert into the waters He sees hisself in it, they said He turned his dead black eyes upon [the burning wagon]. He knows, they said" (258). But after a brief stint in a wool suit with his hair slicked back, James Robert is once again the idiot, naked, stumbling in the dark and nearly drowning in that same river they'd bathed him in earlier; when the judge snatches him out and saves him, it is "a birth scene or a baptism or some ritual not yet inaugurated into any canon" (258-59). McCarthy's chapter heading for the scene is "Another baptism" (256). And after this, the idiot clings to the judge like a new acolyte.

The idiot is twice shown gazing at his reflection in water—once at this baptism in Christ, and later when he's on the run with the judge: "The imbecile had been watching its reflection in the pool" (284). Despite his idiocy, he may be said to

“know himself” in that he cannot mask his form nor his essence. The same cannot be said of the kid. In the barroom scene at the end of the book, he looks and fails to see his own reflected image: “He paid, he lifted the glass and drank. There was a mirror along the backbar but it held only smoke and phantoms” (325). Denying his true nature, the kid puts himself in the camp of the deluded victims—he is unable to see himself.

One scene, in which Sonoran celebrants burn a firework Judas, seemingly presents to the kid a symbolic version of the choice that faces him. McCarthy writes that the kid “saw hanging from a scaffold a poor Judas fashioned from straw and old rags who wore on his face a painted scowl” (263). The term “painted” is used in other scenes to represent the façade of Christianity—when the idiot is made presentable, his hair is greased and combed until “it looked painted on” (258); at the feast of Las Animas an effigy of Christ is carried, “and on his brow were painted drops of blood and on his old dry wooden cheeks blue tears” (190-91); and the aforementioned saint dolls in the town of Sopilotes were described as having their “rude wooden faces brightly painted” (59). The Judas effigy the kid sees here is part of a time-honored Mexican Easter tradition:

On Maundy Thursday and Good Friday there began to appear on the streets large papier-mâché and bamboo constructions that represented Judas, and the effigies embodied all the nefarious characters known in Mexico Sometimes thirty pieces of “silver” were sewn to the clothes of Judas to identify him as the traitor

The important thing about the giant figures is that they were

completely strung with explosive fireworks. On Saturday after the Mass of Glory, the crowds gathered around, the fuse was lighted and the Judas slowly and noisily blew to bits, to the accompaniment of much shouting. This was a typically Mexican interpretation of the symbolic act of punishing Judas and of destroying evil. (Pettit 121)

This image of the hypocrite's destruction may remind us of the kid and his fate. After all, the judge tells him: "you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part" (307)—in essence, that he is a traitor, a Judas. One further clue regarding the Judas firework scene comes in the wording at the close of the paragraph: "[the kid] shrugged up his *rag* of a coat about his shoulders and hurried on" (263, emphasis added); the effigy was similarly described as being dressed in "old rags." The kid is the one being burned in effigy, although the celebrants would never recognize the fact—it occurs on the same symbolic level on which the tarot card has meaning. It is a message for the kid alone. The final piece of the puzzle is the fact that the celebrating Sonorans "called out to him and offered him wine from a goatskin" which he refused (263). The offer of a drink should remind us of that offer of a fourth cup of wine to the boy on the tarot card. Here, in microcosm, the kid sees both his options—he can drink the judge's cup and fully embrace his warrior nature, or he can paint on Christianity and be, like the firework display, spectacularly annihilated.

Another quite literal depiction of the card's image comes at the very end, in the bar scene between the kid—now actually "the man"—and the judge. We first read that "the judge poured the tumbler full where it stood . . . and nudged it

forward" (327). He invites the kid to "drink up" and advises him, "This night thy soul may be required of thee" (327). After the kid quaffs the tumbler, the judge refills it twice more—a total of three cupfuls (328, 330). These are the three emptied cups that lie before the young man in the grass on the card. Later, when the kid is apparently unable to perform with a prostitute upstairs, she tells him: "You need to get down there and get you a drink . . . You'll be all right" (332). But this would be the fourth cup. When the kid refuses it, saying, "I'm all right now,"—expressing satiety, in other words—his fate is sealed.

He has fallen from his original state of vitality in which we read he would descend "like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors" (4)—the description paralleling that of the bear that came out of the woods "like some fabled storybook beast" to snatch the Delaware from Glanton's gang (137)—to become something akin to the trained "bear in a crinoline" (324) that has sacrificed its savage nature only to be slaughtered. Poisoned by the ex-priest's philosophy of cowardice, he carries "a Bible that he'd found at the mining camps and he carried this book with him no word of which could he read" (312). It is as though the Bible were a protective amulet—and if it doesn't work, perhaps the scapular of ears he wears will. But as the judge later tells him, "the gods of vengeance and of compassion alike lie sleeping in their crypt" (330)—Jehovah and Jesus are dead, in other words. The kid has picked the wrong door. It makes no difference that, in response to the judge's comment that there's "plenty of time for the dance," he says of himself, "I aint studying no dance" (327)—as the judge informs him, "order is not set aside because of [your] indifference" (328). The use of the word "order" is interesting, as

it implies that the force of war—the agency Holden represents—is an organizational force in the end, rather than a chaotic one. It alone puts humanity in harmony with the cosmos, while religion is the snake oil of a medicine show. The comforts of society and the luxury of religion are steeped in spilled blood.

The kid is not the only one who has drawn the four of cups, however: it is all mankind. The judge's final lecture to the kid outlines his perspective on the direction the world is taking:

I tell you this. As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. (331)

This respect for "the sanctity of blood" displayed by the Indians, which is reflected in the white scalp-hunters, is falling into disrepute even within the judge's lifetime.

McCarthy subtly indicates the change that is taking place, employing a parallel over the course of the novel that seems to corroborate the judge's social theory. First, he depicts the Comanches that routed Captain White's gang as a motley group arrayed in trophies of previous encounters (52); then he depicts Glanton's gang as similarly heterogeneous and savage, taking trophies such as guns, teeth, clothes, and scalps. In the final pages of the novel, however, we note an ironic parallel in a description of whores in the bar: "[One] wore nothing but a pair of men's drawers and some of her sisters were likewise clad in what appeared to be *trophies*—hats or pantaloons or blue twill cavalry jackets" (334, emphasis added). Evidently it is the women who

are taking trophies of their conquests as society becomes re-feminized. All-important war is finally dishonored as civilization returns to the vanity mirror and sets itself “right.” Like the idiot that is dangerously separated from his true nature by Sarah Borginnis’s troupe of deluded Christian women, or the bear that dances in crinoline as a little girl cranks a hurdy-gurdy, humankind is succumbing to the influence of a bad moon.

It may just be the swing of a pendulum, or it may be something more. There is an implication that it is this disavowal of brutal masculine nature that truly warps the world. As McCarthy once said in a rare interview:

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

That denial of the cup of self-knowledge—that is the first crime against nature. The four of cups is meant to be a hopeful, instructive card. The querent who takes its advice to heart does the only thing anybody can do to save the world: he takes a hard, critical look at himself.

CHAPTER 7

ONEIROMANCY IN THE BORDER TRILOGY

Following the brutal *tour de force* that is *Blood Meridian* came what critics and readers alike acknowledged to be McCarthy's most accessible work to date: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992). The novel works with (but not within) the comfortable conventions of the classic western as popularized by such novelists as Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour and Larry McMurtry, refashioning the form to allow for the sort of metaphysical musings and extreme savagery that are McCarthy's perennial concerns. *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998) followed, the three books together forming a continuous narrative that is the Border Trilogy.

A number of critics have noted the significance of dreams and visions within the series. "It may be that all of Cormac McCarthy's writings constitute a prolonged dream," Edwin T. Arnold asserts at the start of an article on dreams within the trilogy ("Go to Sleep" 38). In his consideration of the structural function of dreams in the novels, Chris Spellman concurs with Arnold: "In addition to using dreams as textual seams to tie his plot together, McCarthy also fashions his entire narrative in a dreamlike structure. The 'there and back' feel of the story is no accident. Viewed holistically, all of [John Grady] Cole's experiences coalesce into the semblance of a most intense dream sequence" (Spellman 169). And Stephen Frye's *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* clarifies the universal—as opposed to the merely psychological—significance of dreams in the Border Trilogy: "Whether conscious or unconscious, these dreams are filled with a sense of mystery and the sublime, and they embody in their evocative power the implication, always omnipresent in McCarthy's novels,

that there exists an ‘other order,’ an organizing principle of causality inaccessible to human reason, one that stands within and against the apparent disorder of the material world” (Frye, *Understanding* 105). The dreams of protagonists John Grady and Billy Parham, then, are not simply concerned with private hopes and anxieties but are, in a sense, portals to a state beyond place and time—a state whose reality is arguably more valid than the fleeting realities of the mundane world.

The ancients made a distinction between two types of dreams: those that dealt with the subject’s personal issues and those that contained messages from the gods requiring priestly exegesis. Artemidorus, a professional dream interpreter of the second century A.D. (Lincoln 3), catalogued both types in his *Interpretation of Dreams*: “[Artemidorus’] method is as follows: First he divides the dreams up into categories: *oneiroi* and *enypnia*. They are both dreams, but the *enypnion* are only active during the sleeping process, and are derived from some irrational fear or physical sensation, while the *oneiros* is divinatory, and predicts something about the future” (Hansen 58). However, the tradition dates much further back than the Romans—in fact, Artemidorus’ sources included the extant oneiromancy tablets of Ashurbanipal, 7th-century B.C. king of Assyria (Lincoln 3). Possibly even predating Ashurbanipal is the Biblical record contained in the Pentateuch, with its famous divine dreams, such as Jacob’s dream of a heavenly ladder (Gen. 28:12-15), Joseph’s vision of surpassing his older brothers in God’s favor (Gen. 37:5-9), and many others. Although most occult practices previously discussed—haruspicy, cartomancy, bone divination, and so on—would have been dubbed sorcery by the

ancient Hebrews, dream interpretation appears to have been condoned as verifiably conveying the mind of God.

Although the visions of the Border Trilogy often contain a personal element, ultimately they are connections to a body of knowledge beyond the individual, and beyond the constraints of time. As “[i]n the dream world of Artemidorus, the dreamer exists in a collective world and not in a private universe. It is not important to discover any personal matters about the dreamer’s self, past or present. The only interesting thing is to divine correctly” (Hansen 58)—so is the world of the trilogy. Arnold places this dream world at a deeper level than that of Freudian psychology: “McCarthy’s use of dreams seems closer to the Jungian concept than to the Freudian, for they are often ‘mystical’ in their manner. Indeed, the stranger Billy meets in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain* appears to speak to the idea of inherited collective knowledge” (“Go to Sleep” 40). It is this collective unconscious that lurks behind the masks of the corporeal world throughout the novels. Although the science of oneiromancy (from the Greek *oneiro-* “dream” + *manteia* “divination”; see “oneiromancy”) was a strict discipline with rules of interpretation—and, at times, grave consequences for misinterpretation—we may view the practice more generally as a metaphor for the sort of vatic visualization McCarthy’s characters often engage in, and the sort of reading practice his novels demand.

All the Pretty Horses: Divining Fate and Free Will

In one of the first scenes of *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole has a vision that will recur for him and others throughout the trilogy: on “the western fork of the old Comanche road coming down out of the Kiowa country to the north” he “encounters” the extinct Comanche, “like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only” (5). These warriors still exist, “in default of all substance” (6) in a spectral limbo, riding on as though in the collective memory of the land itself. Later, Cole’s cancer-ridden father comments on the significance of the dead tribe, making a remark that will resonate throughout the trilogy: “People don’t feel safe no more, he said. We’re like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont know what’s going to show up here come daylight” (26). In the advent of the A-bomb, the Border Trilogy’s America is in the same precarious position the Native Americans faced with the coming of the technologically-advanced, malevolent Europeans. But here at the start Cole gazes unwittingly at the apocalyptic scene, with its sun that “sat blood red and elliptic under the reefs of bloodred cloud before him” (5), just as he will view the “bloodred sunset” and the “bloodred dust [that] blew out of the sun” (302) on the novel’s final page, after his dreams and his own personal tragedy have given him a glimpse of the world’s underpinnings. His own tragedy connects him to the global one: “The red of

the sky may simply be the sunset, but it may work figuratively as the most stunning symbol of the cold war—the atmospheric burn of the atomic test” (Frye, *Understanding* 113).

The subjects of fate, free will and divine will are broached comically at first, with Cole and Lacey Rawlins debating the inevitability of Rawlins’ birth:

My daddy run off from home when he was fifteen [Rawlins said].

Otherwise I’d of been born in Alabama.

