

Ideology and Symbolism in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy



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Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Abstract

This study homes in on the ideological significance of American author Cormac McCarthy's literary symbolism. Focusing in particular on the author's tendency to merge humanity and the environment by way of metaphor, simile, and personification, the study demonstrates how the ethical and political import of this aesthetic is open to dispute. Some critics have celebrated McCarthy's environmental imagination as an opportunity for the reader to cultivate a more responsible way of being in the world, some have criticized it as a relativization of human agency, and some have retooled it into a political commentary designed to challenge late capitalist reification. Acknowledging the validity of many of these readings, but also stressing their insufficiency, the study suggests—with support from the autoreferential aspects of the author's later novels—that McCarthy's symbolism may be made to resonate with many contrasting sentiments at once. By realizing different aspects of the novels' various affordances, that is, their multiplicity of potential uses, critics have been able to think of McCarthy either as a progressive or a conservative writer. Basing its reasoning on this finding, and drawing on the Marxist perspective of Pierre Macherey, the study makes the claim that a literary work never produces meaning on its own and that the role of the critic is never entirely apolitical.

Acknowledgements

McCarthy implies in *All the Pretty Horses* that the novel's protagonist, John Grady, would never have survived his excursions into Mexico without the "smiles" and "the good will" of people encountered along the way (*AtPH* 221). Although my dissertation work has been slightly less venture-some than John Grady's travels in the Mexican-American borderlands, I, too, have relied on similar kindnesses. My supervisors, Magnus Ullén and Maria Holmgren Troy, not least, have always encouraged me and provided me with ever-helpful feedback when I have needed it the most, and they have always done so in that finest of scholarly fashions, marked by seriousness *and* empathy. Associate Professor Bo. G. Ekelund displayed the very same ethos when he read my preliminary draft. His insightful reading of my work was invaluable in helping me recognize and address some of my most problematic blind spots. Any that remain are, of course, mine alone.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in parenthetical references to McCarthy's novels:

<i>TOC</i>	<i>The Orchard Keeper</i>
<i>CoG</i>	<i>Child of God</i>
<i>BM</i>	<i>Blood Meridian</i>
<i>AtPH</i>	<i>All the Pretty Horses</i>
<i>TC</i>	<i>The Crossing</i>
<i>CotP</i>	<i>Cities of the Plain</i>
<i>TR</i>	<i>The Road</i>

Introduction

One of the most contested issues in literary theory is that of context: if it matters at all and, if so, how the critic should deal with it; if the artwork is in some manner determined by its historical moment, or, conversely, if it can ever be said to exist independently of the time and place in which it was produced. Answers to questions such as these have consequences for the reading of any literary text, but they are perhaps particularly pertinent to the reception of texts that actively seek to transcend their own historicity. A case in point is the novels of Cormac McCarthy. Although certainly not consistently indifferent to the historical conditions that gave rise to them, these novels repeatedly conjure temporal and spatial realms that make human history appear insignificant, and thus, they may be taken to call into question the value of engaging this history. These flights into the ahistorical, however, are performed by a symbolist aesthetic that simultaneously stresses—by way of metaphor, simile, and personification—the ontological similarities between a human being and all other types of matter. Notably, this materialistic levelling has elicited a vast number of critical responses that conceive of McCarthy's literary project as an ecological vision capable of helping readers cultivate a more responsible relationship to the environment. If people relinquish their sense of exceptionalism, the reasoning goes, they will be much more likely to recognize their entanglement in an ecology where all agents—including themselves—have an impact on the whole.

Such readings are readily accommodated by how the unrestrained and environmentally oriented symbolism of McCarthy's early texts repeatedly responds to phenomena like pollution, deforestation, and nuclear technology. Yet, although this symbolism can indeed be argued to afford a readerly cultivation of environmental concern, it is important to note how the later novels concede that it may at the same time afford a sense of fatalism: the properties of this aesthetic, in other words, can be *used* by readers to generate or confirm sentiments of either kind. This concession emerges in McCarthy's later writing as an autoreferential response to how the earlier novels' less nuanced espousal of an ontologically flat symbolism risks displacing historical concerns into an aesthetic space where they seem largely inconsequential. As such, these autoreferential aspects serve potentially as a corrective not only to tendencies in the

author's own writing, but also to the tendency among some of his critics to think of this writing as ecocritically progressive. Importantly, though, this goes both ways: if translated into the language of literary theory, the acknowledgement that literary affordances—that is, a text's potential uses—may often be multiple and conflictual hints at the shortcomings of critical outlooks that fail to register *either* the progressive *or* the regressive potential of art. Literary affordances tend to show that the first kind of potential usually does not exclude the other.

The way in which these various affordances often exist side by side is one of those things that connect the literary work most explicitly to history. Differently put, the possibility of interpreting texts by a writer such as McCarthy in diametrically opposed ways, ideologically speaking, is testament to how these texts will always be in dialogue with the world-views and the desires of different historical contexts: the desire to make a difference in the world, for instance, or the desire to evade responsibility. More specifically, with regard to our current historical moment, the vast and diverse body of criticism on McCarthy's fiction shows that this fiction and its ecological view of the world can be made to resonate at once with the attitude that late capitalist exploitation of the environment is unavoidable, and the attitude that it is not. It is only by paying attention to the indeterminacies of this ethical and ideological aspect of reading, I contend, that critics may be able to appreciate the possible material effects of McCarthy's works, to discover the ways in which, when in dialogue with its readers, these works take part in the shaping of history.

The first chapter of this dissertation explains in further detail the theoretical beliefs that underpin these claims. The focus here is on the challenge of reading the interplay between history and literature without simplifying the relationship between the two, without conceiving of this relationship as mechanically deterministic. Chapter one also discusses briefly the specificities of McCarthy's literary form and how these specificities connect him with a number of literary traditions, American and otherwise. The chapter concludes by trying to identify the drawbacks as well as the merits of some of the established critical approaches to McCarthy, including the ecocritical, the contextual, the biographical, and the political—all of which are later sublated into my own reading of the author's work.

Chapter two then provides an overview of McCarthy's novelistic oeuvre and presents some of the formal and thematic tensions that manifest themselves in all of the novels. Particular emphasis is placed on how

McCarthy's writing portrays humans as uniquely destructive even as it paradoxically renders them part of an ecological whole where the behavior of one single species does not matter much. This paradox is ultimately read in conjunction with how capitalist ideology tends to interpellate its subjects as astonishingly industrious yet always free from responsibility whenever this industry goes out of hand, whenever historical facticity would seem to belie the notion of eternal progress frequently prophesied by neoliberal think tanks.

Chapter three deals primarily with McCarthy's 1965 debut novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, but contrasts this novel's symbolist merging of human and environment with various unpublished notes and manuscripts from the Cormac McCarthy Papers in the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University.¹ Read alongside one another, these texts reveal that McCarthy gradually starts thinking about metaphor as an allegorist rather than as a symbolist: in the early texts, metaphor functions symbolically so as to destabilize categorial boundaries such as those between the human and the non-human, but in the later texts, it is evident that the author conceives of the same literary device—and of language in general—as *a standing-in for something else*. Even symbolism, then, for the later McCarthy can only ever be allegory, in the sense that it replaces rather than coincides with whatever it seeks to represent. In McCarthy's later writing, in other words, language becomes not a means by which humanity may be reunited with the natural world, but a tool that always places this world at one remove.

Concerned mainly with the 1979 *Suttree*, chapter four demonstrates how this novel oscillates between a concern with and an escape from some of the most politically pressing problems of its time. This list of problems includes perhaps most conspicuously the sufferings of Knoxville's poor, but also the more specific problem that, in the 1930s, many of these people had been evicted from their homes to make room for a number of hydroelectric dams to be built by the same federal company that would later supply energy to the construction of atomic weaponry—a fact most pertinent to the nuclear fear that also permeates the novel. In connection with this attention to context, chapter four suggests, first, that McCarthy's symbols often function *as ideology*, and second, that ideology itself tends to function, on a more general level, *as symbol*: ostensibly apolitical and ahistorical and thereby perfectly equipped, when appearing in literary form, to conceal the very kind of historical contradictions *Suttree* hints at.

Chapter five is dedicated to the 1985 *Blood Meridian* and what this dissertation refers to as the novel's unresolved dialectic of agency—its tendency to portray human beings as at once free-willed agents and predetermined marionettes. Scrutinizing the ideological significance of this dialectic and suggesting more specifically that its very lack of resolution might be able to remedy feelings of guilt, the chapter also discusses “optical democracy,” a formal hallmark of McCarthy's that is a striking presence in all his novels, but that gets its name from a passage in *Blood Meridian*. Although not generally referred to in McCarthy criticism as a symbolist aesthetic, optical democracy is indeed considered by most critics to do symbolist work, as this dissertation defines it: escaping the historical and calling attention to the ontological similarities between all types of matter. The hope is that chapter five will be able to lay bare some of the contradictions inherent in this mode of writing; contradictions caused not least by the observation in McCarthy's novel that humanity finds itself alienated from an ecological totality to which it must still be considered inextricably bound. The chapter theorizes *Blood Meridian's* conception of this predicament through Marx's distinction between commodification and objectification—the former a capitalist mechanism that turns everything into items of exchange, and the latter the only way for living beings to form life-affirming relations to one another.

The next novel under consideration is the 1998 *Cities of the Plain*. Chapter six close-reads the epilogue to this text—the last instalment of the border trilogy (1992-1998)—and concludes that this is where McCarthy's self-reflexivity comes most explicitly to the fore, where his literary production most clearly anticipates the affordances of his works. Comparing the author's symbolist aesthetic to some of the new materialist and posthumanist ideas that have recently gained popularity in the academy, the chapter moreover argues that such schools of theory and their refutations of the anthropocentric view of the world have served to bolster the critical contention that McCarthy's novels offer an ecological vision capable of reminding people of their entanglement in a largely non-human world. The chapter intervenes in this body of criticism by suggesting that *Cities of the Plain* encourages the critical insight that literature in general can always be made to mean in ways other than their authors intend and that optical democracy in particular lends itself just as readily to political quietism as to environmental activism.

