The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels and the Border Trilogy

by Vince Brewton

Cormac McCarthy's appearance on the national literary radar with the successful publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, after years of largely "academic" interest in his work, also inaugurated on a substantive level a clearly defined second phase in his career as a writer. Chronology alone would mark McCarthy's first phase as a novelist as the two decades between 1965 and 1985 that saw the publication of *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, *Suttree*, and *Blood Meridian*, while the Border Trilogy spans the 90s, including *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and his latest, *Cities of the Plain* (1998). A historicist approach to McCarthy's fiction, however, corroborates the chronological separation in that it reveals the correlations between the work of McCarthy's two major periods on the one hand and the cultural moments, popular and otherwise, with which their conception and composition coincided.

A clear and discernible correlation exists between the novels of McCarthy's first period and the era of American history defined by the military involvement in Vietnam, while the novels of the Border Trilogy exhibit a similar imaginative and thematic debt to the changing political and cultural landscape of America beginning in the 1980s, a landscape best evoked by the Reagan presidency and the Gulf War with Iraq

in 1991. The correspondences between McCarthy's work and his times are part of a larger cultural equation whereby contemporary historical events influenced prevailing cultural attitudes on the one hand, and cultural production on the other, a form of influence manifested in film and literature generally, but felt with equal force in the arena of national media culture, in the campaigns for president in 1980 and 1984, and in the political discourse of the 1980s. Perhaps all cultural artifacts are a product of their times, but the novels of McCarthy's first phase are recognizably so in ways worth exploring, as is the case with the Border Trilogy. To understand how the works display this influence, in some cases a covert influence, requires situating McCarthy's novels afresh in their historical contexts.

The two separate cases of correspondence between McCarthy's work and his cultural milieu are united primarily by the representation of violence and issues closely related to violence in the novels, a circumstance not surprising given that two wars have had a major impact on the cultural terrain of McCarthy's career. Between the novels of the early phase and the work of the Trilogy, a major shift occurs in McCarthy's storytelling and that shift is directly a product of a changing aesthetic of violence in his work. The transformation of McCarthy's aesthetic of violence takes shape as a movement from the serial event to the symbolic drama: the former representing conflicts always contingent and soon to be superseded by fresh eruptions of violence; in the latter, a central act of violence is the single event itself toward which the narrative proceeds and which regularly contains the work's larger thematic conflicts if not in every case their resolution. McCarthy's transition between the serial and the symbolic returns him to the tradition of southern literary violence that relies on violence as the site where divergent interests converge for dramatic effect.

While all literary violence can be viewed as formal in the sense that it has achieved literary form, normally we make a distinction between formal violence on the one hand—violence governed by rules, agreements, and cultural assumptions, typified by the formal duel—and informal violence on the other hand—violence that is fragmentary, unconsidered, "random," or "senseless," as public discourse of our time denotes it. Southern literature—from which Cormac McCarthy emerges in terms of our understanding of his work, especially in his early, Tennessee-centered vision—favors a narrative strategy in which violence represents a climax of tensions and stress with the literary text. For McCarthy, the conflict between an older order and the newer one replacing it persists

from *The Orchard Keeper* to *Cities of the Plain*, a novel in which the closing of the western range ultimately brings about the displacement and final alienation of his surviving hero. Thus McCarthy's return in the Border Trilogy to the symbolic violence familiar to southern literary genealogy marks a repetition worthy of our attention, for it is a return that reinforces our sense of his participation in the southern literary tradition he had seemingly relinquished in his turn to a new subject and place, the American Southwest.

The Vietnam experience, while never appearing directly in McCarthy's novels, has nevertheless left a deep imprint on his early work. Three novels in particular, *Child of God*, *Suttree*, and *Blood Meridian*, show the influence of imagery and ideas issuing from the military-political experience of Vietnam. While *Child of God* and *Suttree* contain repressed traces of the Vietnam experience, *Blood Meridian* comes close to being a novel whose true subject is Vietnam, a kind of allegory of American involvement in Southeast Asia and of the reverberations of that history in the American psyche. Although the date of publication puts *Blood Meridian* forward into the second cultural moment that in turn left its mark on the Border Trilogy, the novel of 1985 is significantly an artifact of McCarthy's two-decade working through of the war and the mediation of that war by American popular culture. Critical thought on McCarthy has certainly hinted at such a connection. John Emil Sepich, in a footnote to his essay on the historical sources of *Blood Meridian*, writes, "The literature of 'atrocities' in Vietnam seems consistent, in its language, with that of Glanton's 'atrocities'" (138). Sepich, however, does not draw any inferences from the similarity (138). Andrew Nelson refers to *Blood Meridian* as "a book which finally dislocates the reader from the adventure of Manifest Destiny," an interesting observation when we consider that Michael Herr made a similar point in his classic *Dispatches* (1977) about our involvement in Vietnam. In a work whose influence on *Blood Meridian* seems significant, Herr surmises that we "might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing perimeter" (49). Herr uses the familiar imagery of native American dispossession to suggest that the disastrous American involvement in Vietnam was the logical conclusion of the ideology of Manifest Destiny. Along these same lines, Richard Slotkin has pointed out that Sam Peckinpah's famous western *The Wild Bunch* mirrors contemporary history in its depiction of a struggle between democracy and tyranny that miscarries and becomes instead an orgy of bloodshed directly suggestive

of the carnage in Vietnam (880). Similarly, reviewers of *Blood Meridian* have compared it to Peckinpah's films (Tatum 479). But the full significance of the link between the historical event of Vietnam and the artistic vision of McCarthy's first phase as a novelist remains to be explored.