You wouldnt of been born at all [Cole said]. . . . If your mama had a baby with her other husband and your daddy had one with his other wife which one would you be?

I wouldnt be neither of em.

That’s right.

. . . . If God wanted me to be born I’d be born.

And if He didn’t you wouldn’t. (26-27)

Cole here seems to subscribe to the notion of fate as he is unable to untangle the strings of even a slight departure from the actual—such seemingly essential notions as the fabric of the boys’ personalities, their friendship, their bloodlines, and all other accidents of their birth are seen as one in an infinite set of possibilities.

However, the conversation is simply dismissed as a game when Rawlins says, “You’re makin my goddamn head hurt” (27)—it implies a philosophy that cannot be acted upon, as the very idea of human capacity for action is called into question.

When the two choose to exert their wills by riding off to Mexico, the narrator describes their departure with ominous evocations of both Hemingway and Milton:

“They heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was . . . they rode . . . like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing” (30). They hear the disembodied ghost of John Donne’s fateful bell, as it echoes in McCarthy’s take on Hemingway, as well as Milton’s ambivalent depiction of Adam and Eve’s eviction from paradise—behind the romance of “ten thousand worlds for the choosing” lies the possible implication that Mexico is not the Eldorado they seek, but rather the place that waits beyond the blissful ignorance of their youth.

Jimmy Blevins, the preadolescent maverick the boys encounter on the road, continues the humorous discussion of predestination: “My granddaddy was killed [by lightning] in a minebucket in West Virginia it run down in the hole a hunnerd and eighty feet to get him it couldn’t even wait for him to get to the top . . . I’m double bred for death by fire” (67-68). Blevins catalogues all the deaths by lightning occurring on either side of his family, making a case for his own “double bred” genetic disposition to such a fate. But bloodlines are also a serious consideration in the matter of character, as John Grady later suggests in his discussion with Don Héctor at the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purisima Concepción: when Héctor asks him how much importance he gives to the mare in horse breeding, he responds, “Same as the sire. In my opinion” (115). Although humans are usually subject to the accidents of birth, horses and other animals can have their fates determined by skilful breeding. This, of course, raises the subject of Cole’s own character, in his own mind and the reader’s—his father is a broken man, and his mother has

abandoned the family to pursue extramarital affairs and a meaningless acting career. Cole is personally determined to take his destiny in his own hands, as will become clear, fighting against the odds of his birth. The subject is comically revisited once again after Rawlins receives a blood transfusion: "They put Mexican blood in me, he said . . . [D]oes it mean I'm part Mexican? . . . Well [Cole said] a litre would make you almost a halfbreed" (210-11). This passage is, in a sense, a return to their previous conversation about bloodlines; however, the implication remains that fate's indelibility cannot be altered by a mere exchange of blood. The hypothetical worlds outside the realm of the actual are impossibilities.

Placed into this context of metaphysical debate is the notion of oneiromancy. In her first conversation with John Grady, Dueña Alfonsa remarks the odd persistence of dreams:

They have a long life, dreams. I have dreams now which I had as a young girl. They have an odd *durability* for something not quite real.

Do you think they mean anything?

She looked surprised. Oh yes, she said. Don't you?

Well I don't know. They're in your head.

She smiled again. I suppose I don't consider that to be the condemnation you do. (134, emphasis added)

What Alfonsa terms the "durability" of dreams, coupled with her certainty that they mean something, raises the question of their reality. Could they exist in some realm beyond subjective fancy? Cole doubts it. But later, this notion of durability is revisited in his final dream about horses: "[S]ome ordering of the world had failed

and if anything had been written on the stones the weathers had taken it away again Finally what he 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 (280, emphasis added). The durability of "ardentheated" horses (6) is here linked to the realm of dreams, with both standing against the backdrop of a physical world in nuclear peril. McCarthy asks us to reverse our notions of reality, recognizing the impermanence of the corporeal world and the eternal durability of the invisible.

But this true vision of horses is a long time in the making for Cole. It is a hard-earned lesson, coming only after the tragedy of his failed love affair with Alejandra: "Something is happening to the nature of his dreams as they begin to convey an increasingly somber reality. Throughout, Cole's dreams are the constant factor in all his experiences" (Spellman 169). In an early vision, as he is beginning to fall in love for the first time, he whispers in the ear of the stud Don Héctor is using for breeding:

[H]e spoke constantly to it in Spanish in phrases almost biblical repeating again and again the strictures of a yet untabled law. Soy comandante de las yeguas, he would say, yo y yo sólo. Sin la caridad de estas manos no tengas nada. Ni comida ni agua ni hijos [I am the commander of the mares, I and I alone. Without the charity of these hands you have nothing. No food nor water nor children.] . . . While inside the vaulting of the ribs between his knees the darkly meated heart pumped of who's will and the blood pulsed and the bowels shifted in their massive blue convolutions of who's will. . . ." (128)

Cole can feel his will pumping like blood through his own mind. He reminds the horse in Spanish that he is the one who is really in charge, no matter how potent the stud may feel at this moment. Aside from the obvious sexual implications, amplified later by Alejandra's brazen request to ride the stud back to the barn, the larger question of free will is visited once again; however, the narrator interjects that "inside the vaulting of the ribs"—language that subtly conveys an image of church ceilings—the horse's heart pumps and his bowels shift "of who's will," and the answer, of course, cannot involve John Grady. Previously, during the scenes in which Cole and Rawlins have broken a paddockful of wild horses, a similar whispering is described as though it were a divine voice informing the horses of the loss of their wills: "[T]hey stood waiting for they knew not what with the voice of the breaker still running in their brains like the voice of some god come to inhabit them" (105); and later: "John Grady walked among them in the sweat and dust and bedlam with his rope as if they were no more than some evil dream of horse" (110). The surprise of being "broken" and disabused of the illusion of free will comes as a shock to the animals—a shock that seems to come as an "evil dream" about a "god," suggesting the validity of oneiromancy for horses in divining the ways of the world. But John Grady is in for a similar shock, which will be described in terms that evoke these scenes in the paddock.

Dueña Alphona's candid admissions about herself are really warnings for John Grady, if only he could heed them: "I was also rebellious and so I recognize it in others. Yet I think that I had no wish to break things. Or perhaps only those things that wished to break me" (136). Her odd use of horse-training jargon here both

alludes to past scenes and foreshadows the boys' future experiences in prison. When he is first arrested, John Grady has a dream that places him not as "comandante de las yeguas," but on equal footing with them: "[I]n the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses . . . and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised" (162). This is partly a wish-fulfillment dream, as Cole longs for the freedom of wild horses here in the prison cell, but his wish has changed from his previous desire to break and dominate. The final words of the passage also suggest an *oneiros* or inspired dream, as Arnold indicates: "Here the dream offers the direct, unmediated moment . . . the transcendent wonder of the 'high world' is transmitted through the medium of dream to the ordinary world in which the boy lives" (Arnold, "Go to Sleep" 53). But further experiences will acquaint him with the heart of the broken horse, which is just as much a reality as the heart of the wild horse.

Cole has a daytime vision after his rejection by Alejandra: "He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter him like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe that it would ever leave" (254). This possession by something "cold and soulless" reminds us of the horse's possession by the "god" who breaks him. An even more striking parallel comes in a short passage during which an old man says grace before a meal in Cuatro Cienagas: "He asked that God remember those who had died and he asked that the living gathered together here remember 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" (221). This catalogue of all the things humanity would not have without God resonates with the passage in which Cole whispers the list of things the horse would not have without him—neither food nor water nor children. God is the rider now, and Cole is forced to recognize by way of this taunting prayer that he has been broken.

Further evidence exists for the validity of the dream world. "I saw you in a dream," Alejandra tells John Grady during their final meeting. "I saw you dead in a dream . . . They carried you through the streets of a city I've never seen. It was dawn. The children were praying. Lloraba tu madre. Con mas razón tu puta [Your mother was crying. More accurately your whore.]" (252). Readers of the entire trilogy will recognize Alejandra's as a clear oneiromantic dream: Cole is destined to wind up dead in the streets of a strange city, and will have a relationship with a whore, in *Cities of the Plain*. This crossing by Alejandra into the realm beyond the actual (an event which will occur with even greater frequency in the aptly-titled *The Crossing*) suggests a complicated gridwork of fate that may be accessed by the dreamer—a glimpse into the mind of a domineering God. The force with which such dreams sometimes assert themselves leaves the dreamer with an impression that is more profound than that of mundane reality: "[M]ost cases show that in spite of regarding the experiences of the dream as real, primitives do distinguish between dreams and perceptions of waking experience, yet often the dream experience is regarded as having a greater reality value than an actual experience" (Lincoln 28).

Despite McCarthy's hyperrealistic attention to physical details, like the "primitives" he appears to place greater reality value on the dream than on the waking world.

Foreshadowing symbols float to the surface of the narrative like prophetic utterances. Before John Grady enters the library to speak to Alfonsa for the last time, he sees "[a]bove the double doors leading into the library the mounted head of a fighting bull with one ear missing" (227), a possible reference to the traditional presentation of the slaughtered bull's ear to a woman in the crowd at a bullfight. But here it is Cole who will be tragically destroyed; he is also associated with the "bull . . . rolling like an animal in sacrificial torment" (302) in the novel's final scene. Alejandra is also depicted as symbolically broken: "They walked . . . where high above them stood a white stone angel with one broken wing. From her stone wrists dangled the broken chains of the manacles she wore" (253). The broken manacles are a fitting image of Alejandra's rebellious "jailbreak" from the life Alfonsa is forcing upon her ("[S]he tells me I must be my own person and with every breath she tries to make me her person" (251) she complains); the broken wing a reminder that she is not free to fly, even after breaking out of her prison.

In this damaged state they are more painfully bound to one another, as Alfonsa advises Cole: "[T]hose who have suffered great pain of injury or loss are joined to one another with bonds of a special authority and so it has proved to be. The closest bonds we will ever know are bonds of grief" (238). John Grady is now being made to wake up from his dream of freedom to the painful reality of bondage, a lesson Alfonsa feels is a crucial one in his learning the true nature of the world: "In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments," she says, "[t]hose whom life

does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting” (238). The dream she refers to here is not the divine dream or *oneiro* but the personal wish-fulfillment dream—even the social dream indulged in by Francesco and Gustavo Madero, those revolutionaries of Alfonsa’s past. Hopes and dreams are not so easily imposed upon reality, as between them lies the metaphysical reality of fate and God’s will, like machinery whose cogs wait to chew up the dreamer. Revolutions turn to bloodbaths, ideals are never reached, and love affairs turn to heartbreak.

John Grady has other dreams that put him in touch with the sober reality of death that awaits him:

He’d dreamt of him one night in Saltillo and Blevins came to sit beside him and they talked of what it was like to be dead and Blevins said it was like nothing at all and he believed him. He thought perhaps if he dreamt of him enough he’d go away forever and be dead among his kind and the grass scissored in the wind at his ear and he fell asleep and dreamt of nothing at all. (225)

It is interesting to note McCarthy’s wording here—we are told not that Cole did not dream, but that he “dreamt of nothing at all,” those words being the same his dream-Blevins has just used to describe death. The dream itself is of death. The blankness he experiences is another oneiromantic dream, beyond waking logic. It is perhaps reminiscent of the map of the Americas the boys look at before their trip, during more innocent times: “There were roads and rivers and towns on the American side

of the map as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond that all was white” (34); although Rawlins, who shortly will express the philosophical concern that “you might be someplace you wasn’t suppose to be and didn’t know it” (37) wonders if Mexico has been mapped, Cole assures him that, “There’s maps . . . I got one in my saddlebag” (34). But this notion that we can blithely cross borders and exert our wills even on the foreign terrain of the underworld is contradicted by their later experiences—the exotic Mexico in their minds also contains what the map shows, the “nothing at all” of death.

In the prison hospital, Cole “slept and when he woke he’d dreamt of the dead standing about in their bones and the dark sockets of their eyes that were indeed without speculation bottomed in the void wherein lay a terrible intelligence common to all but of which none would speak. When he woke he knew that men had died in that room” (205), another oneiromantic dream, which divines not the future but the past. His intuition that his father has died also comes to him in a dream: “When he woke he realized that he knew his father was dead” (282)—this being a prophecy about the present. Both these realizations occur, as the narrator states, “when he woke,” as though he has entered the private domain of God’s mind and has woken to ponder what he’s seen there.