Chapter seven, finally, demonstrates how this self-reflexivity continues in McCarthy's 2006 *The Road*, in which it is even more explicitly

concerned with the political risks of an aesthetic that dreams away the problems of the waking world. Set in a southern US struck by a seemingly global but largely undefined cataclysm, McCarthy's latest novel presents the reader with a choice: s/he may either agree with the view of one of the protagonists that dreams of a better existence run the risk of distracting one's attention from the problems of history, or s/he may choose to believe instead—or at the same time—that such dreams are the only means available for people to envision a way out of the reified deadlock of historical determinism. Although McCarthy leaves this choice to the reader, he displays an awareness that his novel is perfectly able to accommodate sentiments of both kinds. In the following chapter, I introduce the theoretical framework that has allowed me to discern this autoreferential development in McCarthy's writing.

¹ The Cormac McCarthy Papers were acquired in 2007 by The Southwestern Writers Collection (SWWC), which is part of The Wittliff Collections, which, in turn, are kept at the Alkek Library at Texas State University in San Marcos.

1. Theory, Literary Tradition, and McCarthy Criticism

The activity of the writer initially presents itself as labour, as work, once we seek to *know* rather than to follow it. (Macherey 62)

The word *affordance* is used to mean the range of potential actions and uses latent in different forms. (Levine, "Narrative" 517)

Paratactic and metaphorical rather than strictly mimetic, McCarthy's is a writing that consistently makes use of literary form to reflect on the ontology of that which it depicts. The novels' formal idiosyncrasies—the syntax, the metaphors, the similes, and the personifications that will figure prominently in this dissertation—make claims about what a human being is and how this being relates to its social and natural environments. Often, these claims appear contradictory in how they alternate between the resigned view that humanity is an insignificant part of a vast and all-determining cosmos and the view that social ills must be taken seriously. In fairly obvious ways, this tension does "cultural work," to adopt Jane Tompkins' term (200): it ties in with and very likely acts upon how readers think about their place in the world and about their hypothetical culpability in matters such as environmental degradation and nuclear armament, both of which are pertinent to McCarthy's novels. For this very reason, it is imperative that the critic pays close attention to the affordances of McCarthy's form, to the plurality of ways in which, in a given historical moment, this form can be endowed with meaning.

Marxism and Form

The early 21st-century revival and remodeling of literary formalism has in some ways been a disappointment, not least because the need for such a revival seemed so urgent, and the prospects so promising. Regrettably, a trend has emerged as of late whereby scholars facilely circumvent the nuances of previous formalisms. One recent example is Rita Felski, who describes Marxism as the delusional excavation of a text's "hidden" meanings (Felski 56), and another is Caroline Levine, who suggests that Marxists invariably and deterministically conceive of art as an epiphenomenal response "to social realities" (*Forms* 14)—a claim that fails to account for

how Marxists generally believe that art and history influence *one another*.¹ As problematic as they are, these blanket treatments are also to some extent understandable: like most schools of theory, Marxism has occasionally been used in such a simplistic manner that objections seem in place. Still, the critic who reads this tradition more attentively will be likely to find not only the type of careful attention to literary form necessary for the analysis of writers like McCarthy, but also a methodology for how, while still remaining self-reflexive with regard to its own biases and ontological problems, literary critique may be able to say something about literature's relationship to the extra-textual world.

The ability to theorize this relationship is one of the things lacking in formalists such as Levine. If we want to discover forms and how they function, she writes, "we can begin with the immaterial, abstract organizing principles that shape material realities, or we can begin with the concrete, particular material thing and abstract from it to general, iterable patterns and shapes" (*Forms* 10). This, if anything, is a kind of determinism, repeatedly ducking the question of what impact historical processes—that is, people—might possibly have on form. Although Levine suggests that literary "forms and social formations" are "artificial" (14), a word choice clearly suggesting that these forms are in some manner 'made,' the reader never learns clearly enough where the "organizing principles" derive from: work-place discrimination of women, for instance, does "not flow from any particular patriarchal intention or ideology"; rather, Levine explains, it is "unplanned" (8). The same problem occurs when Levine's book touches on some of the so-called "New Formalists" and maintains that, since these scholars conceive of literary form as springing from "specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes," they do not "take account of one of form's affordances: the capacity to endure across time and space" (12). By self-contradiction, though, Levine again cancels out the question of origin, arguing first that "aesthetic and social forms" are engendered by "specific conditions" and then that such "forms are *not* outgrowths of social conditions" (12; my emphasis). Thus, Levine's reader is left with the illusion that forms simply *are*. The most obvious problem with the kind of theory promoted here, then, is that, due to its exertions to avoid materialist determinism, it veils the origins of form and thereby treats this phenomenon as a given.

Another common charge against Marxist critique is that it ignores the surface of the literary text and aims directly for the truths hidden in its depths. A famous example is Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's influ-

ential “Surface Reading: An Introduction.” This 2009 attack on symptomatic reading strategies in general and Jamesonian theory in particular is absolutely obsessed with the concept of “truth,” a word that appears 27 times in Best and Marcus’s 22-page article but only 18 times in their main object of critique, Jameson’s 320-page *The Political Unconscious*. What is more, whereas Best and Marcus repeatedly render ideology critique a theory set on “wresting truths from the hidden depths of resisting texts” (7, 13), Jameson’s references to “truth” generally suggest 1) that “[t]otality is not available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth (or moment of Absolute Spirit)” (39), and 2) that, just like any other kind of literary theory, also “the various historical forms of Marxism can . . . effectively be submitted to . . . a critique of their own local ideological limits or strategies of containment” (38). Jameson arguably seems aware, then, that not even Marxism is a timeless bringer of truth.

The main controversy here seems to be the question whether critical objectivity is at all possible, whether it makes sense to think of literary critique as a successful representation of either text or world. Jameson clearly problematizes this very notion, whereas Marcus and Best “suggest that to begin to challenge the state of things . . . we must strive to produce undistorted, complete descriptions of them” (18). This controversy is somewhat mitigated when a critic such as Walter Benn Michaels maintains that the real object of Best and Marcus’s article is to champion a kind of critique that tries to show, with Susan Sontag, “*how*” the artwork “is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than . . . show what it means” (qtd. in Michaels 77; my emphasis). As Michaels points out, if one reads Marcus and Best accordingly, the affinities become clear between this formalist line of theory and the “defense of literalism” to be found in scholars such as Paul de Man, scholars who think of meaning as an “illusion” and linguistic embodiment of truth as a near impossibility (78). However, although Michaels should be commended for trying to render surface reading more useful, it is arguably overly generous of him to tone down Best and Marcus’s investment in critically unhelpful notions of critical objectivity and accuracy of description (Best and Marcus 16).

Much of this kind of antipathy toward Marxism appears to revolve around the idea that its devotees ignore completely the question of form. David James illustrates this perfectly when, in an article on McCarthy’s *The Road*, he draws on Marcus and Best and constructs a false opposition between critique that is interested in “diction, tone, and other

‘apprehensible’ (rather than covert) features of language,” on the one hand, and symptomatic theory on the other (499). The largely Marxist point I am making in this chapter is that the critic needs both. Attention to form is not very useful if form is theorized in isolation from the contexts in which it is produced and consumed, much like attention to context is not of much value unless it is combined with a meticulous reading of the text’s formal properties.

It is worth noting here that Jameson, Marcus and Best’s negative example, is thoroughly influenced by the Russian Formalists’ obvious interest in the surface of the text and the specificity of literary expression. Victor Erlich points out how, guided by such notions of specificity, these scholars sought to render “poetic speech” an “object of scientific analysis” (224, 223). As Erlich notes, however, one of the critical weaknesses of this line of theory was that it refused to deal with value judgments, an attitude that might seem laudable at first, but the drawbacks of which become evident as soon as one realizes that personal taste and philosophy tend to play a part anyway, although often covertly so (222). What is more, though the Russian Formalists were historically oriented in the sense that they conceived of the progressive author as someone who could move boldly beyond the “canon inherited from the immediate predecessors,” they were strikingly ahistorical in another sense (221): famously, they failed initially to consider, much like the later New Critics, the relationship between their findings and the rest of the social fabric. Still, as Vincent B. Leitch argues, the “depoliticizing-aestheticizing move of formalism during” these Russian “interwar years” is understandable, as this was a context in which so-called “‘degenerate literature’ was being burned in public squares” (74). Viewed against this historical backdrop, the critical approach of the Russians may be understood as a “strategic formalism,” designed so as to protect certain strands of literature from “extirpation and extermination,” as Leitch puts it (74). Moreover, one should hasten to add also that formalists such as Roman Jakobson and Yury Tynyanov eventually admitted that “elucidating the ‘immanent laws’” of a literary text “is only a part of the theorist’s job,” and that “[h]is other duty is to inquire into the ‘transcendent’ laws, to examine the nature of the interrelationship between the given field and other cultural domains” (224–25). Furthermore, the initial reluctance of the Russian Formalists to connect the structural system of the literary work to other cultural spheres was later amended quite successfully by a number of their heirs—such as Fredric Jameson.

In 1971, Jameson opens his “Metacommentary” by lamenting the fact that many contemporary critics feel a “repugnance” to interpret, to extract meaning out of a text (“Meta” 9). This attitude, he claims, finds its “fulfillment in formalism, in the refusal of all presuppositions about substance and human nature and in the substitution of method for a meta-physical system” (9). The object of Jameson’s article, however, is not simply to indict this kind of criticism, but rather, to extract from it strategies that are potentially productive. Thus, with this object in mind, he moves on from these introductory statements to an account of Russian Formalism and states that this is a school of theory that suspends meaning and “the ‘reality’” a work “presents, reflects, or imitates” and concentrates instead on organizational devices, such as style and characters, and the possibility that these devices function to hold the multiplicity of a text together (11). Drawing on Viktor Shklovsky, Jameson suggests that “Hamlet’s madness,” for instance, “permitted Shakespeare to piece together several heterogeneous plot sources,” and that “Goethe’s Faust is an excuse for the dramatization of many different moods” (11). What is implied here is that these “Western ‘myth’ figures” would seem to tie together the diverse social material mediated by the text (11).