One persistent theme in McCarthy's early work is the loss of the American myth of innocence. American mythology has long woven together John Winthrop's imagery of the "city on the hill" with the older notion of the New World as an earthly paradise that generated a national self-conception of righteousness. The literary myth of the new American Adam similarly depends on the framing metaphor of America as a relocated garden, while the Puritan vision of a sanctified national mission in an Edenic paradise added a crucial component of virtue/innocence to the national identity, even if that innocence is no more than a disassociation from the dubious legacy of Old World social arrangements. Innocence so conceived is the tangible quantity expunged from the American self-definition as a direct result of the military intervention in Vietnam and the soiled spectacle of our support for corrupt regimes, the pervasive loss of faith in authority, and the appalling images and stories of that war. In *Dog Soldiers*, Robert Stone sums up this loss of innocence, or ignorance, in Vietnam: "You can't blame us too much. We didn't know who we were till we got here. We thought we were something else." (57)

National mythology thus has linked purpose (mission) with place (paradise metaphors), a process that associates innocence with possession—McCarthy's work charts the dissolution of both. *Child of God* chronicles the sad and sordid history of Lester Ballard's dispossession and alienation in rural Sevier County, Tennessee. Lester's mythic exile takes the narrative form of his eviction from the family farm in the novel's opening scene. From this point on in the novel, Lester occupies a series of downwardly mobile dwellings, from rented shacks, to jail cells, to caves in the bowels of the earth, and at last an asylum for the criminally insane. His crimes conversely rise to a crescendo of horror, from voyeurism and petty theft, to arson, attempted rape, murder, mutilation, and necrophilia. Lester's dispossession obliquely represents the national loss of innocence while also allegorizing the expulsion of the American psyche from the sheltering myth of "city on the hill" virtue, an expulsion that exposed the national consciousness to a two-decade ordeal of bad conscience.

Although Ballard's existence may be confined to the margins of the social order, storytelling reinserts him, or his legend, into the heart of the community. His cross-dressing presence on the outskirts of the civi-

lization corresponds directly with his behavior: where law and taboo are remote, everything is permitted. The falling away of social restraint also reveals itself in the dumpkeeper, Ballard's confrere of the margins, who slides from outraged parent to incestuous father in the heat of a wrestling match in the weeds. The space of the margins is like the traditional space of war, located on the periphery, but one nevertheless generated by the cultural center. Ballard's dispossession places him on the civic limits, just as the organized apparatus of the state creates the scene of war where frequently, despite the well-intentioned rules of warfare, nothing is forbidden. The two sites are comparable in another way familiar to postmodern thought: as marginal spaces, both the scene of Ballard's depravity and the scene of war have the uncanny ability to become central. In this respect, our national stock of lore concerning Vietnam mirrors the legend of Lester in the hollows. Part of our narrative compulsion concerning Vietnam involves its function as a sign of the expansion of our capacity as a nation to misstep, the furthest point down the road of civic dishonor we have traveled in the twentieth-century. Whether American ideals and conduct were at their worst between 1959 and 1973 has become in some ways beside the point. What matters is that public discourse on Vietnam acts as a nether limit for American civilization and serves as a boundary for American behavior within the bigger story of our history in the last century.

The ballad of Lester Ballard plays a comparable role in Sevier County to the national obsession with Vietnam. Ballard's catalogue of misdeeds transacted on the margins yields for the community a reinforced conviction of the existence of those margins that their own lesser meannesses and misdemeanors approach but never transgress. Lester's ghoulish crusade transforms him over time into the hobgoblin of Sevier County mythmaking while his narrative provides the county's inhabitants with a representative means for containing the story of communal deviance within the larger narrative of the community as a whole. Lester establishes the necessary boundary marker—like the cultural sign of Vietnam—and in this he has a function similar to a taboo, which, as Bataille reminds us in *Erotism*, directs us away from the prohibited action while in the same movement fixating our interest.

The gruesome quality of Lester's practices has heretofore been considered within the theoretical framework of the grotesque in southern literature. While the theory of the grotesque opens up *Child of God* in interesting ways, Ballard's obsession with corpses (bodies) and his purloining of trophies from the dead transcend the ordinary pilfering of a

criminal. Having been symbolically expelled from the community, Lester feeds on the edges of communal space. Out on the margins, Ballard recreates the world from which he has been estranged, and the corpses, clothes, and ultimately the "fright-wig" itself have the talismanic quality of the souvenired trophy. Ballard's trophies allow him to incorporate the community that has unincorporated him, thus providing him with potent totems to shelter him existentially from what Vereen M. Bell describes as "more abasement than most humans could imagine" (*Achievement* 55). Every emblem Lester strips from the dead performs the function of the war trophy for the soldier still in combat, for whom the sliced-ear or thumb marks an overcoming of death dread through a symbolic overcoming of the foe. Like the soldier, Lester's metaphorical consumption of objects and human remains confirms the Bakhtinian idea that to consume the world is to tame our fear of it (296).