Stunned and broken by all that he has undergone, and with no argument against Alfonsa’s assertions about the remorselessness of the world, Cole is in danger of losing any connection to his personal will. But the jury is still out on the ultimate meaning of Alfonsa’s metaphor of marionettes controlling other marionettes in a limitless hierarchy: “Which is the dominant agent—free will or

fate? Alfonsa uses the metaphor of puppets There is, in other words, a vast interconnectedness of things, so that clear causal relationships are impossible to isolate” (Pilkington 320). The impossibility of locating the terminus of the puppet strings does not preclude the possibility of free will: the human mind can no more encompass a complete grid of fate than it can a sense of absolute freedom.

John Grady’s heroic stance at the climax of the book is like that of the Hemingway hero who must show bravery when all else is lost—a saving piece of flotsam in a world submerged. The captain who has advised Cole earlier regarding the jail (and perhaps even regarding Mexico) that “[s]ome crazy person, he can say that God is here. But everybody knows that God is no here” (180)—this same captain, when dragged through the countryside by Cole, asks him: “Are you no afraid of God? . . . You should be afraid of God, the captain said. You are not the officer of the law. You dont have no authority” (272). But in a world devoid of God-imposed order, the established hierarchy must be called into question. The captain’s claim to be part of a chain of command that includes (or supplants) God is belied by his merciless dealings with Blevins and others. Authority is there for the taking. Like the broken horses and Cole before him, the captain is disabused of the notion of his own free will. The stolen horses are symbolically restored to their owners in an act of rebellion against the world’s chaos: “John Grady’s seemingly capricious decision to return to Encantada to recover his and Lacey Rawlins’s horses, which have been appropriated by a local hacendado, may be seen as an attempt to impose order and justice on a world in which there is no inherent order and justice” (Pilkington 321).

“One does not like to entertain the notion of tainted blood A family curse,” Alfonsa says to John Grady regarding Alejandra after relating the bad luck of women in her family (229). The passage is the humorless counterpart to Blevins’s account of his lightning-attracting relations. But a taint of blood must be John Grady’s concern as well. He is in a situation like that of the kid at the start of *Blood Meridian*—living with a defeated father and that man’s memories of an absent mother. *All the Pretty Horses* takes a look at the same universe the kid of *Blood Meridian* saw, but without that character’s recoiling from perilous engagement with the powers that be. John Grady is afforded a glimpse of the world’s dark reality through dreams and visions—its disorder, its ruthlessness and its promise of death. But he responds to it all with a brilliant and life-affirming revolt, a personal statement of refusal to submit to the dictates of his own blood or to external authority. Like the ancients, he “places a greater reality value” on the enduring world beyond the terrestrial: the world he connects with in dreams, and with horses.

Huérfano Dreams: Billy and the Orphaned World of The Crossing

If *All the Pretty Horses* contains implications of a vatic dream realm, then *The Crossing* is a plunge into that realm itself. The novel’s structure is much looser, following an apparent dream logic rather than the dictates of a traditional plot. “*The Crossing* is a book predicated on dreams and visions,” Arnold notes; “[o]ddly enough, its protagonist, Billy Parham, is often skeptical of the ideas in these communications” (“Go to Sleep” 57). Parham as dubious seer learns from a host of

characters—a blind revolutionary, a heretic anchorite, a wild indian, a horse-dealing rancher, a circus actor, a gypsy storyteller, a young Mexican girl, even his little brother Boyd. But it is his personal visions—often visions of the transcendent world of wolves—that are most illuminative.

Whereas John Grady's connection to the immutable dream world came in the form of horses, Billy's comes in the form of wolves. This is not simply a matter of personal choice but resonates with the theme of nuclear apocalypse that runs throughout the trilogy. In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady asks the old man, 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" (*ATPH* 111). But wolves are another matter, as evidenced by the fact that they are in danger of becoming extinct. And so, incidentally, is humanity.

The movement in time from the first novel to the second appears to be a backward one, as the events of *All the Pretty Horses* take place beginning in 1949—"The house was built in 1872. Seventy-seven years later his grandfather was still the first to die in it" (*ATPH* 6)—and those of *The Crossing* end with "the first atomic explosion at the White Sands test site, Trinity, New Mexico, at 5:29:45 a.m. on 16 July 1945" (Arnold, "Go to Sleep" 62). Its rationale is not chronological, but thematic: "Moreso than in *All the Pretty Horses*, dreams in *The Crossing* often have . . . [an] apocalyptic quality about them, and the book is in essential ways—structural, thematic—the dark center of the trilogy, the profound mystery that gives foundation

to the more conventional stories that bracket it" (Arnold, "Go to Sleep" 58). An apocalyptic meditation, then, the novel seeks an answer to the question of humankind's expendability as a species.

Billy's waking vision of wolves parallels John Grady's horse dreams:

They were running on the plain harrying the antelope and the antelope moved like phantoms in the snow and circled and wheeled and the dry powder blew about them in the cold moonlight and their breath smoked palely in the cold as if they burned with some inner fire and the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire. (4)

Once again we have a young man drawn to the otherworldly, although he would not be able to express the attraction as the narrator does. McCarthy's description is cinematic, so sharp and ethereal in its detail as to generate a slow-motion vision in the reader's mind without resorting to use of the word "slow." But while the wolf has a reputation for its viciousness, mankind is a savage *par excellence*: "[The wolf is a] beast who dreams of man and has so dreamt in running dreams a hundred thousand years and more. Dreams of that malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and kin and rout them from their house. A god insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood" (17). Such a description recalls the willful dominance of John Grady, the "god" that comes to inhabit horses' minds; its use of terms like "lesser," "pale," "slaughter," "clan," and "ceding" suggest a connection between the wolf and the Cherokee, both of which have been put to rout by a pale, unappeasable god.

It is important to consider that lone wolf—the homeless Indian of chapter one—in this context. When Boyd sees himself reflected in the Indian’s eyes, it is “[a]s if it were some cognate child to him that had been lost who now stood windowed away in another world where the red sun sank eternally. As if it were a maze where these *orphans* of his heart had miswandered” (6, emphasis added). Boyd, the more intuitive of the brothers, sees a vision of himself orphaned when he looks at this man—a man who presumably is involved in the later murder of his parents. But although Boyd is the endangered orphan here, the Indian is in a similar state: alone and desperate. His presence evokes the memory of John Grady’s father’s words about the Comanche.

This theme of the orphan is central to *The Crossing*, in the way that willfulness was central to *All the Pretty Horses*. Billy Parham identifies with the threatened she-wolf because both are *huérfanos*. “Huérfano translates as ‘orphan,’” Steven Frye observes, “which is significant in that Billy, the priest, and the pensioner, like Job and Melville’s Ishmael, are all metaphorically part of a single narrative of the lost child seeking origins and home” (Frye, *Understanding* 131-32). However, much like the laconic kid of *Blood Meridian*, Billy’s worldview is too limited for him to consciously grasp such a concept. When he leaves a community of Indians that has taken him in, a visionary old man gives him some advice:

He told the boy that although he was huérfano still he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world . . . He said that the world could only be known as it existed in men’s hearts. For while it seemed a place which contained men it was in reality a place

contained within themThe boy thanked him for his words but he said that he was in fact not an orphan Eres, [the man] said. Eres huérfano. [You areYou are an orphan.] (134)

On one level this may be read simply as yet another vatic pronouncement, as Billy's parents are most likely dead at this point in the novel. It is also an acknowledgement of Billy's reclusive nature. But most importantly, it strikes the keynote in a novel filled with orphans.

We see images of the lonely wolf, perhaps the last of a dying breed, doubled in the same way that orphan Boyd was previously: "[A]s she lowered her head to drink the reflection of her eyes came up in the dark water like some other self of wolf that did inhere in the earth or wait in every secret place even to such false waterholes as this that the wolf would be always corroborate to herself and never wholly abandoned in the world" (79). For now, it is only when joined by her reflection that she becomes something other than "wholly abandoned in the world"—Billy is not of her kind, and is not equipped to truly help her. She turns to Billy for help, however, just before losing her life in the pit: "She watched him with her yellow eyes and in them was no despair but only that same reckonless deep of loneliness that cored the world to its heart" (105). This essential loneliness of an abandoned world comes through to Billy, apparently on a subconscious level, in the eyes of the wolf. But it tries to reach him repeatedly throughout the rest of the novel.

An oneiromantic dream reveals Billy's father in a light that not only puts him in the same category with the novel's symbolic orphans but appears to be the boy's

realization of his father's death: "[H]e dreamt and the dream was of his father and in the dream his father was afoot and lost in the desert . . . [I]n the silence he heard somewhere a solitary bell that tolled and ceased and then he woke" (112). This is a reappearance of the fateful bell in Hemingway, as seen in *All the Pretty Horses* (Woodson 50), and the predictive dream is similar to John Grady's realization that his father has died—an inexplicable flash of insight. Although we might explain away John Grady's realization by considering the fact that his father has been dying of cancer, no similar explanation can hold in Billy's case. Another dream gives him a vision that will be repeated for him decades later, at the close of *Cities of the Plain*; for now, in this youthful dream, we read only that "[h]is home had come to seem remote and dreamlike . . . He slept and in his sleep he dreamt of wild men who came to him with clubs and their teeth were filed to points and they gathered around him and warned him of their work before they even set about it" (135-36). He appears to be the subject of a nightmare about his own sacrifice at the hands of Native Americans—a nightmare that will finally be elucidated by a stranger in the final novel of the series, as Culla Holme's is revisited by the blind stranger at the close of *Outer Dark*.

Other *huérfano* visions follow. The old heretic at Huisiachepic tells a story of an orphaned boy, one whose "parents were killed by a cannonshot in the church at Caborca where they had gone with others to defend themselves against the outlaw American invaders" (144). Another seeming orphan of the Mexican revolution is the old man who is blinded by a German Huertista in Durango (276), who wanders alone for years after the event. And this blinded man's wife is an orphan, having

witnessed the burial of her two brothers and father all on the same day (286). The mystic Mexican girl Boyd falls in love with says, despite the fact that she has a mother, that “she ha[s] no place to go” (222). Like Billy, the Indian and the she-wolf, all these figures are desperate wanderers, separated from the comforts of community.

In addition, a number of abandoned, crippled dogs appear in the text, as though visionary afterimages of the she-wolf with its damaged forepaw. Just after the wolf’s death, we read of the first of these: “A solitary dog from the town that had caught the scent of the wolf on the wind and followed him out stood frozen on the beach on three legs standing in that false light and then all faded again into the darkness out of which it had been summoned” (125). Later, Billy and Boyd encounter a “boldlooking dog with one leg off” that “turned to stand them off” (239). Both these disfigured dogs foreshadow the one Billy drives away from the barn in the final chapter, with the “false light” of the earlier scene becoming that of the atomic bomb test that awakens Billy. Far from the fierce warrior he has known in the wolf, this dog is “wet and wretched and so scarred and broken that it might have been patched up out of parts of dogs by demented vivisectionists” (423). After Billy heartlessly has driven it away, we read: “it howled again and again in its heart’s despair” (425). Edwin Arnold remarks on the meaning of this penultimate scene: “The love shown the proud wolf is replaced by the thoughtless cruelty to the pathetic dog. If Billy cannot recognize the bond that exists between all living and god-made things, then how can he hope for himself any similar grace?” (Arnold, “Go to Sleep” 63). Although Arnold overstates the possible “trinity” symbols in the

novel—three-legged dogs, the damaged church on three legs, the three major recounted narratives, the three trips into Mexico, etc.—the point here is well taken. The enlightened, orphaned wife of the blind man shows no such favoritism: “Wild blackbirds flew down from the trees and stalked and fed among the poultry but she fed all *without discrimination*” (294, emphasis added). And after Billy witnesses the curious false dawn, he calls hopelessly for the dog in his guilt and grief, until finally “the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and *without distinction*” (426, emphasis added). The lesson has leveled all creatures to a common burden of despair and put them all together on the “endangered species list.”

The vision has been a long time coming for Billy. Boyd can see it from the beginning, long before Billy’s departure, the death of their parents, his meeting with the Mexican girl, or any other eye-opening experiences: “I had this dream . . . I had it twice . . . There was this big fire out on the dry lake . . . These people were burnin. The lake was on fire and they was burnin up” (35). The image is that of the lake of fire in Revelation 20:14; within the context of the novel, it is an image of nuclear holocaust. Although the narrator makes a similar apocalyptic association in the later statement, “the sunset on the water had turned it to a lake of blood” (342; see Revelation 16:3), we have no evidence that Billy makes such a connection. Billy at least recognizes his obtuseness: “I didn’t know nothin about [Boyd]. I thought I did. I think he knew a lot more about me” (387).