On this note, Jameson touches implicitly on literature’s affordances—a concept proven valuable also in Levine’s formalism. Coined by ecological psychologist James J. Gibson and later employed frequently by design theorists, “affordances” denote for Levine “the range of potential actions and uses latent in different forms” (“Narrative” 517). Well in keeping with this notion, Jameson considers how certain novelistic forms seem to harmonize with certain historical contexts: the well-made and inherently consistent plot, for instance, has previously been *used* to persuade readers that “human action, human life, is somehow a complete, interlocking whole, a single, formed, meaningful substance” (12). In Jameson’s late 20th century, however, when the individual and the social are perceived as two “incommensurable realities” and the Cartesian subject has been left behind (12), the coherent plot—be it of action or “unity of character”—is not as convincing any longer (13). What is more, whereas older types of literary forms seemed to interpret *themselves*, by way of narrative closure or an act of exegesis performed by the protagonists, the later “plotless work stands before us as a kind of rebus in narrative language . . .” (13). Therefore, Jameson maintains, a new kind of formalism now emerges: structuralism, which is “formalistic in the sense that it studies organization rather than content, and assumes the . . . predominance

of language and of linguistic structures in the shaping of meaningful experiences” (13). Here, then, relationship replaces substance. Ultimately, though, structuralism too slips from “form into content” and commences to analyze its study objects (15). The problem, however, is that it conceives of its own theoretical concepts—“metaphor and metonymy, the rhetorical figures, binary oppositions”—as eternal and absolute and hence “falls short” of the kind of “genuine metacommentary” that successfully reflects on itself as a historically conditioned phenomenon (15). This, of course, would be precisely the problem also with Best and Marcus’s notion that the critic is able to offer “undistorted” and “complete” descriptions of the literary text (18). Luckily, though, Jameson asserts, it is indeed possible to transcend or complete structuralism, by not only solving the linguistic riddle before us—that is, the literary text, with all its internal “oppositions”—but by approaching also “the very categories of our understanding as reflections of a particular and determinate moment of history” (15). The difference here is that, whereas strictly formalist approaches to literature read form as decoupled from history, so that it risks conceiving of its own tools, even, as universal and timeless, Jameson’s mode of reading is interested in the more historically oriented “*Bedeutung*,” in how the “evaluations” of the work change over time and is put to different “uses” by “its generations of readers” (15; my emphasis). Although affordances are historically “invariant,” then, as Gibson puts it (34), the way in which these affordances are perceived is not.

The kind of historicization Jameson prescribes is helpful not because it encourages the reader to look for some “hidden” meaning beneath the surface of the text (because it does not), but because it points out that literature can be theorized in many different ways, by way of many different critical codes, mediations, or translations, each one of them calling attention to different aspects of a piece of writing; all of these aspects, however, are indeed present in the text, although not always obviously so. Jameson’s argument, then, would be that literature tends to be read differently depending on historical context, which means also that, whereas certain meanings appear obvious and clearly on the surface of a literary text in one historical context and from the perspective of one critical code, these meanings might appear latent in another context—and here, ideology plays a part, as a censor that encourages the reader to see certain aspects of a text, but not others (Jameson, “Meta” 15), as a “‘lived experience’ of capitalist society,” to speak with Louis Althusser (“A Letter” 224), that makes impossible an entirely objective view of the world. From this

perspective, the critical notion that some things or some meanings are clearly and timelessly *there* in a literary text, as Marcus and Best would have it, comes across as a failure to understand that readings are always conditioned by the historical contexts in which they are made, contexts where some critical codes are privileged at the expense of others. The merits of Marxist critique, for Jameson, and for myself, is that it may be able not only to highlight the insufficiency of individual codes, but to acknowledge their “sectoral validity” (Jameson, *Political* 10), their “consonance with this or that local law of a fragmented social life” (10), and to sublimate them into a reading that stresses their historicity and that thus manages to render them all meaningful (later in this chapter, I will explain how I think of the question of different critical codes in relation to the reception of McCarthy’s novels).

Again, none of this is to say that critics should ignore the formal specificity of the texts they read. Tellingly, Jameson suggests, like Marx before him, that human “experience has as its most fundamental structure *work* itself, as the production of value and the transformation of the world” (17). The author’s work, he adds, consists more or less in the “conscious and unconscious artistic *elaboration*” of historical content (17). A similar notion may be found in Pierre Macherey, a theorist who has been a major influence on my reading of McCarthy, even though he will not figure explicitly in all of the chapters. Macherey writes that, “once we seek to *know* rather than to follow it,” the “activity of the writer initially presents itself as labour, as work” (62). It is with this work, then, as it appears on the page of the literary text—which “hides nothing, has no secret,” as Macherey puts it (111)—that critics must begin if they wish to explore the connections between literature and history. (This reasoning prompts Fel-ski to declare that Macherey is a “critic eager to cast off the mantle of archaeologist and to discard the premises of depth interpretation” [68]).

It is my hope that my use of the McCarthy archives will be able to illustrate how the author’s literary production—the adaption of historical content into literary form—tends to complicate ideas that often come across, in the early drafts, as rather straightforward. More specifically, I hope that my archival findings will demonstrate how the author’s *work* amounts not to a mere reflection of history, but to an illuminating recasting of the language currently at our disposal for talking about this history. With reference to this recasting, I will argue that literature may help readers recognize that since late capitalist ideology functions so as to protect the privileges of the bourgeois subject, and since this demands of said

ideology never to acknowledge any errors on behalf of its protégé, this means that capitalism's *seeming* unity is predicated on omissions and glossed-over contradictions. The idea here, in a word, is that the archives may show how literary work is capable of putting ideology into contradiction with itself.

For Macherey, as for Jameson ("Meta" 16), literature is not the invention of a "new language," but a "specific usage" of the language "which we use ordinarily" (Macherey 49), a language that helps uphold societal structures and that must therefore be considered highly ideological (maybe language and ideology "are not so very different," as Macherey submits [59]).² To begin with, literature's usage of language is specific in the sense that it does not have to distinguish between "the true and the false" (50): it creates "both an object and the standards by which it is to be judged," and thus, it "wins a remarkable freedom and power of improvisation" (51). Perhaps it is this freedom, then, that enables literature to render ideology legible and to reveal it as an illusion of unity, upheld only by the omissions that if spoken would threaten to contradict it (Eagleton 150). It is important, though, not to think of this freedom as complete independence: "The work," Macherey argues, "only establishes the difference which brings it into being by establishing relations to that which it is not; otherwise it would have no reality and would actually be unreadable and invisible" (60). This is why, rather than "paraphrasing" that which the text has itself already stated (168), the critic, too, must go outside the work and gauge it "in relation to history, and in relation to the ideological version of that history" (129). Thus, the dissonance between historical facticity and ideological distortion may become visible.

Macherey is careful to point out that ideology itself never appears contradictory, but that it "can be *put into contradiction*" (216). Ideology, he explains, "exists precisely in order to efface all trace of contradiction" (146), and, hence, it seems to have "an answer for everything" (147). When endowed with a determinate literary form, however, and when read in conjunction with historical content that clearly does not agree with it, ideology is exposed as "the false resolution of a real debate" (146), as "an attempt at *reconciliation*" between ideology itself and whatever or whomever this ideology is—really—in conflict with (216). These attempts at resolution or reconciliation, then, is why literature often seems able to accommodate several contrasting meanings at once (88)—like when McCarthy speaks of humanity as at once cosmically insignificant *and* uniquely destructive. Differently put, for Macherey, the potentially disruptive

'autonomy' of literature consists not in an ability to dream up a new world or invent a new language, but in the ability to make use of an already existing language in such a formally specific manner so as to lay bare its ideologically conditioned antinomies (which emerge when an ideology seeks to deal with the discrepancy between its own 'truths' and a much bleaker historical facticity).

Form as Allegory

One of the reasons for calling attention, like Jameson and Macherey, to literature's formal specificity, is that this maneuver serves potentially to carve out a provisional space where the critic may reflect on the text's relationship "to that which it is not," as Macherey puts it (60): the historical moment of its production. Thus, this insistence on specificity pertains also to the particularity of literary theory, and it leads ultimately to the notion of translation or mediation, which for Jameson denotes "the possibility of adapting analyses and findings from one level to another," of discussing literature, for instance, in the code of ideology critique (*Political* 39). Key here is the acknowledgement of *difference* between theory and what is theorized, between "knowledge and its object" (Macherey 7), and the refusal to let the first category merge with the second. As McCarthy puts it in *The Crossing*, in what appears to be an argument for an allegorical view of literature: "the strategist did not confuse his devices with the reality of the world for then what would become of him?" (719). In the arena of literary theory, the separation of different codes—the literary and the critical—amounts in the final instance to a defense of the critic's prerogative to say something *of* rather than *with* the literary text (Macherey 7).