The retrieval of Lester Ballard's collection of corpses at novel's end bears an eerie resemblance to the return of dead servicemen from Vietnam, a cultural sign deeply intertwined with the consciousness of the period in which *Child of God* was composed. McCarthy seems to be invoking the pathos of a sign already present in the psyche of his readers to charge this scene in his novel with the emotional freight of the dead soldier and the corresponding national trauma of that image. Sevier County's dead, wrapped in "muslin shrouds on which was stenciled Property of the State of Tennessee," are repatriated in a movement that mimics the return of servicemen during the war years in official body bags (196). Lester Ballard's victims now share in the cultural mourning experienced by a nation for the casualties of war, deaths that seemed to many then and now as lives "wasted," to use the soldier's slang, in an expenditure of life not sufficiently sustained by a meaningful purpose as in previous wars. For Sevier County's collective memory, the murdered victims occupy a place of unassigned meaning: the myth-making surrounding their murderer is unable to establish that they were killed for any sensible reason—not even as a product of the powerful but inchoate "meanness" with which they identify their own history of violence. Lester's enigmatic career of murder and necrophilia can offer no closure or final understanding, a fact signaled by the mute narration of the gruesome homecoming.

While *Child of God* has an obvious political subtext, *Suttree*, a Joycean epic of the days and nights of Cornelius Suttree, down and out in Knoxville, Tennessee, would appear to bear less resemblance to a clandestine novel of Vietnam. Yet, the narrative of Suttree's daily life reso-

nates with both the experience of war generally and Vietnam in particular. Ballard's serial enactment of murder, by comparison, moves forward without a readily apparent object: even vengeance is absorbed into the series, for Greer's death is only one more murder, neither the first nor the last. Violence in the life of Cornelius Suttree follows a similar sequence in which encounters have neither a cumulative effect nor contribute to a narrative movement toward one central or conclusive moment of violence. Rather, the bar fights of Suttree and his cronies and the titanic struggle of Ab Jones against the police, to cite the main arteries of violence in the sprawling novel, are inherently provisional. Partly for this reason, *Suttree* and *Child of God* have struck some critics as bereft of plot, or as Bell puts it, "innocent of theme and of ethical reference and plot" ("Nihilism" 31). The episodic quality of these novels, however, is neither an artistic failing nor lack of a sustained vision on McCarthy's part, but on the contrary marks an importation of an aesthetic of violence from the heavily televised and reported war in Southeast Asia.

Bell's commentary on *Suttree* unintentionally reinforces the idea that the novel contains disguised references to Vietnam. Of the reckless quality to Suttree's life, Bell writes: "The consequence of Suttree's removing himself from normal society is that it removes him from ordinary amenities of the modern world and thus in a sense displaces him in time. He is therefore in the presence of death daily in the way a citizen of an earlier century would be" (*Achievement* 92). One need not look to an earlier century as a source for Suttree's daily experience. Bell's assertion rings particularly true for the soldier who is removed from "ordinary amenities" and lives in "in the presence of death daily." McCarthy inscribes the experiential reality of war into the novel not, I think, to tell elliptically the ongoing story of Vietnam but to impart to his narrative the wholly contingent and provisional nature of the daily life of an individual outside the normally sustaining entities of family, work, and religion. In the unsheltering existential sky of McCarthy's early work, human beings face reality in unrelentingly gritty episodes of pain and pleasure, a kind of life Bell characterizes as where "the world itself is always insisting upon its own reality; it is then to be dealt with as itself and not at the subordinated service of ideas" (*Achievement* 77). Ideas, particularly those pertaining to the conventionally ordered life bounded by family, conventional politics, and commerce, cannot resist the reality of Suttree's world that always "insists" more powerfully than any attempts to organize it. These attempts to frame and arrange the uncontainable truth of our being find expression in the reproach of Suttree's father, who argues

to his son that "The world is run by those willing to take the responsibility for the running of it. If it is life you feel that you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government" (13–14). Cornelius Suttree's difficulties hardly stem from missing out on life. Quite the contrary, McCarthy demonstrates that for the son life is really quite like war and has an awesome and unsettling immediacy the law courts, business, and government cannot match.

Bell describes Suttree's companions as "an odd little band of ragtag existential heroes" (81). A primary convention of the war genre in literature and film is the handful of soldiers who constitute a microcosm of the conflict, or of humanity in general. Crane, Remarque, O'Brien, James Jones, Hasford, Kubrick, and Oliver Stone all make use of the organizing principle of small-unit soldiery in their works. Suttree's companions—"By nine oclock that night they were twelve or more, all good hearts from McAnally"—carouse with the kind of intensity and abandon of those who live entirely for the moment—"Who the fuck are we fighting? said Suttree. Who the fuck cares, if he aint from McAnally bust him" (184–186). McCarthy's dubious heroes serve as a chorus for the conflict at the core of the novel, that between Suttree and his world. Arnold and Luce remind us that McCarthy labored over this voluminous novel during a twenty-year period that almost perfectly coincides with the Vietnam years. Like the television series *M*A*S*H*, McCarthy situates the novel's action entirely in the 50s, so that although direct representation of Vietnam is formally denied, many of the text's associations and other points of reference with Vietnam work in service of the novel's primary conflicts (8).

Bell concludes his assessment of the Suttrean odyssey with this perceptive remark: "Suttree's hard lessons harden him and eventually free him from sentimental regret, leaving him with perspective, which is at least like transcendence" (101). Bell's insight could be inserted seamlessly into a discussion of the hero of war literature, whose ordeal in the crucible of war transforms him from the naive recruit and does confer something like transcendence, or at least an unsentimental perspective, as a result. When Bell contends that McCarthy never allows us a "readerly station" above the action of Suttree, that "we are solidly in it," we recognize that McCarthy wants us to experience the vertiginous and visceral quality of Suttree's daily struggle for survival, for redemption, a struggle comparable to the soldier's day to day combat with fear, deprivation, and suffering.