It is only in his dreams that Billy absorbs any working knowledge of the world. He has four dreams that are recounted in detail, two in each of the final two

chapters of the book. In the first, he is still concerned about Boyd's injury; however, it is a dream primarily about wolves:

He'd trudged in his dream through a deep snow along a ridge toward a darkened house and the wolves had followed him as far as the fence [T]hey would go no further. They looked back toward the dark shapes of the mountains Boyd turned to him and whispered that he'd had a dream and in the dream Billy had run away from home and when he woke from the dream and seen his empty bed he'd thought that it was true. (295-96)

The "dream within a dream" motif prefigures the final scene in *Cities of the Plain*. The unwillingness of these wolves to pass through the fence into the family's yard shows a respect for order that is not recognized by the Indian of the first chapter, who follows Billy to the house and, later, murders his family. There can be no permanent crossing from the wolf to the human world, nor in the opposite direction. Boyd's question in the dream, "You wont run off and leave me will you Billy?" (296) is a reversal of the present situation, in which Boyd threatens to leave Billy behind in death.

It is his second dream, however, that can truly be said to be oneiromantic. It predicts the death of Boyd, the rain and the howling dog of the final pages, and the nuclear angst that is yet to reach its culmination:

[H]e held his dying brother in his arms Somewhere among the black and dripping streets a dog howled [H]e knew he feared the world to come for in it were already written certainties no man could

wish for Lastly he saw his brother standing in a place where he could not reach him, windowed away in some world where he could never go When he saw him there he knew that he had seen him so in dreams before. (325-26)

This description of Boyd as “windowed away in some other world” mirrors the description of what he saw in the indian’s eyes at the beginning: two identical images of himself “windowed away in another world where the red sun sank eternally” (6). This is the apocalyptic insight Boyd is capable of while awake, but which Billy can only visit in fleeting dreams. But both see through to a world that is arguably more real than the tangible one: as the blind man tells Billy, “En este viaje el mundo visible es no más que un distraimiento [On this trip the visible world is no more than a distraction.]” (292). Beyond the distractions of parents, chores, the one-upsmanship of siblings, and other waking ephemera, Billy has long seen his mystical brother in a larger role, if only in dreams. In this sense he is like the Mexicans who have sung of “the young güero who comes down from the north . . . a youth who sought justice” since long before Boyd—the subject of the *corrido*—was born (375, 386).

Billy’s third dream mirrors the one from *All the Pretty Horses* in which John Grady asks Blevins what it’s like to be dead: “When finally he did ask him what it was like to be dead Boyd only smiled and looked away and would not answer” (400). This response is a variation on Blevins’s dream answer to John Grady, that death is “like nothing at all”—like the blank Mexico of the map. When Billy “trie[s] to think of what that place could be where Boyd was” he can conclude only that

“Boyd was dead and wasted in his bones” (400). Both young men have been lost beyond the border, in the mysterious underworld of Mexico, while John Grady and Billy have survived the crossing and returned, forever changed, to the land of the living.

Billy’s last vision is of a group of itinerant “pilgrims”: “[H]e had a dream in which he saw God’s pilgrims laboring upon a darkened verge in the last of the twilight of that day and they seemed to be returning from some deep enterprise that was not of war” (420). An echo of the Comanche whose ghosts John Grady senses coming down out of the “Kiowa country to the north” (*ATPH* 5), these men are depicted now in religious terms, engaged in “some deep enterprise that was not of war,” unlike the earlier depiction in which they were “each armed for war which was their life” (*ATPH* 5); in fact, Billy looks for some hint as to their activity in their implements but sees that “they carried none” (421). A “dark arroyo separated him from the place where they were going” (421), that arroyo evoking so many other borders that Billy, despite his travels, has been unable to cross—the one between the wolf’s world and his own, the one where Boyd and the Mexican girl exist in mystical sympathy, and the one where a dead Boyd sits “windowed away in some world where [Billy] could never go” (325). And just as the horse in *Cities of the Plain* is said to “see things that will spook him of course but then he’ll see things that don’t spook him but still you know he seen somethin [L]ike somethin he knows about But you dont” (*COP* 124), Billy now comes out of the dream with the sense “that something had indeed passed in the desert night and he was awake a long time but he had no sense that it would ever return again” (421). The Comanche, despite their

life of war, are also “God’s pilgrims” in their “deep enterprise” of spiritual connection with the earth, whereas modern man’s nuclear jingoism is devoid of regard either for earth or for spirit. There is no sense that the Comanche ghosts will ever return to where Billy has slept “in his own country” (420).

Ultimately, dreams appear to be Billy’s only connection to what lies beyond the border of the tangible world. And he is unable to grasp or recount what message they have for him. Although he is counseled by a host of *huérfano* characters whose stories should speak to him directly, he is incapable of comprehending these stories or of joining the dialogue. The ex-priest of Huisiachepic tells him an involved tale of the debates between himself and a passionate heretic—two supposedly opposite figures with nothing in common, whom the storyteller recognizes in retrospect were “[b]oth of them heretics to the bone” (151). After the death of the heretic, the priest has come to an understanding of himself and of his need to stand in the heretic’s stead. He understands that their opposite stories are actually one and the same: “[W]e can never be done with the telling . . . I say again all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one” (143). The apparent hodge-podge of anecdotes in *The Crossing* have overlapped and resonated throughout the novel, its characters often telling the tales of those long dead, keeping their memories alive as part of the fabric of the world’s narrative. As Frye notes: “[I]t is through this act of empathetic rearticulation that human beings come to see how their individual lives are connected and their stories are one” (Frye, *Understanding* 123). Billy stands as a laconic foil to all the conspicuously gifted storytellers that populate the book, as perhaps the reader stands in relation to the author. And humankind stands

inarticulate in the presence of “that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised” (*ATPH* 162).

The final novel of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*, brings together both protagonists—the doomed John Grady and the bereaved Billy Parham—for one final story of loss. And in the telling, McCarthy completes his treatment of the theme of dream divination by channeling the work of the great Argentine magical realist, Jorge Luis Borges.

“To Dream a Man”: Echoes of Borges’s “The Circular Ruins”
in *Cities of the Plain*

At the beginning of *Cities of the Plain*, Billy Parham asks John Grady: “If everybody went crazy together nobody would notice, what do you think?” (11). Although the question is somewhat flippant, its significance in the trilogy is undeniable—the world “aint the same” and “it never will be” after the world wars (11). With no access to any absolute reality, there is no way to gauge the level of universal insanity.

Grady and Parham, having suffered their separate tragedies in the first two novels, come together to the rationality and relative permanence of Mac McGovern’s ranch. But that ranch is about to be taken over by the army (264). Hanging above the two in scene after scene are the hieroglyphics of a vanished people, chiseled into the ancient rocks as though to remind us of the impermanence of everything below: “There were ancient pictographs among the rocks, engravings of animals and moons and men and lost hieroglyphics whose meaning no man would ever know” (49);

“the petroglyphs carved there by other hunters a thousand years before” (87); “they passed under pictographs upon the rimland boulders that bore images of hunter and shaman and meetingfires and desert sheep all picked into the rock a thousand years and more” (165); “They crossed the gravel slide and rode under the old shamans and the ledgerless arcana inscribed upon those outsize tablets (171).” Although these are indecipherable, they are what remains of the aborigines: a written record. From the beginning of the trilogy, the Comanche have existed as ghosts passing through the land, dislocated in time but still somehow real. Now they are relegated to unreadable words, the shells of thoughts.

Once again, Cole’s dreams give him a glimpse of reality. He falls in love with Magdalena at first sight, but while he can have no waking access to the sordid world in which she exists, he is given a vision of that world: “He dreamt that night of things he’d heard and that were so although she’d never spoke of them . . . [O]bscene carnival folk, painted whores with their breasts exposed, a fat woman in black leather with a whip, a pair of youths in ecclesiastical robes . . . a young girl in a white gauze dress who lay upon a palletboard like a sacrificial virgin” (103-4). The girl can be none other than Magdalena herself, whose youth and beauty are being sacrificed in the capitalistic carnival of a Mexican whorehouse. The dream scene bears a symbolic resemblance to the scene at the beginning of *The Crossing* in which Billy’s she-wolf is sacrificed for the pleasure of a crowd in a circus. Interestingly, Cole’s dream contains an image drawn directly from one of Billy’s: he sees “a goat with gilded horns and hooves who wore a ruff of purple crepe” (103-4), the ironic word “who” rather than “which” giving some indication that we should view the

goat as symbolizing a person. Billy has seen this selfsame goat in a dream in *The Crossing*: “He saw a goat with golden horns tethered in a field of mud” (C 326), but here the key is its tethering, which conjures the image of the wolf chained in the circus’s fighting pit. The goat is a traditional object of biblical sacrifice, from Leviticus through the “sheep and goats” of Matthew 25, and so is an appropriate dream image for sacrificial victims like Magdalena and the wolf. The golden horns may represent capitalism’s view of these victims as commodities. Billy cannot compete with the money the circus is making on the wolf’s pit fight, any more than Cole can compete with the money Eduardo is making on Magdalena (although Cole does try, foolishly, to purchase the prostitute). Their fates are tragedies of capitalism. But more importantly, the fact that Billy and John Grady see the same golden-horned goat representing victims implies their dream access to the collective unconscious.

Another element of Cole’s dream that coincides with one of Billy’s is the windswept desert in which the dead appear to exist: “He was alone in some bleak landscape where the wind blew without abatement and where the presence of those who had gone before still lingered in the darkness about” (104). This bears a striking resemblance to Billy’s prophetic vision of his dead father: “[I]n the dream his father was afoot and lost in the desert . . . The small sands in that waste was all there was for the wind to move and it moved with a constant migratory seething upon itself” (C 112).

McCarthy reminds us of the fleeting nature of the tangible world and the permanence of the intangible, reversing their primacy. He does this through use of

ghosts as a metaphor. Whereas Billy has seen “the ghosts of wolves running in the whiteness” (C 31), and John Grady has seen “the ghosts of the Comanches” as a boy (205), now the ghosts are the living: Cole sees “[a] tall woman in a diaphanous gown pass[ing] through the salon like the ghost of a whore” (66), and later the senile Mr. Johnson wanders at night in “his long white unionsuit . . . like the ghost of some ancient waddy” (104). The blind man Cole asks to be padrino to Magdalena says of the doomed bride: “My belief is that she is at best a visitor. At best. She does not belong here. Among us” (81), a vatic pronouncement that seems to recognize her proper identity as ghost in the same way Cole’s dream recognizes her as virgin sacrifice.

Among John Grady’s final words to Magdalena is a pronouncement that may be the most direct statement of McCarthy’s own views to be found in any of the novels: “After a while he said that he believed in God even if he was doubtful of men’s claims to know God’s mind” (206). McCarthy has reportedly said in conversation “that those who have not had a religious experience cannot comprehend it through second-hand accounts . . . [and] that he thinks the mystical experience is a direct apprehension of reality, unmediated by symbol” (Arnold, “Go to Sleep” 37-38, quoting Wallace). These two thoughts seem to encompass all of McCarthy’s thinking throughout his first eight novels: belief in the esoteric vision versus the exoteric posturing of religions, bound as they are to the trappings of culture. Although his response when Oprah Winfrey asked if he had “worked the God thing out” was “it would depend upon what day you asked me” (Conlon),

McCarthy certainly gives ample evidence of his belief in a reality lurking behind the distractions of the visible world—a reality accessible in stories.

In the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy has some final thoughts on themes he's examined throughout the Border Trilogy—themes such as the nature of reality, the nature of dreams, and the writer's role in bridging the gap between them. These are central themes of Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Circular Ruins" as well. A number of textual details indicate that McCarthy, intentionally or not, modeled his old vagrant's dream story on this Borges piece.

Each of these fictions relates the experience of a nameless traveler who finds himself in an ancient pagan temple. McCarthy's old man begins telling the tale of his dream: "There was this man who was traveling through the mountains and he came to a place in the mountains where certain pilgrims used to gather in the long ago" (270). At the beginning of Borges's story, the protagonist drags his canoe ashore and enters a defunct place of worship: "This circle was a temple which had been devoured by ancient fires, profaned by the miasmal jungle, and whose god no longer received the homage of men" (Borges 57). The vagrant tells Billy that people used to be slaughtered upon a "table of rock" in his dream setting, "to appease the gods" (270)—pagan gods who are forgotten as well. Both stories set the stage here for a discussion of religions as at once shifting fictions, capable of dying and being forgotten as men are, and repositories of psychological power that leave a residual charge even in their ruins; both stories involve the all-important engagement of the transformative *omphalos* of the sacred place. And both stories will imply that in worship and in dreams, we step directly back into the waking world of the ancients.