One attempt at negotiating the conditions for such a prerogative can be found in Jim Hansen, who pits Walter Benjamin against Paul de Man and presents a theoretical middle road, an approach that acknowledges the necessity of ideology critique but recognizes simultaneously the value of deconstruction as a corrective device that functions, much like Jameson's metacommentary, as a constant reminder of the critic's own historicity and the impossibility of transhistorical truth. What emerges here, in Hansen's words, is "a formalism capable of doubting its own truth-claims without giving up on the object's *Wahrheit-Gehalt* (truth-content) wholesale" (680). One way of arriving at this kind of critique, Hansen suggests, is to pay attention to the significance of allegory in Benjamin and de Man. For both these thinkers, Hansen has it, allegory is a literary form that

directs the reader's attention to some kind of failure: for Benjamin, allegory textualizes and mourns modernity's loss of unity and collectivity, which is concealable and redeemable in the "mythic, ideal order" of symbolism but never in allegory (670), and for de Man, allegory always calls attention to the "ineluctable failure" of its own truths "to be anything other than rhetorical and situated" (672). In both accounts, allegory retains its historicity and its "negating immanence" in resisting the symbolist impulse to coincide with an "eternal, indivisible, and essential unity" (669–70). Echoing de Man, Hansen suggests that writers who buy into this resistance—"the Nietzsches, Rousseaus, and Prousts of the world"—are sometimes able to produce texts that "undermine any simple, utilitarian, or transhistorical purpose for their various writings" (672). These would be writings, in other words, that display an awareness of their own situatedness and their corollary inability to offer any credible explanations for how the world works beyond the here and now. It is important to note, as Hansen's examples of self-reflexive writers show, that this self-reflexivity is not necessarily postmodern, although the preoccupation with the text's ontology has often been associated with this literary historical period. Rather, this awareness of how a text works can appear anywhere and anytime, in any "self-conscious" author (672). Consider, for instance, how, in McCarthy's American context, Charles Brockden Brown asks rhetorically in 1799 whether there is "a criterion by which truth can always be distinguished" (Brown). Brown's own answer is clearly "no": all one may ever access is "transient and faint" glimpses of this truth (Brown).

There is always the risk, though, as Hansen concedes, that literary theoretical formalisms informed by such ideas become "so immanent and so skeptical as to doubt the use or veracity of any kind of collectivity or political criticism, that it will see all political critique as structurally totalitarian" (679). Indeed, although this is a commonplace charge against thinkers such as de Man, it is worth taking seriously, as Hansen does when he combines historicism and poststructuralism in order to render both methodologically operational. To a significant degree, Gayatri Spivak pursues a similar project when she adapts de Man to her critical purposes and shows how his take on the concept of *parabasis* may be turned into a politically useful concept. The background here is that, in Attic comedy, *parabasis* was "an infrastructural model" in which "the chorus repeatedly [broke] up the main action" (Spivak, "Learning" 28). First, drawing on this phenomenon, Spivak demonstrates how de Man's logic can be used to interrupt and surpass *his* own main text; that is, his theorizing and its

problematic confinement in a critical tradition more interested in results of reading than in the causes of particular kinds of readings. Second, she suggests that a possible next step is to translate the same logic into a systematic interruption or permanent undoing of the “Euro-US main text” (30). De Man’s “pugnacious literalism,” writes Spivak, triggers for her an interest in the causes consciously neglected by de Man and many of his academic contemporaries (34); and this inclination to go beyond, to displace “the lesson of de Man to another theatre”—that of the social text, that of history—Spivak explains by pointing to the specificities of her own and de Man’s respective contexts. “My generation,” she writes, “was born when de Man’s generation”—and, one should add, de Man himself—“was flirting with fascism,” the allegedly “uninteresting cause of a subsequent shift from history to reading” (35); a shift from a critique of the text’s relationship to material realities, as one might perhaps also put it, to a critique that considers literary texts in isolation from those realities. “Typical of *my* generation,” Spivak continues, is the “concern for preserving the dreams of postcoloniality in the face of globalization” (35; my emphasis). Needless to say, this concern brings with it an interest in how texts mean in relation to—rather than in separation from—the historical moments in which they are produced; and importantly, McCarthy’s oeuvre is produced in a time and a place where the “combined and uneven development” of global capital is particularly palpable (cf. WReC 12–13): capitalist modernization runs like a common thread through these works, and so does its flipside, the underdevelopment and suffering without which the accumulation of capital would not be possible.

As convinced as she is of the necessity of her own politics, however, Spivak is also aware of the risks it entails. And here, then, the skeptical textualisms of de Man and Derrida function not as safeguards against totalizing claims, but as tools that allow Spivak to make such claims while nevertheless remaining aware of their inevitable provisionality. The idea here is one of (im)possibility: cultural critique will never fully succeed, but it is still the best option there is. Therefore, in order not to lose sight of historical truth-content, to adopt Hansen’s concept, critics must acknowledge their ceaseless failures but still try to “walk the walk” (Spivak, *Outside* xi).

McCarthy's Affordances

The notion of provisionality promoted by de Man, Derrida, and Spivak serves potentially as a reminder for literary critics that their reading of a particular text can never determine once and for all what this text *really* means. There will always be other critics who desire other meanings, and although such meanings are impossible to fully anticipate, there is critical value in trying to find out what their mere possibility says about the text and its relationship to history (which is invariably where a text means). A quick glance at McCarthy's latest novel, the post-apocalyptic *The Road* (2006), might be illustrative here.

By undermining the credibility of one of the protagonists, the father, and by implying that his individualistic and competitive world-view is a symptom of the now fallen economic system of late capitalism, *The Road* appears to call this system into question. It soon becomes clear, though, that since the father is the only character in the novel to offer us glimpses into the past, history as such also perishes with this character's loss of reliability, thereby rendering capitalism out of reach for any explicit political commentary. Yet, in McCarthy's novel, allegory soon emerges as an indirect means of coming to terms with this problem: pushing their shopping-cart through a post-apocalyptic wasteland where billboards display "advertisements for goods that no longer" exist (135), the two protagonists come across as emblems for the coerced consumer, illusorily free, but in reality designated to live his or her life in the only social space there is: the market. The only way to survive, for McCarthy's father and son, is to make sure that the cart never runs empty of supplies. Surely, although McCarthy's portrayal of this predicament does not explicitly portray the historical moment of late capitalism, it stands in allegorically for an economic system that is absent in the text but present in most readers' lives.

Still, the political subversiveness of this novel is by no means self-evident. As the immense body of critical responses make clear, the novel may be read either as a warning about what will happen if short-term economic growth is prioritized before environmental sustainability, or it may be read, if one were to focus on its refusal to clearly identify capitalism as the root cause of the novel's cataclysm, as a document of defeatism, suggesting that the cataclysm was unavoidable and that political action is therefore futile. These two hypothetical readings illustrate how a novel's affordances often allow for vastly different receptions of the same text. In the case of *The Road*, the allegorical allusions to the unsustainable and

socially corrosive features of consumerism afford the notion that this is a novel that critiques late capitalism and encourages readers to take action; the very same allegorical method, though, can be taken to acknowledge that the text is only a standing-in-for-something-else, that history will always be at one remove from the reader, and that the reader will therefore never be able to engage this history. These conflicting affordances of McCarthy's allegory, in sum, make for a novel that can be used to sanction political quietism no less than it can be used to sanction political activism.

One could object that my use of the concept of affordances and my focus on the McCarthy archives make for a methodological contradiction. The hypothetical problem here would be the fact that the archival notes and drafts pertain to the notion of *literature as process* or *work* whereas the concept of affordances is useful mainly in my discussion of what critics do with the published novel. These seemingly distinct foci, however, are not as methodologically incompatible as they may seem: when critics interpret the novel, they, too, engage in work, transcoding, as they do, the text from literature to critique; producing it by consuming it, by making use of its affordances (see Marx's notion that "without consumption," "production would . . . be purposeless" [*Grundrisse*]). *Critical work*, then, is highly related to the *affordances* of the text, to the *critical possibilities* a critic may be able to *realize*. Even though the work of the author and the work of the critic are governed by different codes, both are transformative processes. The author draws on a historical material that s/he transforms into literature (and, as already mentioned, the archives demonstrate that this is a transformation that often renders ambiguous ideas that may at first have seemed perfectly straightforward). The critic then transforms the literary text by realizing its affordances. The neglect of either of these two transformative and thoroughly historical processes lessens the critic's chances of successfully theorizing how literary meaning is produced.

The concept of affordances agrees well with Wittgenstein's famous aphorism that the meaning of a word or a text always hinges on their use (Wittgenstein 20). This is a view of language that will be central to the methodology of this dissertation, which, as a whole, builds on the assumption that a sensitivity to the potential uses of literature opens up for more nuanced readings of this literature and the conditions that gave rise to it. For the same reason, although the theoretical framework of this study is largely Marxist, it will not adhere faithfully to one single Marxist perspective: instead, it will often draw on concordances *and* disagreements to be found within this line of critique. The underlying hypothesis here is that

critics may attain a more nuanced view of a literary text if they take seriously, for example, not only Lukács's savaging of modernist literature and Adorno's pessimism in regard to popular culture, but also Brecht's faith in the revolutionary potential of formal experimentation and Benjamin's celebration of art's technological reproducibility.³ Taken together, these views do not merely shed light on the ways in which literature in general can always be made to resonate with views that exceed anything its authors may have imagined; they may also show, if read in conjunction, that a critical perspective informed at once by pessimistic and optimistic views of art is more likely to avoid taking for granted either a text's subversive potential *or* its regressive qualities.