The narration of Suttree's nearly fatal illness and subsequent recov-

ery calls to mind Frederick Henry's wounding and recuperation in *A Farewell to Arms*. For Suttree, the experience forms the final act in the drama of his transformation. The novel had begun with a simile of war: "The night is quiet. Like a camp before battle. The city beset by a thing unknown and will it come from forest or sea?" (4). His health restored, McCarthy's hero stands beside the road with new clothes and suitcase, like "someone just out of the army or jail" (470). Suttree's hard-won perspective invokes finally a farewell to arms that seems more permanent than any before. In the end, Suttree appears to bid farewell to some of his relentlessly uncompromising resistance to the organizing principles of his world, a stance he had long maintained out of some authentic alienation that refuses spurious consolation—the distinctive apartness common to McCarthy's characters as the price of maintaining their original humanity.

Blood Meridian takes us further historically from our time than any of McCarthy's other novels while ironically carrying us closest to the heart of darkness that was the American experience in Vietnam. McCarthy tips his hand as to his intentions in the Captain's recruiting speech that has as its direct referent the war with Mexico over Texas in 1846 and the ill-conceived military expedition that initiates the kid's bloody sojourn in Mexico. The subject of the speech doubles as a muted commentary, at times cryptic, at times direct, on various aspects of the Vietnam conflict:

> We fought for it. Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by god if we didnt give it back. Back to a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favor will admit have no least notion in Gods earth of honor or justice or the meaning of republican government. . . . Did you know that when Colonel Doniphan took Chihuahua City he inflicted over a thousand casualties on the enemy and lost only one man and him all but a suicide? . . . We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land. . . . Unless Americans act, people like you and me who take their country seriously while those mollycoddles in Washington sit on their hindsides, unless we act, Mexico—and I mean the whole of the country—will one day fly a European flag. Monroe Doctrine or no. (33–35)

Replace the European flag with the banner of Communism to complete the analogy.

The irony of the Captain's rhetoric—"Colonel Carrasco is asking for

American intervention"—when viewed in light of his expedition's imminent slaughter, links this intervention with our own in Southeast Asia. The Captain's military disingenuousness matches that of American policy makers and Pentagon planners who seriously miscalculated the potential for American casualties in the war. The Captain's worldview has the almost self-parodying mixture of idealism and self-interest of American rhetoric of the war era. Explicit in the Captain's appeal to the kid is the understanding that their mission will be conducted on behalf of civilization—and just as explicitly he appeals to the kid's baser nature: "we will be the ones to divide the spoils" (34). Innocence mingles with a denial of greed here, anticipating the loss of the one and the wholesale embrace of the other.

What begins as an appeal to join a crusade, however bungled in its execution and morally dubious, degenerates further still with the kid's second recruitment into Glanton's band of scalphunters, a collection of rogues about whom Herr might have been writing when he described the "common pool" of soldiers on leave in Saigon: "redundant mutilators, heavy rapers, eye-shooters, widow-makers, nametakers, classic essential American types; point men, isolatos and outriders like they were programmed in their genes to do it" (35). Glanton's band of outriders was initially welcomed by the citizenry of Chihuahua City and officially commissioned by the governor and a private society to end Apache depredations on the populace. This relationship dissolves in chaos when the band begins to prey on the populace itself, a souring comparable to what became of the relationship between the Vietnamese people and their would-be protectors. Motivated ostensibly by greed and a bounty on Apache scalps, Glanton's band soon abandons the troublesome distinction between Apaches and other Indians, collecting those scalps most easily culled. In this collapse of the separation between friend and foe, the novel illustrates a parallel with one of the common myths of Vietnam, that soldiers were at times unable, or perhaps unwilling, to discriminate between friendly villager and Viet Cong, further eroding the American relationship with the South Vietnamese.

The connection between the band's scalphunting and the military policy of the "body count" in Vietnam was first made by Sepich, who does so only to propose a comparison in kind of atrocities. Glanton and his men lay claim to nominal success in the reckoning of scalps, but their conflict, as in Vietnam, is endless, the dogs of war not to be appeased with the offering of a few hundred scalps. For many Americans, Vietnam was a nightmare that seemed to have no end. In *Blood Meridian*,

McCarthy expands this idea into one of the work's most powerful themes, and Judge Holden figures as the living embodiment and oracle of an ontology of war: "War endures. . . . War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him" (248).

The war waged by Holden and his associates is by its nature endless and in its essence less the pursuit of an object than the practice of a trade, "the ultimate trade," as Holden calls it (248). Steven Shaviro describes *Blood Meridian* as a book of "restless, incessant horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings, topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert" (145). While McCarthy supplies particulars of geography, the reader experiences a collapse of time and space so that only the ceaseless repetition of violence remains foregrounded, enacted in a kind of no-place of desolation. The novel depicts the scalphunters as the ultimate practitioners of their trade, warriors for whom war is no longer waged as an instrument of policy or even for gain, but for its own sake, and generative of its own radical state of being: "wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order" (172).