This practice of dreaming in a temple was consciously employed by ancient priests and doctors in a rite called “incubation”:

In Greek medicine there was moreover from ancient times a widespread belief that a god could show himself or herself in a dream and prescribe a cure. Even Galen, a contemporary of Artemidorus, made some use of this practice The practice of incubation, spending the night in a god’s, usually Asclepius’s, temple in order to make the deity appear in a dream and prescribe cures to or even operate on the sick, flourished in Artemidorus’ time. (Hansen 63)

Rochberg also discusses the antiquity of the practice, placing its origins thousands of years before Artemidorus and Galen, in ancient Sumer: “Evidence for the extreme antiquity of a belief in mantic dreams may be found in Sumerian texts in which dreams are interpreted as messages from the divine. A Sumerian dream incubation priest, *ensi* . . . is attested to in lexical texts. Outside the lexical tradition the term is found in a cylinder inscription of King Gudea of Lagash, who reigned circa 2200 B. C.” (Rochberg 82). Although neither *Cities of the Plain* nor “The Circular Ruins” employs an “*ensi*” per se, a number of features of the pagan rite coincide with those of both stories: the sacred nature of the dreamer’s vision, the dream’s influence on “reality,” even the implication of the dream’s healing properties. And both authors clearly are familiar with incubation as an attempt to give life to some vision from the gods, even if they both have doubts about the identity of those gods.

The purpose of Borges’s traveler soon becomes clear: “He wanted to dream a man; he wanted to dream him in minute entirety and impose him on reality”

(Borges 58). Borges associates his sorcerer with demiurges of “Gnostic cosmogenies” who fashion a “red Adam who cannot stand” (Borges 58), an allusion to Genesis and the conscious work of a creator god. In *Cities of the Plain*, Billy is skeptical of this notion of creating actual human beings in the imagination, until the old vagrant guides him through the idea by way of some Socratic questioning:

Have you not met people in dreams you never saw before?

. . . . Sure.

And who were they?

I don't know. Dream people.

You think you made them up. In your dream.

I guess. Yeah.

Could you do it waking? (271)

Billy, who is not a maker of fictions, has to concede that he could not. The implication is that the unconscious is a real place, and that its inhabitants can stake some claim on reality. Borges's magician's dreaming is initially a willful, controlled act of creation, whereas the dream of McCarthy's vagrant (and the dream of his dreamer) is beyond his control: “The proprietary claims of the dreamer upon the dreamt have their limits. I cannot rob the traveler of his own autonomy, lest he vanish altogether” (274). Borges's traveler, teaching his dream students in the burnt amphitheater, soon learns this same lesson—his phantoms act independently, at times, and are beyond his control to varying degrees. In his quest “to redeem one of them from his condition of empty illusion and interpolate him into the real world” (Borges 58), he recognizes that “he could expect something only from those who

occasionally dared to oppose him” (Borges 58)—to assert their autonomy, that is. Those who are in agreement with their creator could be figments of his imagination, whereas those whose opinions diverge from his might be said to stand independent of him.

Borges’s narrator relates the old wizard’s reasoning on the subject: those characters who stood distinct from their dreamer “pre-existed to a slightly greater degree” than the others (Borges 59). This notion of “pre-existence” is related to what McCarthy suggests at the end of *Cities of the Plain*. Part of the author’s job is to choose as characters those phantoms which prove themselves the most solid, the most connected to eternity. Convincing, “well-chosen” fictional characters promise to take their place in the world of the living. Some of them may even prove more convincing than some of our acquaintances.

In both stories, the sleepers recognize the cosmic dimension—the infinite quality of space and time—in their unconscious landscapes. *Cities of the Plain* represents this notion in the sceptre of the chieftain: “He carried a sceptre on the head of which was his own likeness and the likeness carried also such a sceptre in miniature and this sceptre too in what we must imagine to be some unknown infinitude of alternate being and likeness” (275). And Borges tells us regarding the pupils sitting in the sorcerer’s amphitheater that “the faces of the farthest ones hung at a distance of many centuries and as high as the stars, but their features were completely precise” (Borges 58). Both characters have managed to transcend the mundane and step into the infinite world of myth, presumably by virtue of their presence in holy places. But McCarthy’s symbolism goes one step further than that

of Borges, at least initially: it strips the dreamer of his privileged status over the dreamt by stacking them together in infinite regression, like Russian dolls. McCarthy, who has clearly assimilated Borges (and has been assimilated in advance), gives away the surprise ending of “The Circular Ruins” by way of this simple, unexplained image.

But McCarthy’s vagrant has already suggested the ending of Borges’s story in another place. He tells Billy in preparation for discussion of the bracketed dream, “Let us say that the events which took place were a dream of this man whose own reality remains conjectural” (272). Opening for discussion the reality of a dreamed man necessarily works backwards, effectively calling into question the reality of the original dreamer. And this unreality is what finally dawns on Borges’s protagonist. The fire god has told him in a vision that fire will forever recognize his dream-turned-human to be a phantom, no matter what others may believe. When the old wizard is surrounded by burning ruins at the close of his story, we read: “He walked toward the sheets of flame. They did not bite his flesh, they caressed him and flooded him without heat or combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him” (Borges 63). This shock of realization—that creator and creation are both unrealities—is like an electric jolt running through the joined hands of characters, reader, author, and continuing on up to God.

In one sense, then, this “someone else” who dreams the unreal character in Borges is the author. In *Cities of the Plain*, when Billy asks, “You sure you aint makin all this up?” the vagrant’s answer is telling: “The problem is that your question is the

very question upon which the story hangs” (277). The vagrant’s story is not the only one hanging on this question: it is the story of the entire Border Trilogy as well. McCarthy has made a textual joke on this subject of authorship previously when, in *All the Pretty Horses*, the judge in John Grady’s case tells him after his testimony: “I dont believe anybody could make up the story you just now got done tellin us” (ATPH 288). Although the author is the one who “makes up” the text of a work of fiction, he is also at the mercy of larger forces beyond his control, like the dreamer who is surprised by his autonomous creations. And the stories of previous authors are among the forces an author contends with. As McCarthy has said: “The ugly fact is books are made out of books” (Woodward).

McCarthy cleverly wraps up this idea of characters and author existing as equals in the final pages of *Cities of the Plain*. After Billy and the vagrant have said their goodbyes, the paragraph beginning, “Every man’s death is a standing in for every other” (288) is ambiguous, due to McCarthy’s practice of excluding quotation marks. Is its advice being expressed to Billy by the vagrant, or to the reader by the narrator? As the vagrant had said previously, “the question of who is telling the story is very consiguiente,” or consequential (277). If we take this passage as authorial intrusion, then novelist and characters alike have transcended the temporal to attain the solidity and evanescence of the mythic. Like those travelers in “The Circular Ruins” and *Cities of the Plain*, both authors have stepped into the *omphalos* and had the sacred fictional dream that saves the tribe.

CHAPTER 8

SORTILEGE IN *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*

As most of its critics have noted, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) is a radical departure from everything that precedes it in McCarthy's oeuvre. Gone are the lyrical passages of the Border Trilogy; gone are the curious, vatic pronouncements of the nameless narrator found in all his earlier novels. In place of the psychologically opaque antihero comes Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, a man whose every rumination, self-doubt and act of cowardice is catalogued for the benefit of an unidentified confessor. These passages are a clever twist on the first-person musings of detectives in classic crime novels, as Steven Frye observes: "The monologue deals with the intricacies and personal tension of a man attempting to understand the power of violence in a changing world, and it does so in deliberate homage to the hard-boiled novels of the noir genre, particularly in the hands of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Jonathan Latimer, and Erle Stanley Gardner" (Frye, *Understanding* 159). In this sense, the novel may be seen as a logical continuation of the elegiac content of the Border Trilogy, written in a style so sparse as to make it initially unrecognizable as McCarthy's work.

One of McCarthy's main concerns, however, quickly makes itself evident again: the concern with reading the divine will. The device employed in *No Country* is the ancient practice variously known as sortilege, sortition, or cleromancy—or perhaps the less ancient one known as numismatomancy, i.e. "coin divination." All the terms denote the casting of lots in an effort to determine a course of action, often

based on the simple binary “yes” or “no” system in answer to questions about the future.

Julian Jaynes discusses the antiquity of the practice: “The earliest mention of throwing lots appears to be in legal tablets dating from the middle of the second millennium B. C., but it is only toward its end that the practice becomes widespread in important decisions” (Jaynes 241). Although the practice of sortilege took many forms, including “throwing marked sticks, stones, bones, or beans upon the ground, or picking one out of a group held in a bowl, or tossing such markers into the lap of a tunic until one fell out” (Jaynes 239), the “yes” or “no” result is in keeping with the more modern form of coin tossing—the form used in the novel.

Some of the oldest Bible books refer to the ancient Hebrew version of sortilege, involving the use of mysterious objects referred to as the Urim and Thummim, often translated as “lights and perfections” (Muss-Arnolt 193). The most helpful of the handful of biblical references to the Urim and Thummim can be found at 1 Samuel 14:41: “Then Saul asked the Lord God of Israel, ‘Why haven’t you answered your servant today? If the wrongdoing is mine or my son Jonathan’s, respond with Urim, but if the wrongdoing belongs to your people Israel, respond with Thummim.’ Jonathan and Saul were taken by lot, and the troops were cleared.” Not only does this indicate that the two terms represented contrasting answers, it also shows that the diviner could “call” the meaning of the result before casting the lot, much as one might call heads or tails before a coin toss. Scholars have posited various theories about the nature of the objects used, most of which center around gems, meteorites, or colored stones: “The Urim and Thummim were two objects

used in the lot—perhaps stones of different colours . . . one of which gave the affirmative, the other gave the negative, answer to a question put in the form already indicated” (Muss-Arnolt 195, quoting H. W. Smith). It is important to note that only the high priest was qualified to cast lots with these objects, and that he kept them on his person: “The ‘Urim and Thummim’ were simply two stones put into the pocket attached to the high priest’s ephod; on them were written some such words as ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ Whichever stone was taken out, the . . . word upon it was looked upon as the divine decision” (Muss-Arnolt 203, quoting Davies). There is general agreement that such tablets were not for private use, but were reserved for sacred persons and sacred functions: “In ancient times the priestly oracle of Urim and Thummim was a sacred lot” (Muss-Arnolt 201, quoting Robertson); “[t]heir presence is indicated obliquely by mention of the Ephod or a *High Priest* in a situation of community distress when divine guidance is imperative” (Hurowitz 265, emphasis added).

Some mystery still surrounds the origin of the Urim and Thummim, with some scholars arguing for Babylonian origin while others imagine some source common to both the Hebrews and Babylonians, such as Akkad or Sumer. The Babylonians had the equivalent of the Urim and Thummim, called *Tablets of Destiny* or *Tablets of Judgment*: “The tablets of judgment are furthermore mentioned in the primitive mythology of the Babylonians. We read in a text discovered in Assurbanipal’s library . . . [a] passage which mentions a tablet of judgment worn by the *high priest* and used for divination” (Carus 379, emphasis added). Once again, use of the tablets was reserved for the high priest who acted in an official capacity as

representative of the state. “The possession of the *Tablets of Destiny* . . . carried with it, according to Babylonian belief, the supremacy among the gods and absolute dominion over mankind” (Muss-Arnolt 207).

Such dominion naturally extended even to life and death. As Joshua 7 indicates, the result of a sacred lot could be a God-and-state-sanctioned execution. In that book, Israel has recently lost in battle, and Joshua learns the reason for Yahweh’s disfavor: one of the people has taken gold as spoils of war, rather than devoting everything to destruction as required. The people are told to “consecrate themselves” in verse 13, and in verse 14 they are subjected to a sacred casting of lots—tribe by tribe, clan by clan, family by family, and man by man—until the culprit is identified. The final verse of the chapter relates the result: “Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger” (Joshua 7:25 *New International Version*). The entire family is obliterated so that the sanctity of the community may remain intact.

No Country for Old Men begins with the modern version of a sacred communal stoning. As Sheriff Bell relates in the very first lines of the novel: “I sent one boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville. One and only one. My arrest and my testimony” (3). The state, of which Sheriff Bell is a representative and instrument, exacts the death penalty in a clear-cut case of criminal sociopathology: the murderer tells Bell “that if they turned him out he’d do it again” (3). While Bell recognizes the necessity of capital punishment, he also recognizes something curious in the community’s attitude toward the rite of execution, and in his own:

There was one or two come dressed in black, which I supposed was all right. Some of the men come just in their shirtsleeves and that kindly bothered me. I aint sure I could tell you whyWhen it was over they 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 somethin. It just seemed peculiar. Well it was peculiar.