McCarthy's Style: Symbolism and Allegory

The question of affordances ties in fairly obviously with the question of style, which is to say that the ways in which an author articulates a particular idea affect the ways in which readers are able to make use of it. In his early novels especially, up until the border trilogy, McCarthy tends to think about the world primarily as a symbolist: mourning the “the lost unity” between the human and the non-human, he attempts repeatedly in his writing “to restore” this unity, in the language of Paul de Man's 1950s discussion of symbolism (“The Double” 7). This is registered in the novels' recurring merging of subject and object, in their evocation of temporally vast realms that nullify all human affairs, and in their implicit rejection of history as a category for explaining human behavior. The brutal violence in *Blood Meridian* (1985), for instance, often seems attributable not to the primitive accumulation of the Mexican-American borderlands, or to the ideological specificity of this phenomenon, but to natural law: before “man was, war waited for him,” as one of the characters maintains (262). For McCarthy, moreover, as the following chapters will demonstrate, minerals and plagues are as much living parts of the world as are humans. In this sense, all is one, and the “translucence” of this ‘one’—eternal and universal—penetrates rocks in McCarthy's symbolist discourse no less than it penetrates humans (Coleridge qtd. in Halmi 354): “If I am a concretion I am one of time as well as matter for they are one,” as the author puts it in an unpublished draft of *Blood Meridian* (Wittliff 91/35/4). In this manner, the novels here under consideration partake in a symbolist tradition that harkens back at least to Coleridge, acquires a name in the “Symbolist Manifesto” of 1886, and is a strong presence in some of the

modernist writers with whom McCarthy arguably has affinities: Woolf, Forster, and Eliot, to name a few. Consider, for instance, how, in “Burnt Norton,” Eliot suggests that “The dance along the artery / The circulation of the lymph / Are figured in the drift of stars” (180) and compare this to how, in McCarthy’s *Suttree* (1979), the protagonist puts “his ear to the womb of” of his young lover, Wanda, and hears “the hiss of meteorites through the blind stellar depths” (432) (“For a while,” Wanda and the world “are one,” as Thomas Daniel Young puts it [116]). In both texts, the human being is an inextricable part of a cosmos that contains it, and that it contains. In Eliot as in McCarthy, in other words, the symbol “is characterized,” to return to Coleridge’s definition of this literary device, “by the translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General”; but above “all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal” (Coleridge qtd. in Halmi 354). The point of writing symbolically, then, is “to recapture,” as Charles Feidelson writes in his study of the symbolism of Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, and Whitman, “the unity of a world artificially divided” (51).

Nevertheless, even though McCarthy clearly has a penchant for symbolism, and even though he most likely does not set out to write allegories of late capitalism, there are in his work indelible traces of an allegorical thematization of difference. As I will show primarily in my chapter on *Suttree*, McCarthy’s novels occasionally render humans uniquely destructive and thus distinct from a harmonious natural environment they repeatedly disturb. Admittedly, this destructivity appears sometimes to be the result not of modernity, or of a highly malleable economic system, but of some incorrigible flaw in our genome. Yet, McCarthy’s novels are also rich in references that provide a historical framework for an understanding of human violence. The Westward expansion in *Blood Meridian* paves the way for a society where, as McCarthy implies in *Suttree*, the destitute are forcefully relocated to make room for dams used in part to generate energy for the construction of the atomic bomb: an emblem of human destructivity that will then figure more openly in connection with the 1945 Trinity test alluded to in *The Crossing* (1993) and that *might*—as some scholars argue—be the cause of *The Road*’s cataclysm (see chapter seven in this dissertation). Furthermore, even though McCarthy’s latest novel presents the reader with a world devoid of the kind of capitalist infrastructure long protected by nuclear armament, the novel hints again and again at the disadvantages of the system now perished. The point here is that, although McCarthy could well argue that this may all be traced back to a

violence that is not specifically late capitalist and not even specifically human, but rather a primal force that binds all things material and that appears in different forms depending on context, the historical particularity of the novels' content potentially disrupts McCarthy's symbolist understanding of the world. If critics pay attention to this particularity, as it appears in McCarthy's novels, they may be able to use these novels against themselves, to show how their late capitalist specificity can be harnessed to undermine their own reification of a violence that—at least right now, at this historical juncture—may be conceived of as ideologically conditioned and thereby also redeemable. In so doing, in intervening rather than merely observing, critics are at least trying to be historical subjects, and thus heirs, perhaps, to the “will of the Marxist heritage”: “the conquest by human beings,” as Jameson puts it, “of the otherwise seemingly blind and natural ‘laws’ of socioeconomic fatality” (*Postmodernism* 343).

I suggest in this dissertation that, much more so than the early fiction, McCarthy's later writing appears to reflect on how its own symbolist form sanctions the forgetting of history as much as it sanctions responsible engagement with it. The later works, then, emerge in this sense as allegories for the difficult task of writing about the relationship between human and world in the midst of an ecological emergency that requires of humans that they relinquish their sense of ontological exceptionalism even as they retain their sense of agency; or, differently put, that they acknowledge their entanglement with other, equally significant agents, while still cultivating the confidence to deal with problems they have caused mostly on their own.

McCarthy and the Tradition

McCarthy's concern with this dilemma links him quite clearly to a number of literary forebears whose careers have also been devoted to the exploration of humanity's place in the world. The most ambitious attempt, to date, at uncovering McCarthy's influences is Michael Lynn Crews's 2017 *Books are Made out of Books: A Guide to Cormac McCarthy's Literary Influences*, which lists more than one hundred writers who appear in McCarthy's notes and drafts. The authors mentioned range from Shakespeare and Milton to Flannery O'Connor and Nathanael West; from Conrad and Joyce to Tim O'Brien and Annie Dillard. As Crews shows, these authors have had an impact on McCarthy to different degrees and in different ways, but it is clear, even though this is not Crews's main focus, that

many of the texts listed have in some way addressed the relationship between humans and the natural environment. This lineage was also acknowledged in McCarthy criticism long before the publication of Crews's book. Bryan Vescio (2004), for instance, focuses on McCarthy's debt to the "tragic Humanism" of Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain (88), which, as Vescio argues, responds to Emerson's Transcendentalism with the contrasting belief that, since nature is brutal and indifferent and offers no consolation, the only redemption available to people is one of humanism, one of being good to each other (76).⁴ There is obviously some truth to this. McCarthy's universe often comes across as indifferent and violently entropic, "rushing away" and caring "nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead" (*AtPH* 305). Yet, there are also numerous instances in McCarthy's work that seem related to Emerson's more optimistic view of human-world relations, such as another passage from the novel just quoted, where the characters are borne "up into the swarming stars so that they" ride "not under but among them," at "once jaunty and circumspect, 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" (31). Free, excited, and capable, McCarthy's protagonists could well, like Emerson, "Live in the Sunshine, swim the sea, / Drink the wild air's salubrity" (*Complete* 243)—and it would not be beside the point here to note Emerson's fascination with the increasingly liberal preaching style of the early American 19th century and the ways in which this style allowed for poetic flights fit to register humanity's implication in God's creation (Reynolds 23). Precisely because they are philosophically opposed, then, Hawthorne, Melville, and Emerson all seem pertinent to how McCarthy conceives of the natural world as at once a place of brutal indifference and a transcendent home. Both of these views, however, are arguably symbolist in the sense that they unite human and world into an interlocking whole. The difference is that, whereas the first view is registered in what de Man calls "symbolic language as the agent of cosmic destruction," the other seems more a symbolist restoration of a "harmonious paradise" ("The Double" 11).⁵

Two other authors who are frequently mentioned in McCarthy studies are Hemingway and Faulkner. In 1993, Tom Pilkington writes about *Blood Meridian* that its "language seems Hemingwayesque" but that it also contains "Faulknerian cadences and rhythms" (318). Andrew

Hoberek (2011), too, mentions both these authors, and he points out that while the heritage from Hemingway is evident primarily in McCarthy's occasional "minimalism," which occurs with higher frequency in the later novels, Faulkner is recognizable in McCarthy's equally prominent "maximalism" (492). Arguably, it is in the Faulknerian elements of the author's style that his nature writing—commonly referred to as "optical democracy"—comes most explicitly to the fore, not only in how this elaborate style indulges in metaphors, similes, and personifications that destabilize the ontological differences between the human and the non-human, but also in how its paratactic syntax, the syndetic or asyndetic stacking of one clause upon another, adds to this lack of separation between subject and object.

On this note, Dana Phillips (1996) calls attention to how scholars have tended to think of McCarthy either as a Southern writer, influenced by authors such as Faulkner and O'Connor, for instance, and embarked on a quest for redemption and regeneration, or as a nihilistic Western writer, invested in Western culture at large and influenced not only by the great American writers, but also by foreign novelists like Dostoevsky and Conrad and philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger ("History" 435). This critical debate is relevant also with regard to McCarthy's symbolism. One could possibly make the case that this aesthetic is strictly American, and that it is related, even, to the how the Puritans' "radically metaphoric" way of perceiving the world "united past and present, idea and material fact, in the objectively given," as Feidelson puts it (81). Such intertexts aside, it certainly makes sense, at the very least, to consider how the notorious mining, smelting, and deforestation of McCarthy's Tennessean context might have triggered in the author the impulse to imagine a world where humans appear at peace with the environment (Dixon). Even if these contextual particularities would seem to render McCarthy's symbolism typically American, though, it would be difficult to argue convincingly that its style of execution has no affinities with literature produced outside of the US. As there are traces of Shakespeare in Coleridge and Coleridge in Whitman, there are traces of Whitman in Forster and Forster in McCarthy: none of these writers remain within their national borders.

In the debate referenced by Phillips, the first camp of critics sees in McCarthy someone who seeks to disprove his own suspicions of nature's indifference, whereas the other does not (435). Of pertinence here are also scholars who associate McCarthy with literary naturalism, such as Eric Carl Link, who defines this form of writing as that "literature in which the

ambitions of individuals are routinely circumscribed by the coercive pressures of environmental, biological, economic, and social forces” (156).⁶ Here, too, there is the sense that humans inhabit a world that simply does not care about them. What is more, this naturalist connection also implies that human actions might be determined by “chemical compulsions,” as Theodore Dreiser once put it (611), rather than by rational thought. Such matters of human agency will be discussed repeatedly in this dissertation, not least in the chapter on *Blood Meridian*; suffice it to say here that McCarthy never presents a clear-cut answer to this problem either: humans appear in McCarthy’s novels as at once free and determined, inhabiting a world that is as full of promise and possibility as it is entropic and pitilessly “dark” (McCarthy, *TR* 200). These indeterminacies, then, clearly link McCarthy to a number of earlier authors; equally important, though, they connect him with his own historical context, too, and the ways in which the specificities of this context—the intensification of modernity, environmental degradation, atomic fear, etc.—render consequential the question as to whether humans are at all responsible for the course of history.