If *Blood Meridian* serves as McCarthy's epic treatment of war in Vietnam, the reactions of one commentator on the novel are interesting when juxtaposed with the observations of a commentator on the war itself. About the ambiguous experience of reading *Blood Meridian*, Shaviro writes "Bloody death is our monotonously predictable destiny; yet its baroque opulence is attended with a frighteningly complicitous joy," and he goes on to contend that

> The scariest thing about *Blood Meridian* is that it is a euphoric and exhilarating book, rather than a tragically alienated one, or a gloomy, depressing one. Our pulses quicken as "considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right [are] rendered void and without warrant" (250), subsumed in the trials of war. Once we have started to dance, once we have been swept up in the game, there is no pulling back. (154)

Michael Herr's observations on his own relationship to the soldiers and experience of war are remarkably similar to Shaviro's:

> But of course we were intimate, I'll tell you how intimate. . . . We covered each other, an exchange of services that worked all right until one night when I slid over to the wrong end of the story, propped up behind some sandbags at an airstrip in Can Tho with a .30-caliber automatic in my hands, firing for a four-man reaction

> team trying to get back . . . until the whole night had passed and I was looking at the empty clips around my feet behind the berm, telling myself that there would never be any way to know for sure. I couldn't remember ever feeling so tired, so changed, so happy. (67–68)

The likeness revealed here goes beyond the critical hypothesis that McCarthy's chronicle of nineteenth-century border history was influenced by his conscious or unconscious immersion in the cultural discourses of Vietnam. Certainly the subject matter is the same. One can argue with justice for the existence of a parallel between the trade of war as practiced by the scalphunters and the conflict in Vietnam—by eschewing territorial conquest as its goal, the United States doomed itself to a war of attrition that came to resemble, finally, the dark night of war primordial against an enemy of seemingly infinite numbers and boundless will. But one can and should go further to say that *Blood Meridian* insists upon a meditation on the darkness of our violent natures and the full range of scarcely imaginable, scarcely representable consequences that follow when human nature gives free play to the death drive.

While McCarthy's initial series of novels owes an unacknowledged debt to the Vietnam experience, the Trilogy shares significant associations and images with the Gulf War of 1991. The desert landscape had not been a prominent part of the American imagination since the Second World War, but the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the American military build-up in Saudi Arabia, and most importantly, the around-the-clock media coverage of events in the Gulf thrust the sensibility of the desert back into the American consciousness.

The western landscape, including the desert, is ground commonly associated with the literary and film genre of the western. Richard Slotkin has argued that the revival of the western in the 1980s was "motivated in part by nostalgia for old movie forms and styles," and that it "owed something to the popular mood of the Reagan presidency" (881). The influence of the popular mood in some form is visible in McCarthy's Border Trilogy that, though spanning the 90s in terms of publication, shows significant traces of both popular cultural discourse in the 1980s as well as the imaginative legacy of the 1991 Gulf War. In McCarthy's hands, however, the cultural discourse of the 1980s—with everything that that implies for us politically and socially—remains undeniably McCarthean, which is to say that it is fundamentally characterized by ambiguity rather than certitude.

The Trilogy marks a sea-change in McCarthy's fiction in his treatment of the hero. In contrast to Lester Ballard, or the kid, or even Suttree, the protagonists of the Trilogy are unambiguously heroic. In this connection we should recall that the reconstitution of the hero was a central part of the cultural rhetoric of the 1980s. Gail Moore Morrison points out that one reviewer of *All the Pretty Horses* finds John Grady Cole "simply too good at everything" (190). A similar charge could be leveled against the sixteen-year-old Billy Parham in *The Crossing*, who adeptly captures and transports a wolf on horseback to Mexico, and with his younger brother Boyd vanquishes would-be rapists and a posse of agents working for "Senor [Randolph?] Hearst." Despite an untimely death, Boyd also falls into this class of larger-than-life teenagers, about whom Billy remembers: "There aint but one life worth livin and I was born to it. That's worth all the rest. My bud was better at it than me. He was a born natural. He was smarter than me too. Not just about horses. About everthing. Daddy knew it too. He knew it and he knew I knew it and that's all there was to say about it" (*The Crossing* 420). The heroic is not a part of McCathy's vision before *All the Pretty Horses*, and to cite commercial ambition as the cause of this shift would be a disservice to the seriousness of his work, and in any case is unfounded given the noncommercial, metafictional structuring of the narrative in *The Crossing*.

In the Border Trilogy, McCarthy has undertaken to tell authentic westerns using the basic formulas of the genre while avoiding the false sentimentality, uncritical nostalgia, and unearned happy endings that often characterize the genre in its popular forms. Slotkin identifies seven oppositions or conflicts that serve as hallmarks of the western, all of which in some form can be found in the Trilogy:

> Between white civilization and redskin savagery; between a corrupt metropolitan "East" and a rough but virtuous "West;" between tyrannical old proprietors (big ranchers) and new, progressive entrepreneur (homesteaders); between the engorged wealth of industrial monopolies (railroads) and the hard-earned property of citizens (farmers); between old technologies (stagecoaches) and new (railroads); between the undisciplined rapacity of frontier criminals and the lawman's determination to establish order . . . between the violent culture of men and the Christian culture associated with women. (874)

It may be that some or all of these conflicts find their way inevitably into narrative when the genre of the western is employed. It seems more

likely that the presence of all seven in McCarthy's Trilogy indicates a self-conscious effort by a postmodern writer interested in telling a western and interested in a genre that lends itself to storytelling about storytelling.

Much in the same way that the genre of the western was employed by John Ford in *The Searchers*, and later Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven*, to tell morally sophisticated stories using the "simple"—and thus familiar—vocabulary of the western, so too McCarthy uses the western to explore the most permanent concerns of literature: the profound relationships between being and witness, between truth and desire, and the persistent proximity of violence to narrative. Each of the novels of the Border Trilogy relies on a version of the traditional western's conflict between right and wrong. As heroes, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham both are deeply moral in a conventional sense and are guided by a code of principled conduct, though still susceptible to internal conflict concerning their own actions and motives. When we see Cole and Parham a decade or so older in the final volume, in fact, though Billy's ardor for the austerities of cowboy life has waned, their core values remain unchanged. At critical moments in the narratives, the heroes find themselves pitted against clear injustice, or what seems the deliberate presentation of evil, and McCarthy's eschatology mirrors the rhetoric of good and evil that underscored the U.S.-led war of public opinion that made the Gulf War possible. While it would be unwarranted to posit a direct connection between these novels and any series of contemporary events, a significant cultural yearning to be able to distinguish clearly between good and evil made itself felt in the early 90s, and McCarthy's work seems to reflect that desire. To have arrived at this moral destination from the "ambiguous nihilism"—to use Bell's phrase—of McCarthy's first phase is a remarkable development.