(63)

Bell's sense that people should attend such a solemn occasion dressed in their Sunday best is followed by the deeper realization that the execution is actually a sacred ritual, a notion that "seemed peculiar" to him. But the idea is in harmony with the thoughts of cultural anthropologists such as René Girard: "[M]y research always leads me to emphasize scapegoating as the generative principle of mythology, ritual, primitive religion, even culture as a wholeThis principle can certainly account for those religious institutions that present visible signs of scapegoat transference" (Girard 106). Girard attempts to trace the obscure origins of ritual killing, establishing it as the unspoken essence of all religions and societies. Conservative Sheriff Bell is no cultural anthropologist, but he stumbles on a fundamental human truth in this passage—a truth that haunts him.

Enter Anton Chigurh. In some ways, the villain Chigurh is a resurrection of *Blood Meridian's* Judge Holden: "Chigurh is not to be read as a human being: he is another of those allegorical figures that McCarthy has woven into previous texts, the judge being the first among them" (Cant 56). He also brings back the judge's notion of the "game of chance" as a means of divination:

Men are born for games. Nothing else Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card The preference of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. (*BM* 249)

Whereas cards were the metaphor of choice in *Blood Meridian*, here in *No Country* it is coins. And whereas Holden had killed indiscriminately, using the example of a seemingly random card flip merely as part of his rhetoric, Chigurh acts upon the suggestion.

Chigurh brings another element to the table that the judge has not: he seems to be acting in a sacred—or mock-sacred—capacity. He sometimes tosses a coin and allows his potential victims to “call it” as though he were seeking the direction of a silent God in his action, much as the high priest of Israel did before the stoning of Achan. He does not approach this ritual with levity but discusses the coin as a sacred instrument: “Dont put it in your pocket,” he advises the clerk at the gas station who makes the correct call and survives; “You won’t know which one it is” (57)—that is, the coin should remain sacred, consecrated, set aside. In its capacity as stand-in for the Urim and Thummim, it has taken on holy importance. Chigurh goes on to relate his philosophy regarding how objects become charged with sacred significance:

Anything can be an instrument, Chigurh said. Small Things. Things you wouldnt even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People dont

pay attention. And then one day there's an accounting. And after that nothing is the same. Well, you say. It's just a coin. For instance. Nothing special there. What could that be an instrument of? You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment. How could that be? Well, it's just a coin. That's true. Is it? (57)

Without looking at it, he is able to tell the man that the date on the coin is 1958—he is certainly not oblivious to the seemingly insignificant. “It's been traveling twenty-two years to get here,” he says, speaking with the sort of philosophical authority one might expect of an omniscient god (56). In this concentration on the significance of the mundane he is, once again, like the ancient priests of divination: “The Babylonians and Assyrians believed that the future could be both controlled and predicted; they thought that everything which happened in the universe formed part of an intricate pattern of cause and effect, and that the meaning of the pattern could be discerned by observing the course of events, *even the most trivial*” (Hooke 330, emphasis added). Attuned to the trivial with a spiritual, philosophical attention beyond that of mere mortals, Chigurh then engages in a bathetic act to end the scene: “Chigurh cupped his hand and scooped his change from the counter into his palm and put the change in his pocket” (57). Here is another pile of meaningless coins waiting to take on similar life-and-death significance in a world where store clerks are a dime a dozen. But the gravity of the situation is not lost on this clerk, who “put[s] both hands on the counter and just [stands] leaning there with his head

bowed” (58)—a posture of religious solemnity that creates a parallel between him and the “slumped over” sacrificial victim in the gas chamber.

This power over life and death is, strictly speaking, the domain of the state. However, in the wake of Vietnam, this state privilege is called into question: perhaps it has not been acting in the best interests of society after all. The Vietnam War, which is recent history at the start of the novel in 1980, is repeatedly invoked by several of the characters, not the least of which is Llewellyn Moss. After he has taken a satchel of drug money and put himself in the crosshairs of killers, he meditates on his situation: “He’d had this feeling before. In another country. He never thought he’d have it again” (30). Carson Wells, a hit man who tries to help Moss in return for the money, has been a lieutenant colonel in ‘Nam, in special forces (156)—a bullet point, presumably, to be found on the resume of many an assassin. But it is not a fact that builds community, as Moss recognizes: “So what does that make me? Your buddy?” he says to Wells (156). It is merely a reminder of disintegration. We later learn that Moss “was a sniper in Vietnam” (293), but ironically, our introduction to him shows him missing a shot at an antelope. Although anyone can miss a shot, McCarthy frames this for our consideration—it is as though even Vietnam cannot prepare someone for the collapse it has caused. There is no such thing as a person who has adapted to such an environment. “It must of sounded like Vietnam out there,” says the deputy regarding the shootout between the Mexicans (75), bringing the metaphor home. But Sheriff Bell sees the war not as a cause but an effect: “People will tell you it was Vietnam brought this country to its knees. But I never believed that. It was already in bad shape.

Vietnam was just the icing on the cake You cant go to war without God” (294-95). The morally upright Bell here echoes Judge Holden’s pronouncement that “War is god” (*BM* 249), citing, without irony, the sacred aspect of human conflict.

John Vanderheide argues that the novel is an allegory, with the opposing forces of Bell and Chigurh standing to either side of the psychologically-fragmented veteran:

Ultimately Bell resists the temptation to recognize himself as a subject of Chigurh’s ideology. Moss, regrettably, does not. Moss’s narrative assumes the shape of an allegorical battle the moment he accedes to the temptation of taking the satchel full of drug money

Temptation is thus a symptom of a psychomachia, an internal battle between opposing ideologies that has rendered the subject fractured and incoherent” (Vanderheide, “No Allegory” 39).

Chigurh’s question to Wells is appropriate here: “If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule?” (175). But Moss apparently is not governed by any consistent set of rules at all. Although Erin Johns argues that “Llewelyn [sic] also relies on a particular system—one that overlaps the oldest world (that of hunter and gatherer) and that of the new (the Vietnam veteran),” betraying them both in an act of greed (Johns 145), the latter category is not the discrete, tidy one she makes it seem. It is not a code of behavior, but a symptom of universal splintering. It has become “no country for old men,” as in Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” with the generation of Ed Tom Bell withdrawing to the relative calm of a bygone world while

the young tear one another apart physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Moss and his wife Carla Jean are very much a part of that misguided world.

Another curious congruence between Babylonian myth and the novel may shed light on the allegorical figures of Bell and Chigurh. In one ancient story, the *Tablets of Destiny*, previously demonstrated to have played the same role in Babylonian religion that the Urim and Thummim do in the Old Testament, are stolen from their rightful owner—a benevolent god appropriately named Bel—by a usurper seeking to gain control of human fates. The thief, a god named Zu, takes on the role of angel of death:

Zu . . . approached Bel Zu gazed also at the tablets of destiny, belonging to the god . . . [and] eager desire for supremacy took possession of his heart. 'I will take the tablets of destiny of the gods, even I; and I will direct all the decrees (oracles) of the gods' Zu seized with his hand the tablets of destiny; he took Bel's supremacy, the power of giving commands. (Muss-Arnolt 208)

Although the state that Bell presides over is entrusted with enforcing the law and, by extension, killing wrongdoers as it deems necessary, both Bell and the state are impotent against the power of Chigurh. Almost all of the novel's murders are committed by Chigurh, whose coin serves as his "tablets of destiny" to "direct all the decrees" of a higher power. Bell neither apprehends Chigurh nor defends Moss—his supremacy has been stolen from him. "[P]robably the only reason I'm even still alive is that they have no respect for me" Bell laments at one point (217), echoing the situation between Bel and Zu in the Babylonian myth: "He [that was mighty

before?] is now considered as dirt. But [to] his (Zu's) command bow even [the gods]" (Muss-Arnolt 209, original brackets).

Given his apparent bent for divination, it is important to establish Chigurh's thoughts on the subject of God. Frye contends: "The God he imagines is by no means a deity of benevolence and concern but is instead an abstract and indifferent lawgiver concerned with balancing the cosmic scales in the interest of principles beyond human understanding" (Frye, *Understanding* 161). And Vanderheide argues: "He emulates a God who binds himself to His own will and who therefore cannot do, or want anything other, than what he has willed, a supreme arbiter who subsequently rewards or punishes His subjects—alive or dead—according to what they have done or what they can no longer undo" ("No Allegory" 42). Both descriptions fit the vengeful Yahweh of the Old Testament. But he is a god Chigurh does not appear to believe in. As he tells Carla Jean before murdering her: "Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact" (255). Some critics have seen the influence of Flannery O'Connor's *Misfit* in Chigurh (Woodson 6), and this scene in which the killer witnesses Carla Jean's epiphany right before shooting her certainly bears a resemblance to the climax of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." But Chigurh also channels Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood*, who preaches "the Church Without Christ . . . [T]he church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption" (O'Connor 105). Amid the trappings of a religious fanatic's life—aloofness, asceticism, monomania—both characters harbor a central unbelief, the whole package standing as satire of the spiritual vacuity of contemporary society.

Despite his atheism, however, Chigurh does firmly believe in fate. He stands as instrument and oracle of fate alone. As he tells Carla Jean: "Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed this. The accounting is scrupulous" (259). We know this to be true as well as she does, for she has told Sheriff Bell about her understanding that fate brought her together with Llewellyn: "[I]t come to me in this dream or whatever it was that if I went down there that he would find me. At the Wal-Mart" (132). In her world to date, this has been a positive thing—her feeling that she has been fated to meet her husband has changed her life for the better. But now her association with him will be the cause of her death. Since the story does not end with marriage, but with death, there can be no way to read the value of this predestined meeting until all the complicated machinery of fate stops. Perhaps this point is not even reached when she dies, but only in some speculative apocalypse that takes Chigurh with it. At any rate, another victim recognizes his death as an outworking of fate: Carson Wells. "By the old woman's calendar I've got three more minutes" he tells Chigurh (178), referring to an earlier scene in which he has seen a stray bullet that "had marked a date on a calendar on the wall behind [the old woman's corpse] that was three days hence. You could not help but notice" (147). In this he is related to Carla Jean, who "kept a calendar and marked the days" until she met Llewellyn (132). The calendar, with its grid of days extending into a fixed future, is a fitting symbol of predestination. Chance has no way to enter into it—as Wells says when asked by his employer how he "happens" to remember the date he last saw Chigurh: "I dont happen to remember it. I remember dates. Numbers" (139). Happenstance is not a

useful concept for the hit man, whose knowledge must encompass and limit the complexity of the world.

Other characters in the novel repeatedly refer to luck and chance— notions that are antithetical to the beliefs of Chigurh and Wells. Even when flipping a coin, Chigurh does not subscribe to the notion of chance any more than would a priest in the ancient world. Jaynes establishes the important distinction between the modern notion of chance commonly associated with coin-flipping and the attitude of the ancient Mesopotamians toward sortilege:

We are so used to the huge variety of games of chance, of throwing dice, roulette wheels, etc., all of them vestiges of this ancient practice of divination by lots, that we find it difficult to really appreciate the significance of this practice historically. It is a help here to realize that there was no concept of chance whatever until very recent times [B]ecause there was no chance, the result *had* to be caused by the gods whose intentions were being divined. (Jaynes 240)

In a world devoid of luck, proper divination is simply a matter of decoding the signs—bad readings are never the fault of the gods, but can only stem from the reader. But all around Chigurh are infidels who firmly believe in chance. Llewellyn tries to counsel himself about the windfall satchel, in an attempt to unify his fragmented mind: “You have to take this seriously, he said. You can’t treat it like luck” (23). Later, he continues to chastise himself for stupid behavior: “He thought about a lot of things but the thing that stayed with him was that at some point he was going to have to quit running on luck” (108). Both examples call our attention

to the superficiality of the notion of fortune. It is in this light that we must read Chigurh's two references to luck, both in connection with episodes of coin-flipping. He hands the store clerk the quarter he decided his fate with, telling him: "Take it. It's your lucky coin" (57)—but the ironic lightness of that descriptor, given the circumstances, implies mockery. This is something beyond luck, for Chigurh. The mockery continues in his discussion with Carla Jean:

None of this was your fault.

She shook her head, sobbing.

You didnt do anything. It was bad luck.

She nodded. (257)

He is apparently consoling her with the same banalities she would use if she were not speechless with crying. He has already used the trite phrase, "There's a reason for everything" (257), which we know to reflect his own philosophy, ironically turning a religious cliché into something menacing. And she also knows that "lucky dont even say it" when it comes to events in her life (130).