McCarthy’s embodiment of several traditions at once also pertains to the literary historical shift from modernism to postmodernism, a shift he was alive to witness, almost regardless of whether one sets an early or late date for it. Much more so than the typical postmodernist, it seems, McCarthy is obsessed with matters of life and death that stretch beyond the literary artifact; what is more, his novels generally avoid, as Phillips notes, “the jaded manner of much postmodern fiction” (436). Yet, this does not mean that these novels are blind either to the ‘death of language’ or to the ‘end of history’ frequently advertised during their period of conception.⁷ On this note, David Holloway argues that McCarthy’s writing attempts to challenge such postmodern notions “from within” (*The Late* 4), that it first concedes the failure of language to affirm its own historicity, but that it then taps into modernist notions of critical distance and manages finally to match in its form a world that exists outside late capitalism’s reification of an eternal present (173). Even though the success of this subversive move is disputable, the move itself *might* be considered symptomatic of a historical period when literature’s ability to make a ‘real’ difference has been cast into doubt. It makes just as much sense, though, to think of McCarthy’s increasing interest in literature’s ontology as evidence of the development of his own self-consciousness as a writer. As Richard Gray has argued, moreover, a self-reflexive concern with the

problems and possibilities of language has characterized American literature for centuries: from the previously mentioned Brockden Brown and his musings on the unstable “barrier between fact and fiction” (*A Brief* 45), via Whitman’s “language experiment” (111) and Dickinson’s view of language as “a prisonhouse” (111), to Faulkner’s sentiment that language can be “as much a function of ignorance as of knowledge” (206) and Pynchon’s “self-reflexive halls of mirrors” (329).

For McCarthy, and for this dissertation, this issue of authorial self-reflexivity is important especially in relation to the autoreferential musings that appear in later novels such as *Cities of the Plain* and *The Road* and that display the author’s concern for whether his own writing might afford an escape from history—an affordance that in itself would definitely be historical, in the sense that it would have effects in the extratextual world. It would be wrong to suggest that, up until this point, McCarthy shows no signs of self-reflexivity; yet, my contention is that the later texts are characterized by an interest in their own affordances that is unparalleled in the early fiction. Whereas *The Orchard Keeper* is focalized partly by a character labelled in an early draft as the “natural . . . voice of the leaf” (Wittliff 09/01/02), *The Road* is focalized by a character who mistrusts any vision of harmony between human and environment (*TR* 17). The “right dreams for a man in peril” are “dreams of peril,” this man says, in what may be taken as an autoreferential assertion that the unrestrained symbolist aesthetic of McCarthy’s early novels encourages an escape from the ‘perils’ of history (*TR* 17).

McCarthy Criticism

This idea of a self-reflexive author is also somewhat risky, however, in the sense that it may contribute to the twofold illusion not only that McCarthy eventually grows entirely aware of the cultural work done by his texts but that this work and the political sentiments that underpin it almost invariably conform to the world-view of the progressive critic. At least since the publication of the border trilogy, McCarthy has frequently been understood, as I will often remind the reader, as an author capable of illuminating his audience as to how they are inescapably part of a natural world for which they—again, inescapably—are responsible. In 2002, Wesley Berry writes about McCarthy’s debut novel that, by demonstrating “what we must aspire to,” the novel’s meditations on the non-human lend “a sense of hopefulness to the story of wasted nature” (58); and, similarly, in 2001,

Edwin T. Arnold suggests about *The Crossing* that this is a novel where, “in the midst of destruction,” there “is hope for regeneration, for mercy” (4). One may discern in these critical accounts a view of literature as something that is able to affect, on its own accord, the ethics of its reader. This view appears in higher relief in various later critics. Andrew Keller Estes, for instance, argues in 2013 that “[b]iocentric maps like the one found in the flesh of fish at the end of *The Road* . . . offer a way out; they offer a responsible approach to how humans may conceive of the world which they shape and of which they are only a part” (102)—and for Estes, it is the novels themselves that accomplish this, in a “a move reminiscent of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*,” as he puts it (54). A long list of critics display the same belief in the redemptive capacity of McCarthy’s writing: Dawn A. Saliba (2012) proposes that “the fire of language, as embodied by the violent beauty of McCarthy’s word-craft, presents the only relief in this artificial, cold and unrelenting world” (154); Lee Clark Mitchell (2015) submits that “the very sounds and rhythms of [McCarthy’s] words invoke the redemptive possibilities of expression” (“Make It” 215); Richard Rankin Russell (2016) writes that “McCarthy’s style may be thought of as redemptive” (344), and Markus Wierschem (2013) labels McCarthy’s “an oeuvre that, though constantly wrestling with ‘the end,’ by its very nature and design burns as a fire in the dark, cold night of the Second Law [of Thermodynamics]” (18). “Art,” Wierschem concludes, “may save us after all” (18). Notably, the early contributions to this appreciative construction of McCarthy’s authorship precede the consolidation in the academy of ecocritical modes of reading. Still, as these critical trends have eventually grown stronger, they seem to have helped corroborate the idea that, thanks to its ecological view of the world, McCarthy’s aesthetic is somehow able to help readers realize what is required of them in the midst of an environmental emergency, the seriousness of which the novels simultaneously allude to. As the quotes above demonstrate, moreover, this is not just a matter of literary content; it seems, rather, as though it is the formal logic of McCarthy’s writing—the “word-craft”; the “sounds and rhythms”; the novels’ “design”—that may help readers productively reimagine their relationship with the world. As I have already made clear, this dissertation, too, will frequently home in on the specifics of McCarthy’s formal idiom, though it will do so with the suspicion that this idiom affords evasion as much as it affords the cultivation of responsibility.

The celebratory view of McCarthy, however, is obviously not the result of ecocriticism alone. Another potential explanation is the fact that,

published in journals such as *The Southern Literary Journal*, *The Appalachian Journal*, *The Southern Quarterly*, *The Southern Review*, and *The Journal of Appalachian studies*, early McCarthy criticism was largely regional and very much fueled by the desire to put the spotlight on a neglected writer. According to the Cormac McCarthy Society's website, the first McCarthy conference in 1993 was co-organized by prolific McCarthy critic Rick Wallach and "Bellarmine College's Wade Hall, a leading regional teacher and critic" ("About the Cormac"). The explicitly regional vein of McCarthy criticism seeks to provide information about the time and place of the novels' gestation—see, for instance, Wesley G. Morgan's 2004 "A season of death and epidemic violence': Knoxville Rogues in *Suttree*" and this article's focus on the media coverage of crimes committed in the Knoxville area while McCarthy was working on his fourth novel (other examples, from the same critic, include "Suttree's Dead Acquaintances and McCarthy's Dead Friends" [2013] and a website—entitled "Searching for Suttree"—that functions as a tour guide to places in Knoxville that figure in the novel). A related type of critique is the biographical excavations that seek to better understand McCarthy's texts by way of acquiring knowledge about his life. This critique is perhaps best exemplified by articles like Dianne Luce's 2009 "Cormac McCarthy in High School: 1951." Such critical work is often the result of intimate regional knowledge and long hours in undigitized archives, and although the research that results from these efforts is at times unsatisfying in how it tends to refrain from theorizing its findings, from drawing conclusions that pertain to society at large and not merely to the writings of one single author, much is indeed lost when critics of, say, a more theoretical inclination choose to ignore the virtually atheoretical yet consistently meticulous research of a scholar such as Luce. One risk, ironically, is that these more theoretically informed critics lose track of the work's historical and contextual specificity, the familiarity with which is arguably indispensable for any kind of theorization. The knowledge provided by Luce that McCarthy seems to have worked on *Suttree* for about 20 years, for example, should have consequences for how any serious critic approaches this novel (Luce, *Reading* viii). Like most regional and biographical criticism, though, the criticism discussed above entails a certain measure of hagiography, typical of research conducted in close dialogue with author societies, and most likely predicated on the researchers' enthusiasm for the writer in question. It is my contention that this valorization tends to extend, as I insinuate above, also to the reception of McCarthy's nature writing.

It should be acknowledged here that even though one may certainly identify trends and tendencies in McCarthy criticism, and even though one may also try to assess the merits and the drawbacks of these different approaches, this type of cataloguing is also by necessity reductive. Some scholars will not fit neatly into one trend only, if any at all—and the periodization of McCarthy criticism is also risky: it would be wrong to suggest that due to the vast amount of critical work that has already been done for them, all later critics are wonders of nuance, just as it would be wrong to suggest that all early critics lack this very same nuance. Note, for instance, how pioneering McCarthy critic Vereen Bell writes insightfully already in 1983 about the “clear, good water that recurs in” the novels, arguing that this “is a simple representation of what is desired of the world but is a provisional image only, *not* a symbol of redemption” (“Ambiguous” 38; my emphasis). Then, compare this—and Bell’s suggestion that McCarthy’s “vague dialectic is one point” and “its irresolution . . . the other” (38)—to some of the more undividedly optimistic readings referenced above. One could argue that despite his lack of critical interlocutors, Bell has a better grip on McCarthy’s complexities than many of his successors.