Both *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* make use of a familiar Hollywood motif from the post-Vietnam era of the 1980s—the rescue mission. Film and television rescue dramas involving Vietnam POWs have continued to meet our psychic and entertainment needs well into the mid-90s, and, while McCarthy foregrounds this motif in the Trilogy, the effect on the narrative as a whole is far more complex than the use to which it is put in films like *Uncommon Valor*, or the Rambo saga, in which the Vietnam conflict is restaged in order to be won "this time." The rescue plot of *All the Pretty Horses* is a function of McCarthy's emergent interest in the love story during his second phase, and for the rescue plot to succeed, Alejandra must be "rescued" from her world in order

to live with John Grady in his. The preamble to this rescue involves yet another plot standard from the 1970s—the unjustly accused hero—in which the ringing phrase "for a crime he did not commit" gives credentials to the central character as an anti-establishment hero. John Grady's love for Alejandra being inadmissible in caste-bound Mexico, her father arranges Cole's false arrest and imprisonment. As in classical tragedy, the false accusation and its tragic outcome flow ultimately out of the best, most essential elements of John Grady's character. Against Rawlins's will and John Grady's own better judgment he had helped Blevins recover (steal) his horse, and thus stands wrongly accused of the very serious crime of horse theft. This act among others emphasizes the "mixed" quality necessary to the hero of the western, the capacity to cross the line in pursuit of good. As Slotkin puts it: "the action of the narrative requires that borders be crossed by a hero whose character is so mixed that he can operate effectively on both sides of the line" (874). Blevins's horse is a magnificent example of its breed, and this fact in itself tunes up Cole's sense of justice, as if conscience makes a stronger than usual demand in the case of so fine an animal. In this juncture, McCarthy links Cole's passion for horses, a passion that lies at the very heart of his character, with the narrative circumstances that separate him from Alejandra and place him in prison.

The main action of *All the Pretty Horses* functions as a variation on one of Slotkin's basic conflicts, that "between tyrannical old proprietors (big ranchers) and new, progressive entrepreneurs (homesteaders)" (xxx). Cole is an entrepreneur in the most basic sense of the word, and what he undertakes is the impossibility of love with Alejandra: "He told her that he could make a living and that they could go to live in his country and make their life there and no harm would come to them" (252). The failure of this romance in *All the Pretty Horses* reinscribes John Grady Cole in the myth of the stoic American of the frontier: "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 it would ever leave" (254). Cole accepts this psychologically withering condition, however, without surrendering his fundamental will to live. Christina Bold's definition of the protagonist of the traditional western—"a heroic man, poised and ultimately isolated on the frontier between 'civilization' and 'savagery'"—reminds us that isolation is the condition of possibility for the hero of the western (875). In each volume of the Trilogy, McCarthy leaves the hero's quests either unresolved or

settled in failure. Good and evil may be clearly distinct in the Trilogy, but good does not clearly triumph. Although John Grady is not wholly at odds with his world, it is fair to say that he has not found his place in it, nor can he, for his fate in the Trilogy is indissolubly tied to the old order of the range that is inexorably passing away.

John Grady seeks expiation from the judge, in part, because he had been forced to kill the "cuchillero" in the scene that marks McCarthy's return to symbolic violence in the Trilogy. The duel with the cuchillero in the prison mess marks the turning point in the novel and a shift in the hero's condition, from victim of the hacendado's revenge and Mexican injustice to avenging angel and redresser of wrongs. Though nearly killed in the knife-fight—a foreshadowing of his eventual demise in *Cities of the Plain*—Cole recovers and becomes the embodiment of retributive justice, recapturing his own horses, delivering the captain to the summary justice of the vigilantes, and bringing Blevins's horse back across the border. Present in the fight with the cuchillero are the novel's primary conflicts, and the action of the novel since John Grady's arrest on the hacienda Nuestra Senora de la Purisma Concepcion culminates in this moment. Cole and Rawlins encounter Blevins before they cross the border into Mexico, and from that moment the chain of events in the novel leads step by step to the scene of violence in the prison. By killing the cuchillero, John Grady initiates the reversal whereby Blevins's murder is avenged. Cole's opponent is a paid assassin, a coolly impersonal signifier of the forces he is pitted against—the hacendado's influence and the sweaty caricature of Mexican injustice. In their other fights in the prison, Cole and Rawlins had fought back-to-back, reminiscent of heroic stands in narratives of the "buddy" genre. But in this symbolic contest Rawlins has been removed, too badly wounded to figure in the hero's defining moment, and the mess hall clears out to reveal a stark tableau of violence, a narrow gate through which the narrative must pass. The opponents are equal in age and arms, their fight to the death a contest between both John Grady's values and his ignorance on the one hand, and a tattooed killer who represents the world's implacable and remorseless unconcern for the values John Grady represents. Cast in these terms, Cole's triumph over his ordeal is at best a temporary victory, for in the context of McCarthy's trademark pessimism (call it realism), the individual cannot truly win against the world. Nevertheless, in the context of the plot of *All the Pretty Horses*, the death of the cuchillero begins the hero's ascent out of darkness, out of prison, out of the tentacles of injustice, and toward a resolution of the novel that com-

pletes the quest structure, though that completion provides little solace for the hero.