But several other characters subscribe to the herd mentality regarding fortune. Sheriff Bell calls it "dumb luck" that Bill Wyrick is dead (42); he later says that there is "no luck in" cussing the dead (73); his deputy says it was "about as bad a piece of luck as you could have" for the hotel nightclerk to get accidentally shot between the eyes (136); the hitchhiking girl who travels with Moss declares that she "was always lucky. About stuff like that. About meetin people" (234), to which Moss prophetically responds, "Well, I wouldnt speak too soon" (234); Ellis tells Sheriff Bell: "You never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from" (267). It

is a decidedly unreligious perspective, whereas Chigurh at least recognizes some sinister providence.

One last theme that runs throughout the novel is the notion of indebtedness to the dead. The three main characters all acknowledge this debt in their own ways. “The dead have more claims on you than you might want to admit or even that you know about” Bell states in one of his monologues (124); it is an attitude that is borne out later when we learn that he talks to his deceased daughter in his mind: “I listen to her. I know I’ll always get the best from her. It dont get mixed up with my own ignorance or my own meanness” (285). This serves as a spiritual substitute, as he admits: “The world I’ve seen has not made me a spiritual person” (303). Chigurh, of course, speaks of his duty to the murdered Moss: “We’re at the mercy of the dead here . . . [i]n this case your husband” (255), to which Carla Jean responds “You dont own nothin to the dead,” and Chigurh replies, “How can you not?” (255). And Moss, showing his typical dependence on luck, wears a talisman that is a boar’s tusk, explaining: “I’m just keepin it for somebody . . . [A] dead somebody” (225). All three figures approach the idea from their own perspectives—one tender and disillusioned, another aloof and philosophical, the third embracing a soldier’s superstition. But this triple emphasis reinforces a theme that lurks beneath the surface of the entire work.

The one most indebted to the dead is Chigurh, with his reliance on the long extinct practice of sortilege. If, as critics suggest, Bell is the old man of the title, and therefore a representative of the speaker in Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” then is Chigurh a part of that poem’s springtime world in which “[t]he young . . . [are] in one

another's arms, the birds in the trees" (Frye, "Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium'" 14, quoting Yeats)? Hardly. If anything, his world is more ancient than even Bell's—he is the high priest of fate. The blood of ancient sacrifices is on his hands, but his heart is clean. He does the good work all societies engage in, ordering the universe as he sees fit, and living in a delusion about his morality. "This country will kill you in a heartbeat and still people love it" Ellis tells Ed Tom (271)—words that might almost fit Anton Chigurh. If he proves successful in business, perhaps this is the capitalistic world's pragmatic embrace of amorality. But there can be no question that he would "kill you in a heartbeat."

The businessman who tells Carson Wells, "Somewhere in the world is the most invincible man. Just as somewhere is the most vulnerable" (141) seems to be making a pronouncement about Chigurh and Bell, respectively. Bell bows out of the hunt, recognizing that it is "about what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard" (4). His code as lawman—sworn protector of the people—must be broken. He recognizes his own vulnerability on a cosmic scale. Chigurh stands at the opposite pole, also unwilling to become something abhorrent to him; as he tells Carla Jean: "You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do" (259). Taken in this way, we might view the finale of *Blood Meridian* in the positive light some cast it in. Bell's is a passive victory, an inward triumph that is derived from refusal to escalate an already all-too-bloody physical fight. He may share this passive triumph with the kid/man of the earlier novel. However, unlike the indomitable judge of that novel, Chigurh is last seen limping off after a car accident ironically exposes him to the same forces of "chance" he has unleashed on

others. Whether this injury will kill him or make him stronger it is impossible to say.

Despite the views of critics like William Deresiewicz and Richard Woodward that Sheriff Bell is a manifestation of McCarthy's conservatism, the novel does not actually privilege Bell's reactionary perspective (Cremean 22). It may be "no country for old men," but what country, from the bloody dawn of civilization, ever has been? Chigurh, with his detached, religious sensibility, is not a sign of the times, but a man out of time; the battleground is not West Texas, but the cosmos.

CHAPTER 9

THE ROAD AND THE UNEMPLOYED PROPHET OF APOCALYPSE

The subject matter of McCarthy's tenth and most recent novel, *The Road* (2006), creates something of an artificial sense of closure—artificial in that it is certainly not the last novel he will publish. There is “still ‘the New Orleans novel’ in the works,” as well as three or four others (Luce, “Beyond the Border” 6). But a return to the Tennessee setting of the early novels, to the nuclear concerns of the Border Trilogy, and to the pared-down narrative of *No Country for Old Men*, brings us full circle in a career that has spanned five decades. Possibly the most striking change in *The Road*, however, is McCarthy's parodic treatment of what had become a stock character for him: the wise-mad prophet. In a deconstructed world, apparently no institution or text is stable.

In many ways, it is a text of subtractions. As Chris Danta has noted, “[T]he words *disaster*, *catastrophe*, and *apocalypse* never appear” (Danta 11); Sean Pryor adds the word “revelation” to the list (Pryor 38). Our sense is that use of such terms would be redundant in this wasteland, for the same reason that there is no word for “snow” in Eskimo (at least as the popular myth would have it). Words are simply metaphors, after all—convenient currency in a virtual world of our own making. But the actual world has broken through the glass and smashed everything that was non-essential. As the blind sage advises Billy in *The Crossing*: “Stones themselves are made of air. What they have power to crush never lived” (C 158). Ethical concepts like morality, goodness, and empathy, along with larger ones such as civilization and religious devotion—all are on trial in this ontological nightmare.

In the first sentence, we are introduced to the only certainty in the nameless protagonist's world—his young son: "When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him" (3). Even though the man is confident enough to kill or die for the boy, this gesture of reaching out to touch him has an element of uncertainty about it, as though at any moment even he might disappear into the void that has taken nearly everything else. Their world is "[b]arren, silent, godless" (4) as the man candidly affirms, although he is not quite prepared to formally discard his belief in God. "He knew only that the child was his warrant," we learn, and that "[i]f he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). Use of the word "warrant" here is interesting, as it implies a number of possibilities based on its several definitions: "1. A protector, defender. *Obs.* . . . 5.b. A conclusive proof . . . 8.a. Justifying reason or ground for an action, belief or feeling" ("warrant"). Although the most obvious choice is the third definition, as the man makes clear when he says "[m]y job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (77), the second definition—indicating that the boy may be proof of God's existence—is also implied. But it is by the obsolete first definition—with its suggestion that the *boy* is the *man's* defender—that the statement resonates with the larger themes of the book. As John Vanderheide notes, regarding the man's dream of the translucent creature in the cave: "While in the waking world of the diegetic action the man guides the boy across an ashen wasteland, in the dream it is the boy who leads the man . . . The boy's role as guide suggests the divine origin of this dream" ("Sighting Leviathan" 118). The boy is the man's warrant, or

defender—a reversal of daylight truths which is recognized by the man only in his dreams.

Throughout the text, the caustic words of the late wife ring in the protagonist's ears, luring him into self-debate and self-doubt: "A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost [she says]. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (57). Her cruel wisdom is indisputable and causes us to wonder at times—along with the man—what his true motive is for 'shielding the boy from harm with his body': it is as though his own psychological self-preservation is dependent upon the child's survival, even upon some delusion about the child's sacredness. After he is forced to murder a road agent who has threatened the boy, he wipes the man's brains from his son's hair, meditating on the ritualistic element of that act: "All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (74). This sentiment, including the notion of "breathing" some empty thing into being, is eerily similar to that expressed by the wife earlier. Her persona persists as an almost irresistible voice at times, including her "Job's wife" admonition to "Curse God and die" (114)—advice which the man partially follows when he "prays": "Are you there? . . . Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God" (11-12). His final expression is, perhaps, not so much a statement of remorse over his blasphemy as

an acknowledgement of just how close to the “and die” part of his wife’s counsel he has actually come.

The father continues to “evoke the forms” of organized religion in his private thoughts, with metaphors revolving around the remnants of Catholic ritual. His observation on a melting snowflake in his hand is that it is “like the last host of Christendom” (16); the boy’s blond hair puts him in mind of a “[g]olden chalice, good to house a god” (75); the doorway to an underground bunker later looks to him “like a grave yawning at judgment day in some old apocalyptic painting” (155); and he has a late vision of his son “glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (273). As critic Grace Hellyer observes:

An ambiguous intent often seems to hover around the habitual use of religious imagery by the man in his contemplation of the boy as beautiful image: the emergence of a will to impose the sacred on the formless ruin of the world by regarding the boy in a way that invokes the romantic notion of the perfect individual in whom transcendental ideas of moral truth and beauty are immanent. (Hellyer 57)

The ambiguity of the father’s intent is indicated by the fact that these symbols from ritual are now empty shells—or, to use the terms of postmodern criticism, they are signifiers without a signified. If the human race survives, the time cannot be long before such terms as “host,” “chalice,” “tabernacle” and even “god” fall into the abyss of disuse. Of course, that is not to say that spirituality is entirely defunct—that remains to be seen. But the father’s clinging to the trappings of ritual has a quality of despair and sentiment about it, just as his picking up a dead telephone and

“dial[ing] the number of his father’s house in that long ago” does—an act which causes the son to ask what he is doing, possibly because the boy does not know what the purpose of telephones ever has been (7).

McCarthy provides plenty of examples of linguistic signs that have become “uncottered” from anything they might have signified “in the long ago.” It is now a world where “everything [is] uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a *breath*, trembling and brief” (11, emphasis added). The metaphor of a quickening breath is invoked a third time, but here it is not only the rituals and phantoms of religion that are barely sustained by it, but *everything*. Written language, having become overblown and disconnected from the real world, is rejected in favor of spoken language and its animating breath. One advertisement advising travelers to “See Rock City” (21) might be noticeably ironic, if the whole atmosphere were not already ironic; but where irony is the norm, it becomes meaningless. “Phone books, maps, states and even nations have no signifying purpose in the fictional world presented to us here, and road signs advertising the tourist attraction Rock City stand isolated where all signifiers of previous order, place and supposed security lack any kind of signifying purpose” (Walsh, “The Post-Southern Sense” 52): all of these examples pertain to the written word, which appears to have been relegated to a secondary role, a ghost of “virtual communication.”

As language is on the chopping block, logically, even the text itself is destabilized. When the man finds a ransacked library, we recognize the very real possibility that “entertainments” like *The Road* might have lined its shelves:

“[B]lackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He’d not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him” (187). While the brutal truths of McCarthy’s novels make them less likely candidates for the apocalyptic fires than, say, those of P. G. Wodehouse, they still cannot be eaten, drunk, or fired from a gun. Everything has boiled down to essentials.

Equally useless are technical manuals, particularly those pertaining to the virtual world that was information technology. McCarthy subtly uses the terminology of computer programming in the first half of the novel, seemingly to remind us both of the emptiness of such technology in our world and of the specter of the nuclear nightmare within the novel. The clearest example of this metaphoric use of jargon is his brief discussion of “classes”: “The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone” (28). Within the novel, this passage is about extinction of actual things; however, the terminology is drawn from object-oriented programming, in which objects or “instances” are created from prototype “classes.” Although in the virtual world of programming the class does not disappear for lack of objects, this behavior is in keeping with reality: things go extinct and are forgotten.

A number of other high-tech terms surface, perhaps never to be thought of or uttered again. The man thinks of “[t]he world shrinking down to a raw core of parsible entities” (88), the term “parse” meaning “to break down into discrete parts, as in separating elements in a data string extracted from a database into columnar

data for a spreadsheet” (“parse”). We also read of the man that “[h]e rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark . . . Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite” (15). One of the many meanings of “matrix” is “a two-dimensional array” (“matrix”) which forms the pool of possible values for variables in a program. And later, in an odd moment which might constitute either internal monologue or authorial intrusion, we also read: “Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?” (32), the term “query” being the command one uses when attempting to extract information from a database (“query”). Although the use of specialized terms is nothing new for McCarthy, the use of programming language in this techno-hell is clearly meant to be portentous.

Recognizing this combination of religious and technical jargon, then, we may arrive at an answer to the unposed, unanswered question of the text: what happened? Erik Hage’s brief consideration of the novel includes the intriguing statement: “all of culture and the religions within it have dissolved (possibly in the wake of a holy war)” (Hage 143). “Holy war” would certainly be consistent with the world we have come to know, with its jihads and jingoism, its long history of violent religious fervor. The constant threat that unstable governments such as that of Iran, Syria or North Korea might acquire the technology to inflict their spiritual perspectives on the world is daunting. And McCarthy has expressed his opinion on the matter of mankind’s fate in a fairly recent interview: “McCarthy did tell *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2007 that he didn’t believe that climate change or environmental disaster would be the end for humanity; it would be the violent nature of the human

race itself: 'We're going to do ourselves in first,' he claimed" (Hage 141, quoting McCarthy as found in Kushner). Although both "climate change" and "environmental disaster" might also be variations on 'doing ourselves in,' McCarthy believes humanity will have a more directly active, violent role in its own demise. And perhaps the only remaining contender for global destroyer is the one Ronald Reagan feared would bring Armageddon so many years ago: the bomb.