That said, there are sometimes new developments in McCarthy criticism. One should mention, for instance, the fairly recent trend that focuses on McCarthy’s interest in phenomena such as entropy and chirality—a trend triggered mainly by the author’s association with the multidisciplinary Santa Fe Institute and a trend that almost invariably shuns the ideological significance of its findings: there is rarely any room in this category of articles for a discussion of what it means, here and now, that McCarthy takes an interest in scientific ideas that downplay humanity’s cosmic significance. The methodology of this research is largely intertextual, gauging McCarthy’s aesthetic against various theories from the natural sciences in order to show how these theories have helped form the author’s world-view. One case in point would be how Julius Greve (2015) argues, with archival support, that McCarthy seems aware of the “resonance” between his own natural philosophy and German naturalist Lorenz Oken’s notions about “*Ur-Schleim*,” a “biologically primordial and formless sludge from which all forms of life and phenomena are issuing forth” (“Another” 29–30). On this basis, Greve argues that the world-view of *Blood Meridian* is “physiocentric, rather than biocentric,” a perspective that recognizes the entanglement of all things material, and not just all things living (32). The connection between Oken and McCarthy, writes Greve, “problematizes the assumption that McCarthy’s novel is a simple

denunciation of the practices of war, American imperialism, and bloodshed in general” (48).⁸ In other words, Okenian philosophy helps Greve suggest that the main point to be made about *Blood Meridian* is not that it partakes of contemporary ideology. One could object here, of course, that although McCarthy appears to be more interested in the common properties of all the world’s matter than in the very specific causes and effects of westward expansion, this supposed fact might in itself be approached as a perspective that *does* ideological work, regardless of the author’s intention. This objection aside, readings such as Greve’s have obvious merit in how they render visible the ways in which McCarthy’s work is in dialogue with various types of scientific outlooks, the recognition of which may definitely help critics attain a deeper understanding of the various layers of the author’s work.

As of the 2006 publication of *The Road* and McCarthy’s subsequent breakthrough in the mainstream, the rapidly expanding critical discourse on his works has grown increasingly diverse. This means, not least, that the hagiographical tendency has met with opposition. As Nicholas Monk (2016) points out, there is much in McCarthy’s novels to “suggest a writer who is unafraid to appeal to a more conservative readership”: their representations of masculinity, their characters’ valorization of independence, and, not least, their “piercing sense of loss” and “irrevocable decline” (xiii). These elements provide plenty of fodder for the more suspiciously inclined readers who do not necessarily sympathize with The Cormac McCarthy Society’s “stated purpose” of furthering “the scholarship and general *appreciation* of Cormac McCarthy’s writing” and who are mainly interested in *The Road* (“About the Cormac”; my emphasis). Some of these critics have problematized the function of hope in McCarthy’s latest novel: Andrew McMurry (2012), for one, maintains that the “appeal to hope” to be found in novels such as *The Road* “is simply the growth-machine voicing through us its impossible, reckless vision of limitless expansion”—“another ruse” McMurry explains further, “by which the current system of power asserts its authority over our imaginations and robs us of our ability to come to grips with its perverse trajectory” (83). On a similar yet more formalistic note, Sean Pryor (2012) argues that the “deliberate artifice of McCarthy’s rhythm functions not as resistance to nature, but as compliance” (40). “In assiduously replicating the rhythms of . . . our world,” he argues, “*The Road* offers the false consolation of a naïve lyricism: sweet sounds instead of thought” (40). In a very recent book, Nicholas Brown (2019) suggests similarly, as though combining McMurry’s

and Pryor's arguments, that, rather than acknowledging and seeking to overcome and exploit the "constraints" of the "generic form" of the novel, *The Road* merely elevates these constraints "stylistically" (Brown 95). Whereas the previously mentioned and more appreciative critics evidently conceive of McCarthy's formal expression as having the ability to make readers see the world anew, Brown seems to imply instead that since McCarthy is mired in the thoroughly ideological form of the novel, all he will have to say about the world will fall "under the sign of the market and the agreeable" (95).

The suspicious readings referenced here certainly serve as a welcome corrective to the construction of McCarthy as an ethically benign writer. Still, while the overly optimistic reception of McCarthy's authorship tends to ignore the novels' potentially problematic relationship to contemporary phenomena such as the fetishization of the second amendment and climate change denial, the suspicious reception of McCarthy's writing is sometimes reductive as well. The tendency not to concede any potential ethical or political *merits* of McCarthy's work arguably stems from the critical decision—intentional or not—to dismiss those aspects of the work that *may* actually afford a recognition on the reader's part of how his or her lifestyle poses a serious threat to the environment. The possibility of making such readerly 'use' of McCarthy is aptly illustrated by how, as I show above, his sympathetic readers have realized these very affordances of his texts.

On this note of 'use,' Monk (2016) helpfully relocates some of art's supposed agency to the reader (192–93). Drawing on Marcuse and Adorno, Monk argues first that McCarthy's writing may be thought of as an aesthetic that manages to belie the bleakness of modernity, and then, that this same aesthetic may be seen as "radically darkened" (177, 184–185). The first part of the argument refers to Marcuse's idea of an art that invokes a "beautiful image" capable of reenchanting the natural world (177). Obviously, this seems well in keeping with how some of the scholars discussed above conceive of McCarthy's aesthetic as a record of the magnificent yet fragile beauty of the natural world. The Adornian part of the argument, on the other hand, conceives of McCarthy as an author who never gives in to the false rationality of modern society and who instead interrogates closely the anxieties this society represses (Monk's example is the climate fears of *The Road*'s political unconscious [185]). Needless to say, Marcuse and Adorno are here entirely incompatible, and Monk is indeed right to imply that, left to their own devices, neither of the arguments

mentioned above provides a satisfying account of an aesthetic that arguably tends to *oscillate* between ‘redemptive beauty’ and ‘radical darkness.’ Still, taken together, these two thinkers are potentially helpful in gesturing toward the possibility for the reader to construct a McCarthy of their own: “McCarthy’s fiction offers the reader an opportunity,” as Monk puts it, “to be affected in meaningful and embodied ways” (225)—and clearly, this affect may be predicated either on the notion that McCarthy’s novels may help us reenchant the world or on the notion that they may help us “bring into focus repressed social anxieties,” as Lydia Cooper (2014) puts it (“Tennessee” 41). Clearly, both of these readerly or critical possibilities would render McCarthy ethically and/or politically progressive—and Monk, too, chooses such a path when he concludes, on the last page of his book, that McCarthy’s “fiction demands that we ponder our role in environmental degradation,” that we “engage with the suprahuman and subjugated consciousness of animals” (225).

Monk’s emphasis on readerly affect, however, separates him from those critics who seem to be working under the hypothesis that art has a political agency of its own and places him instead in a strand of critique which to me seems much more productive: the self-reflexive and theoretically complex endeavor of *making* McCarthy do productive cultural work. There is also something in Monk’s espousal of affect that brings to mind Joseph North’s recent reinvention of Raymond Williams as a scholar who encourages us to deepen our emotional and aesthetic response to art because he believes that this might also deepen our political response to it (North 183–83). At any rate, the practice of translating McCarthy into a radical political commentary is arguably best exemplified by David Holloway’s 2002 Marxist retooling of McCarthy’s novels. Writing in the vein of Fredric Jameson and heeding this theorist’s call to “always historicize,” Holloway frames his reading of McCarthy’s novels by calling attention to the emergence in the 1960s of the green, feminist, and pacifist ‘grand narratives’ that were designed to challenge Fordism’s normalization of perpetual capitalist crisis and the dissemination of the idea of a liberal “classlessness” (*The Late* 46). Although these narratives are now “fully lived and theorized for the first time” (45), Holloway suggests, they have often been successfully repudiated by the Fukuyaman and Friedmanian counternarratives that helped cement a late capitalist hegemony in the late 20th century (46). This second kind of narrative, then, would be the kind that enters novels such as those of McCarthy’s border trilogy, where it seems so utterly “intractable” and “natural” so as to evoke a kind of historical

closure; a closure, though, where, paradoxically, the permanent crisis of capitalism and its contradictions live on with full force, where these contradictions continue to evolve, that is, despite the illusory “end of history” (46). The “rising to the surface of the antinomy in McCarthy’s mature fiction,” Holloway argues further, “thus resonates with the normalizing of crisis in our time” (46), and, we must assume, with the presence of competing ideological narratives. In other words, drawing on Jameson, Holloway submits that McCarthy’s “representational” antinomies should be seen as “historical symptoms, ‘rather than as occasions for demonstrating something about the structural incapacity of the mind itself, or of its languages’ per se (Jameson, *Seeds of Time* 8)” (47). To Holloway, this is how critics may account for the common verdict that *Blood Meridian*, for instance, displays a “paralysis of process” and an “inert” dialectics (48)—because McCarthy’s project, Holloway explains, is not to solve the antinomy, but to explore it. This exploration, moreover, would be explicitly modernist in character, since it returns to language itself in order to rediscover some kind of semi-autonomy from which may emerge “formal strategies” with the capacity to redeem the collapse of referentiality that has occupied critical theorists for at least six decades now (57).

This rescuing of referentiality is where I part ways with Holloway. As I have tried to explain above, and as I will have reason to explain again later on, Holloway’s strategy for reading into McCarthy’s works a return of referentiality consists in approaching the novels’ formal structure as something that does not reflect but that *matches* the materiality of a world existing beyond late capitalist commodification (55). Through this critical sleight of hand, McCarthy’s writing is suddenly endowed with subversive energy. The purpose and usefulness of this kind of critique seems obvious: if the critic approaches the artwork as a site of struggle, the endgame for the same critic should perhaps be the strategic retooling of this artwork into something that conforms to his or her own political sentiments. The self-reflexive sophistication of Holloway’s work notwithstanding, however, it, too, has its drawbacks. The inclination to make McCarthy’s texts do progressive cultural work tends to deflect focus both from the evasive elements in the author’s writing *and* from the autoreferential attention these particular elements receive in the later works.