McCarthy fittingly organizes the second volume of the Trilogy, *The Crossing*, around three border crossings into Mexico, by Billy Parham alone with the wolf by Billy and his brother Boyd to recover horses stolen by their parents' murderers, and by Billy alone again to search for his brother. Having exhumed his brother's body from a Mexican cemetery for reburial at home, Billy laconically notes in the manner of the heroes of the Trilogy: "This is my third trip. It's the only time I was ever down here that I got what I come after. But it sure as hell wasnt what I wanted." (416). What Billy wanted was to find his brother alive and well, similar to the popular rescue fantasies of the 1980s where American POWs from Vietnam are snatched from work camps by selfless and patriotic (but antiestablishment) commandos. Instead, Parham is forced to settle for the repatriation of his brother's bones, and in the process his fraternal quest intersects with his brother's reinvention as the "hombre de la gente" in the mythology of the Mexican folk (317). All of the novels of the Trilogy feature sage figures that provide a meta-commentary on the narrative itself, or on other narratives told within the frame story. There are several in *The Crossing*—Senor Gillian, the ex-priest, the blinded revolutionary, the gypsy, the gerente Quijada—and it is Quijada who explains the significance of Boyd's fate for his brother, once again telling the McCarthean story of storytelling itself:

> What does the corrido say?
>
> Quijada shook his head. The corrido tells all and it tells nothing. I heard the tale of the guerito years ago. Before your brother was even born.
>
> You dont think it tells about him?
>
> Yes, it tells about him. It tells what it wishes to tell. It tells what makes the story run. The corrido is the poor man's history. It does not owe its allegiance to the truths of history but to the truths of men. It tells the tale of that solitary man who is all men. (387)

What Billy knows with certainty is that his brother was seriously wounded by the henchmen of La Babicora and later disappeared with "the girl." Whatever his actual fate, the circumstances of Boyd's life and death are absorbed and transformed into the "corrido," the ballad of the countryside that mythologizes the deep economic divide and political struggle between rich and poor in Mexico. The workers who save Boyd's life immediately christen him the "guerito," though they know nothing about who

shot him or why. Boyd's wounds and his youth are all that is required to transform him into the guerito of their song, and the myth-making apparatus of the Mexican folk absorbs whatever material it finds into the story that sustains their struggle.

Billy Parham's quest to find his brother and bring him home is thus linked with the larger narrative of class struggle and national identity in Mexico. Film and media discourse in the 1980s frequently foregrounded the issue of surviving MIAs in Vietnam. The repatriation of remains of soldiers killed in action and the issue of surviving MIAs became an important political and cultural subject for nearly a decade. Hollywood cinema did its share in fueling speculation that American servicemen had been betrayed, mostly by weak and cowardly civilians and generals. The effect of "rescue discourse" on American public consciousness was to partially merge the narrative of repatriation with the politically conservative narrative of American renewal. Bringing the POWs home became a part of a new national narrative, culturally significant if election results are an indicator, whereby rescuing brave Americans from the netherworld of POW camps marked a symbolic movement analogous to rescuing national identity from the miasma of defeat in Southeast Asia and self-division at home. The narrative of the guerito and the narrative of American MIAs are similar in their role in the continuous reproduction of national identity, and both incorporate "real" events into a self-serving myth necessary for their respective communities.

Each of the Parham crossings into Mexico has at least one corresponding scene of symbolic violence: Billy and the young don face off in the fighting pit over wolf; Billy and Boyd contend with the agents of La Babicora; and last, Billy experiences a kind of "Mexican stand-off" in the bar with the drunken veteran of the revolution. In this last scene, bloodshed is averted only when Billy, himself intoxicated, backs down from a barroom dispute that seems to originate in simple ill temper. The confrontation is a scene rich in irony, however, for both men have reached a boiling point of frustration directly the result of their struggles against the same ruling powers in Mexico. The former soldier of the revolution refuses the American whiskey Billy proffers, signifying as it does to him the collusion of the American government with the despotic Mexican regime. Parham responds to the insult with belligerence of his own, fueled by the two adventures in Mexico that have proven so devastating for him personally. The violence in the moment remains latent, unrealized, and Billy achieves a moment of drunken clarity in "the sallow light of the cantina," one in which he recognizes that two narratives

of futile struggle against the McCarthean "world" of indifferent force, so well represented by the rich and powerful in Mexico, have spiraled into violent contact with one another. When the veteran displays his bullet wounds from the revolution, Billy reflects "that the only manifest artifact of the history of this negligible republic where he now seemed about to die that had the least authority or meaning or claim to substance was seated before him" (363). This epiphany holds true to the McCarthean vision presented in the Trilogy: the uncertain validity of all that Billy has been a part of in Mexico haunts his consciousness and calls to mind the suspect quality of all narrative, while on the other hand the veteran's scars seem to tell an authentic story that ironically threatens the end of the road and his death.