Into this atmosphere of emptiness, through the ruins of defunct religions, civilizations, technologies and texts, wanders the "prophet" Ely. A Chaplinesque tramp, he "tap[s] along with a peeled stick for a cane" (161), looking "like a pile of rags fallen off a cart" (162). Although he is a sympathetic character, he might also be viewed as something of a textual joke—a parody of the biblical prophet Elijah, or "a kind of reincarnation of Melville's 'Elijah' from *Moby-Dick*" (Sheehan 97).

Unfortunately, however, he has no tragedy left to predict. Linda Woodson comments on his curious place in the novel:

Ely, the only named character, contradicts the usual literary narrative of an encounter with an old wise man or prophet . . . Rather than presenting a prophecy or example of hope, his story suggests a condemnation to endure in a world where endurance is no longer desirable. His words to the man carry a postmodern distrust of language and its power to deceive, and his lies illustrate that power. (Woodson, "Mapping" 93)

And given the fact that McCarthy has already been dabbling with postmodernism's implications in the novel, Ely may even represent the final trace of his perennial

prophet figure—a mantic mendicant climbing out of the ruins of the author’s previous texts, lost.

The gallows humor of the passages involving Ely reminds critics such as Chris Danta and Paul Sheehan of Samuel Beckett’s plays, particularly of *Endgame* (Danta 11; Sheehan 97). His answers to the man’s initial questions set the stage for a prolonged, humorous exchange:

What’s your name?

Ely.

Ely what?

What’s wrong with Ely?

Nothing. (167)

There is actually something wrong with “Ely,” however, as it is the mere shell of the original name: “The name Elijah is אליהו in Hebrew, transliterated as Eli-Yahu, and means “my god, Yahu,” i.e. Yahweh” (Hamel). The name “Eli” or “Ely” alone might, perhaps, be translated “My god, [blank].” And this is essentially what Ely means when he says: “There is no God and we are his prophets” (170). His name is an empty sign, and he is a prophet of nothing. Like Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*, he is a reflection of O’Connor’s Hazel Motes and his “Church Without Christ.”

Probing further, the father draws more humorous answers from the old man—answers that read like something from *Waiting for Godot*:

[Y]ou might wish you’d never been born.

Well. Beggars cant be choosers.

You think that would be asking too much.

What's done is done. Anyway, it's foolish to ask for luxuries in times like these. (169)

Speaking with a sort of Depression-era pathos, the old man states the truism that “beggars can't be choosers” when it comes to the “luxury” of never having been born. He invokes the phrase “in times like these” twice in his responses to the man (169; 171)—another ridiculous expression that has become devoid of meaning in a time like no other. Later, the father mocks him to the boy when he says: “There's not a lot of good news on the road. In times like these,” to which the boy immediately replies, “You shouldn't make fun of him . . . He's going to die” (175). And this brief line by the child is the final word, perhaps even on the original prophet Elijah, whose legend involves the belief that he never actually died but simply “went up in a whirlwind to heaven” (2 Kings 2:11).

Correspondences between Elijah's story and Ely's confirm his role as obsolete prophet. There is some question whether Ely, with his poor vision, thinks the child was an angel (172); the boy feeds him twice, once a tin of fruit cocktail (163-64), the second time, part of their dinner (166)—a combination of facts that seems to be an allusion to 1 Kings 19:5-8, in which an angel feeds Elijah twice. Ely also says, “I knew this was coming” (168); Malachi 4:5 connects the reappearance of Elijah with “the great and terrible day of the Lord,” i.e., Armageddon (Mal. 4:5, *New International Version*). And Mark Steven sees a similarity between Revelation 6:8 concerning the activity of a personified Death and Ely's words: “When we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He'll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He'll say:

Where did everybody go? And that's how it will be. What's wrong with that?" (173; see Steven 78).

Despite all the evidence equating him with the Old Testament prophet, however, he refuses to wear that mantle. Regarding the boy's innate goodness, Ely remarks: "Maybe he believes in God He'll get over it" (174). Sheehan correctly identifies him as "a prophet of nihilism" (Sheehan 104). He is, perhaps, a somewhat lighthearted variation on the wife/mother's cynical voice. McCarthy depicts him one last time as he wanders away: "[T]he old man had set out with his cane, tapping his way, dwindling slowly on the road behind them like some storybook peddler from an antique time, dark and bent and spider thin and soon to vanish forever" (174). The image is reminiscent of the classic Charlie Chaplin departure that appears in the final scene of films like *The Circus* (1928), in which the dejected vagabond saunters away from us with his cane swinging while the shot "irises-out" to black (Golda). Ely is clearly heir not only to Elijah, but to Chaplin, Didi and Gogo—a tragicomic tramp on a minimalist stage.

If even the prophets have packed their bags, as it were, what hope is there for spirituality? McCarthy has burned his usual bridge by letting this mystical figure "vanish forever," and it seems quite possible, after such rough treatment in *The Road*, that this character type will not make another appearance in any future novels. Are God and the metaphysical realm part of the non-essential world that can now be discarded? Were they delusions to be "breathed upon" by human beings all along?

The answer has to come from the boy. Phillip Snyder recognizes a telling biblical parallel in the father and son: "Could we, as readers following the narrative progression of McCarthy's father and son protagonists, obvious latter-day doubles for Abraham and Isaac, discover some figurative ram caught up in the textual bushes that might relieve the father of his constant readiness to sacrifice his son and thus also finally bring them both to rest?" (Snyder 69). If the father and son are Abraham and Isaac, the mercy killing the man contemplates certainly has nothing to do with devotion to a God he would like to "throttle." But the son, like Isaac, is a figure of Christ. Jay Ellis also remarks on the institution of sacred sacrifice: "We give up one of our young, our greatest natural promise, so that we may secure the greatest magical favor for the whole group" (J. Ellis 24). But the father has no intention of murdering his son to win God's favor, or to gain some magical blessing for the human race. He is simply trying to minimize the boy's suffering.

The father constantly reminds his son that they are "carrying the fire" (83; 216; 278-79). Although the metaphor is never explained, it clearly could go in any of several directions, symbolizing civilization, ethical behavior, the light of wisdom, etc. Spirituality, however, makes the most natural choice of all. One specialized use of fire in the text allows the symbol to resonate ironically, and supports Hage's assertion that the cataclysm was the result of religious war:

I found a flarepistol [the man said]It shoots a thing up in the air
and it makes a big light

Can you shoot somebody with it? [the boy said].

You could.

Would it kill them?

No. But it might set them on fire. (240-41)

And this, of course, is exactly what happens. The man is struck in the leg with an arrow—an image that calls to mind attacks by 18th-century Native Americans on “innocent” white travelers encroaching on their territory—and responds by shooting his attacker with the flare gun: “The flare went rocketing up toward the window in a long white arc and then they could hear the man screaming” (263). We are told regarding a woman tending to the burnt man (possibly her son): “As soon as she saw [the protagonist] she began to curse him” (264); and, according to Snyder, this “cursing parallels the father’s earlier cursing at his being wounded and underlines another parallel between the two parents protecting their sons” (Snyder 83). The two characters, then, are placed on the same level, with the beneficial “fire” that the father so jealously defends bringing grief to outsiders.

The boy clearly has different ideas about the usefulness of the flare gun.

After the father fires the gun out over the bay, the two discuss the event:

They couldn’t see it very far, could they, Papa?

Who?

Anybody

You mean like the good guys?

Yes. Or anybody that you wanted them to know where you were

Like God?

Yeah. Maybe somebody like that. (246)

The flare, for the boy, is a visible prayer. So this fire plays both positive and negative religious roles in the text, once again making us wonder if we will find any indication that religion provides absolute value to humankind:

Though it is never fully explained what it means to “carry the fire,” it suggests the original Christian meaning of the word “immanence”: the divine presence whose flame burns *within*, as opposed to God’s transcendence *without*, beyond or outside creation Yet fire is also the instrument of global catastrophe, the medium that has devastated the land . . . that has blotted out the sun and polluted the air. The “best” and the “worst” are thus embodied in an element with unequivocal religious connotations. (Sheehan 102)

Although each expression of this notion of “carrying the fire” is meant, by the father, to convey notions of nobility and grace, his use of the element reveals a position that is the opposite of Christian ethics.

The tension between the father’s and son’s perspectives reaches its climax shortly before the man’s death. After punishing a thief who has stolen all their belongings by making him strip off all his clothing at gunpoint, the father tells his sullen son: “You’re not the one who has to worry about everything,” to which the son replies, “Yes I am I am the one” (259). This moving passage brings us back to the dream in which the father was led by the son—his “warrant”—through a cave in a reversal of apparent reality. It is the son who has “carried the fire” all along. And the father, although he would like to think otherwise, has actually been something of a threat to that fire at times. The sacred light of the son’s face has occasionally

flickered: “[W]hen he bent to see into the boy’s face under the hood of the blanket he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again” (136). Thankfully, that “something” is not gone, as the father clearly sees in his dying vision of the son: “[The fire is] inside you. It was always there. I can see it” (279). But the physical world has not been so lucky—McCarthy verbally echoes the father’s fears about his son in the book’s final, elegiac paragraph: “Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains . . . One their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. *Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again.* In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery” (286-87, emphasis added). Sacred nature has been permanently defiled by its caretakers. The Edenic garden has become “the ruins of an old apple orchard, black and gnarly stumps, dead grass to [the] knees” (118). Mankind has destroyed something that cannot be put back.

But some things—sustained by a breath, fragile as phantoms—actually prove sturdier than rocks and trees, sturdier than civilizations. The mystery of the boy’s goodness is finally tended by those “godspoke men” the father was certain they would never encounter (32). The boy has caught him in his logical fallacy earlier, when his father has said, ““I dont think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road,” and he had replied: “We’re on the road” (151). In other words, there is no more likely place to find goodness than in the world as it is. An earlier scene in which the man has begun to raise the pistol to their images in a mirror ends with the son reassuring him: “It’s us, PapaIt’s us” (132). The message is a profound one:

in a world that is already barren and on the verge of collapse, religion, if it has any merit, must be that which moves us to recognize our brothers on the road.

CONCLUSION

In much the same way that postmodernists employ language despite the word crisis they herald, McCarthy employs divination in a post-divine world. His use of the trope creates a dimension in his work that gives weight to the smallest gestures, the most innocuous-seeming remarks. Yet there is never a sense that this metaphor is merely a device, or that it springs from an attitude of wry negativity: “[McCarthy] avoids the apocalyptic tone and the jaded manner of much postmodern fiction (the novels of Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, for example)” (Phillips 435).

McCarthy’s brand of agnosticism allows for a wide spectrum of interpretations. Divination may range from the sorcery of Mother She in *Suttree* to the ironic nihilism of Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* or of Ely in *The Road*; it may be used to skewer such institutions as organized religion and medical science, as in *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*; it may be the last true portal to a bygone world, as in the Border Trilogy. It allows for the opposing perspectives of the two survivors of the Glanton gang— Judge Holden, with his pronouncement: “Your heart’s desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery” (*BM* 252), and the ex-priest Tobin, who asserts: “[S]omeplace in the scheme of things this world must touch the other” (*BM* 130)—and manages to privilege neither view. It admits an argument in the precarious ruins of a Caborncan church—that between a priest and a blasphemer, which ends with the priest’s last rites and the atheist’s last words: “Save yourself” (*C* 157), as though these two characters have been mirror images of one another all along. But the delicate balance of the structure is never disturbed, the church wall never falls, the art retains its ambiguity.

In one sense, the god that humanity has invested with so much blood and so much breath and so many words must exist, even if only as the phantom of a Borges story. Human endeavor makes it so. But McCarthy divines that god in a cast of disparate, invented voices, all rising from the pages of his work in quoteless harmony with the voice of the omniscient narrator. The old man who helps Billy understand the autonomy of dream people (*COP 271*) also helps us understand McCarthy's approach to the otherworldly in storytelling, even if that other world is just the depths of the collective unconscious. But the Indian who tells Billy of his orphan nature provides the greatest insight on the novelist's role as sociologist, psychologist, historian, and shaman, when he informs him simply that "the world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts. For while it seemed a place which contained men it was in reality a place contained within them" (*C 134*). McCarthy's creative act of divination, in the end, is to give us an accurate picture of the terrible and multifarious god that exists nowhere if not in the human heart.

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