Another rescue plot appears as the main action of *Cities of the Plain*, and the novel's resolution hinges on the rescue of John Grady's beloved from a Juarez whorehouse. While the closing of the range provides *Cities of the Plain* with a historical backdrop, the primary ground of the novel is ontological rather than social or political. The book's theme might be deciphered from an aphorism delivered by the nameless philosopher-transient to the aged Billy Parham: "You call forth the world that God has formed and that world only. Nor is this life of yours by which you set such store your doing, however you may choose to tell it" (285). There is certainly an air of authorial sanction to the words of the various sage figures in the Trilogy, and the mysterious tramp's observation concedes that while we do create reality in the act of perception, nevertheless because we are a part of that world we cannot falsify it, we cannot call it forth other than it is. This is McCarthy's trump, an acceptance of the postmodern condition while refusing the nihilism inherent in such a position. So it must be with the life and death of John Grady Cole, a character in a work of art that has the same status as the figure in the dream told by the philosopher-transient. Cole's entire romantic quest, beginning in *All the Pretty Horses* and concluding disastrously in his love for Magdalena, stands in the same relationship to the reader as the dream-figure for the philosopher-transient. McCarthy thus implies that John Grady's life in a work of art (or Billy's, or Boyd's) and the life of the man in the dream have the same ontological standing, as the philosopher-transient explains:

> My belief is this, and I say it again: His history [the man in the dream] is the same as yours or mine. That is the stuff he is made of. What stuff other? Had I created him as God makes men how

then would I not know what he would say before he ever spoke? Or how he'd move before he did so? In a dream we dont know what's coming. We are surprised.

All right.

So where is it coming from?

I dont know.

Two worlds touch here. You think men have power to call forth what they will? (285)

The point is, clearly, that we do not. Like *Absalom, Absalom!*, the volumes of the Trilogy ultimately provide their own theory, and *Cities of the Plain* can hardly be equaled for artistic bravado in that it contains the formal justification of its own narrative as truth.

As the final installment of McCarthy's turn from serial to symbolic violence, the contest between Cole and Eduardo marks the culmination of the primary action that begins the moment John Grady sees Magdalena at La Venada. Having premised the novel on the redemption of a teenaged, epileptic prostitute sold into sexual slavery as a child, it is difficult to imagine, even given McCarthy's transformation as a storyteller, how such a tale could end happily and remain McCarthean. *Cities of the Plain* is a novel rich in narrative irony, and Cole's fatal duel with the pimp and the failure of his quest are predicated from the very beginning—in retrospect, no other outcome seems possible. The entirety of the novel is present in the single moment that a teenaged cowboy and a child prostitute recognize their destiny in a Mexican bar, their love sufficiently improbable within the vision embraced by McCarthy's work that we may without hazard foresee the outcome.

The knife fight between Cole and Eduardo serves as a contest of violence in which self-preservation is put aside for principle and the resuturing of the fabric of self-respect calls for blood. There is an unspoken agreement between the two men that their quarrel involve no other, not Tiburcio or Billy Parham, and that it be fought with weapons, knives, not only equal on both sides but also fiercely expressive of the desire for the retribution that each man in his own way seeks. During their deadly struggle over a prostitute, Eduardo supplements the practiced play of his switchblade with a running commentary on an old story in which John Grady is a player: "They [Americans] drift down out of your leprous paradise seeking a thing now extinct among them. A thing for which perhaps they no longer even have a name. Being farmboys of course the first place they think to look is in a whorehouse" (249). What Eduardo

means by the nameless "thing" is of course the McCarthean mystery of existence, and the search for an answer to this mystery forms a thread that runs throughout his entire work. At an earlier stage in McCarthy's career, Judge Holden offers one answer: "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery," he observes to the assembled band of scalphunters, and in *Blood Meridian* the answer seems to be that "The mystery is that there is no mystery" (252).

The novels of the Trilogy propose an alternative to the Judge's nihilism. When John Grady descends on Eduardo at the White Lake—"to kill you or be killed"—he embodies the bitter failure of his romantic quest, the aborted Pygmalion south of the border (248). At the moment of truth, Cole kills Eduardo by jamming his knife through his jaws and into his skull, thus symbolically shutting the pimp's mouth, but not before the pimp has made a home thrust, not only with his blade, but with an ontological sally: "They cannot seem to see that the most elementary fact concerning whores . . . is that they are whores" (249). On a symbolic level, John Grady's success in silencing the pimp would seem to indicate that Eduardo is, as Cole claims, "a liar," that Magdalena is no whore "to the bone," but rather an unfortunate victim of horrific circumstances. The elementary fact that escapes Cole, however, as it escapes all romantics, is that the reality of the world seldom if ever coincides with the reality of our desires, that Magdalena is indeed a whore, if not morally, then by a more insidious and unalterable definition: she is a whore because she is a whore, and for that reason the world opposes their love with a finality explained by the blind man: "Let me tell you only this. Your love has no friends. You think that it does but it does not. None. Perhaps not even God" (199). Their worlds cannot touch; their quest for a life together has no future.

Through the return to symbolic violence in the Trilogy, McCarthy reestablishes the connections to his predecessors Faulkner and, to a lesser degree, Warren that he had seemingly severed in his radical devotion to serial violence in the early work. McCarthy turns to the genre of the western for a mythic landscape suitable to conflicts stark and simple, and on that spare terrain the true subject of the novels becomes not so much the story he is telling but storytelling itself. That he does so without resorting to the elaborate narrative hijinks of his peers among postmodern novelists we may attribute to what is pre-modern in his artistic sensibility, viz., that storytelling is a historically transcendent means of knowing—stories reveal being because they are a part of being itself. McCarthy's novels of the Border Trilogy share equally with Faulkner

and Warren a concern for the consequences of the crossing of the ways, of the passing away of one world and the emergence of another. Since this transcendent conflict oversees much of the work of these three writers, it is understandable that they find useful the organizing principle of symbolic violence as a means by which two antagonists can embody the contending forces within the narrative. Whatever McCarthy's other artistic motives for taking up the genre of the western, the centrality of symbolic violence in the Trilogy testifies to his meditation on the continuous quest for identity in the space created by violence.

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