My way of tracking this self-reflexive development is to take seriously both the appreciative and the suspicious camps in McCarthy criticism and the ways in which these camps have realized the various affordances of the author’s texts: the supposedly conservative and the

supposedly progressive, respectively. I contend in this dissertation that my Machereyian approach is better equipped than Holloway's largely Jamesonian perspective to theorize McCarthy's autoreferentiality. What is more, I also suggest that the same theoretical framework is particularly helpful in calling attention to the *modus operandi* of late capitalist ideology. If one accepts, with Macherey, that ideology is a false resolution of a real debate (146), one may also recognize how critics often tend to partake of this resolution in a manner that prevents the acknowledgement of the artwork's ideological significance: the critical construction of McCarthy as an environmentally progressive writer, for instance, is only possible if one ignores the ways in which the author's works may also be read as an espousal of quietism. To discover late capitalist ideology in McCarthy's novels is to discover, as Macherey says about Jule Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, how the novel speaks "with several voices at once" (56)—how it partakes of the way late capitalism *needs* to interpellate its subjects as agents and innocents at the same time. For capitalism to keep expanding, the capitalist subject must be interpellated as an industrious agent, and for capitalism to convincingly label itself as benevolent, the same agent must simultaneously be interpellated as a creature whose impact on the environment is negligible. This, then, is why McCarthy's novels may read both as a laying bare of humanity's ability to help the Earth bounce back from environmental degradation *and* as a suggestion that humanity is merely an insignificant part of a cosmos where things will keep happening the way they always have, regardless of human activity (an aspect of McCarthy's texts that his more suspicious readers often home in on—and rightly so). For the McCarthy critic, this Machereyian understanding of late capitalism may contribute to the recognition of how ideology is at work both in the conception of McCarthy as a writer who renders visible the possibilities of human agency and as a writer who denies these very possibilities (since ideology needs both descriptions of humanity to be true).

Against this background, it appears problematic also to retool McCarthy's texts into a progressive political commentary, even if this retooling is guided by the self-reflexive idea that critique is always a translation from one code to another, or a destruction of that which it reads, as Jameson puts it in his latest book (*Allegory* 32). If critics refrain from resolving McCarthy's works in any of the ways described above, they stand a better chance of discovering how these works illuminate late capitalism's success in combining contradictory notions of what humanity is in a

seemingly unified ideological narrative. What is more, if critics combine these insights with a mapping of how scholars have realized the various affordances of McCarthy's novels, they might also be able to spot those places in the novels that reveal an autoreferential acknowledgment of the ways in which the author's symbolist aesthetic may be made to resonate with different political agendas. To track this development in McCarthy's writing, however, one must also have a comprehensive view of what this symbolism looks like. This is what my next chapter will try to offer.

¹ One should note here that already Engels loosened the structure of the base-superstructure model: "The economic situation," he wrote, "is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure"—such as "political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas—also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form" (Engels).

² Here, the similarities become clear between Macherey and that on which much of his literary theory is based: Louis Althusser's concept of "internal distantiating," presented in "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre," and suggesting that, thanks to their literary form, novels can "make us 'perceive' (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held" (223).

³ For a comprehensive account of these conflicting views, see Eugene Lunn's *Marxism and Modernism*.

⁴ As Vescio points out, "tragic Humanism" is a term coined by Leslie Fiedler, who applies it to Hawthorne and Melville, but not to Twain (Vescio 75). Megan Riley McGilchrist, too, compares Melville and McCarthy and calls attention to the significance of how *Moby Dick* "critiques the destruction of the natural world as early as the mid nineteenth century" (197).

⁵ "In emphasizing the mysteries of nature," writes Steven Frye, "the author doesn't resort to the unexplainable but, like many writers of nineteenth-century romantic fiction, configures nature in figurative terms" (81). Frye here touches on something that is central to McCarthy's authorship and that will be discussed not least in the chapter on *The Orchard Keeper*: the tendency of McCarthy to close the gap between human and environment by way of attributing human characteristics to non-human agents. This often seems to emerge in McCarthy's novels as a response to the witnessing of nature's imminent demise, and here, too, as Julian Murphet suggests, McCarthy appears to be allied with some of his American predecessors, such as Melville, Jack London, and Hemingway (111).

⁶ As Bill Hardwig notes, the list of critics who have recognized McCarthy's debt to literary naturalism include Barclay Owens, Steven Frye, James Giles, Dana Phillips, and Erik Carl Link (38).

⁷ Phillip A. Snyder and Delys W. Snyder argue, similarly, that McCarthy is neither exclusively a modernist nor exclusively a postmodernist: "Like many contemporary writers," they note, "McCarthy develops his thematics and stylistics from an array of literary practices and traditions, including romanticism and realism as well as modernism and postmodernism" (30).

⁸ Greve delves into this issue at greater length in his *Shreds of Matter: Cormac McCarthy and the Concept of Nature*, published in 2018.

2. Overview, or “Rigid homologues of viscera”: Human Destructivity and Human Insignificance in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy

He took hold of the twisted wrought-iron, the mangled fragment of the fence, and shook it. It didn't shake. It's growed all through the tree, the man said. We cain't cut no more on it. (*TOK* 3–4)

Already on the first page of McCarthy's 1965 debut novel, the reader is introduced to something that will eventually prove central to the authorship as a whole: the question as to whether humanity, human activities, and human artifacts should be thought of as harmoniously interwoven with an ecological totality where *nothing* or no *one* is accorded extraordinary significance, or whether it should be acknowledged, conversely, that humanity poses a uniquely destructive threat to this totality. Below, I will show how this question is never settled, and how it is entangled in many of the novels with a nostalgic portrayal of a selfless sociality that appears *both* to counteract the notion of human destructivity *and* to decenter anything not human. More specifically, although the novels seem to suggest that “[e]xistence is always coexistence,” to adopt ecotheorist Timothy Morton's phrase (*Ecological* 4), they remain undecided about the possibility for humans and non-humans to ever coexist respectfully and sustainably. The twofold purpose of the following chapter is 1) to demonstrate how tensions such as these manifest themselves in McCarthy's complete oeuvre and 2) to begin sketching how McCarthy's ambivalent texts fit into the historical context in which they were produced.

An Ecological Totality

As Jay Ellis points out, the fence in the epigraph to this chapter is clearly rendered an agent, an artifact that has “*growed* all through the tree,” rather than the other way around (Ellis, *No Place* 62, McCarthy 3; my emphasis). As Ellis goes on to argue, this literary animation of the fence is suggestive of a world-view that conceives of “metal” as “a living part of the earth, growing and moving like blood through ‘veins’”—a material that “is

not at odds with nature,” but that “is nature” (3; my emphasis). Obviously, though, the whole point of the fence in the epigraph is that it is an artifact, and thus different in form from unrefined metal. Still, Ellis is right to make the connection between the “wrought-iron” that blunts the saw and the raw material that dwells in the earth’s innards. He is right, because, obviously, the prologue of *The Orchard Keeper* merges tree and artifact and endows them with equal status: they are both living things, both part of some universal ecology. As Georg Guillemin suggests, with Vereen Bell, the “eco-centric” here prevails in a “theme of man and nature interfused” (Bell qtd. in Guillemin, *Pastoral* 23)—a theme that reaches its climax toward the end of the novel, where the reader finds the “dead sheathed in the earth’s crust and turning the slow diurnal of the earth’s wheel, at peace with eclipse, asteroid, the dusty novae,” and “their bones brindled with mold and the celled marrow going to frail stone, turning, their fingers laced with roots, at one with Tut and Agamemnon, with the seed and the unborn” (*TOK* 258). Here, humanity is intertwined in a vast cosmic mesh that seems at once dark and deep.

This tendency to undermine the nature/culture binary, moreover, is further accentuated throughout the novel by means of symbolic language: metaphors, similes, and personifications that both anthropomorphize objects, natural as well as artificial, and liken the appearances of humans to those of things. The “brass eye of the sun” is “ponderous and unreal” (42), the “coals” in the fireplace “chuckle[...]” (79), “young cedars gathered in a clearing” appear as “vespertine figures, rotund and druidical in their black solemnity” (128), a rooster calls “questioningly” (140), horses watch “with eyes luminous and round as bottlebottoms in the car-lights” (174), an engine “crank[s] cheerfully” (194), a pair of human eyes burn “cold and remote in their hollows like pockets of smoldering gas” (168), a man hovers “like some dark and ominous bird” (125), “a huge ulcer fold[s] out of” a “mass” of clouds (181), “dead and leafless trunks” grasp “with brittle gray fingers and go[...] prone on the earth” (182), “fields lay dead-white and touched with a phosphorous glow as if producing illumination of themselves” (139), rain falls “mendicant-voiced” (195), and “the moon [is] no dead thing” (94).

In McCarthy criticism, this kind of eco-centric prose is usually referred to as “optical democracy,” a term taken from a passage in the 1985 *Blood Meridian*, where it is used to allude to “the neuter austerity of” the novel’s late 19th century Mexican-American borderlands (261). In “the optical democracy of such landscapes,” McCarthy writes, “all preference is

made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinship” (261). Writing in 1996, Dana Phillips is the first critic to discuss optical democracy critically, describing it as an aesthetic that collapses the Lukácsian distinction between narration and description and so also any ontological difference between the human and the non-human (“History” 446–47). David Holloway defines the term similarly when he describes it as a reading or seeing of landscapes that rejects “any anthropocentric assumption of human primacy over the natural world” (*The Late* 153). Like most critical terms, however, optical democracy proves a pliable tool as soon as one takes a closer look at how different critics use it. Holloway, for one, does not have in mind the kind of synthesizing metaphoricity I describe above; rather, drawing on Bell, he eventually departs slightly from his own definition as well as McCarthy’s original usage and finds this aesthetic idiom in a language of “precise mimetic quality” that conveys “the phenomenological *exclusivity* of the object cited” (158; my emphasis). This definition is diametrically opposed to the conception of optical democracy as a formal feature that erases rather than accentuates differences between the objects and subjects portrayed in the text. What is more, Holloway fails to register some of the dialectical complexity of the quote from *Blood Meridian*. There is not only “a strange equality here,” but also “the eye”—or the human “I”?—that subjectively “predicates the whole” on one feature at a time. Even in a single quote such as this one, then, elements of the dialectic I intend to discuss manifest themselves: humanity is rendered part of a whole it is unable to grasp objectively and all at once—an inability that seems to engender in McCarthy’s humanity the corollary inability of treating this ‘whole’ respectfully and responsibly.

Destructivity and Greed

Even though the optically democratic aesthetic did not have a name until the mid-80s, it was nonetheless a striking presence also in McCarthy’s earlier novels. If understood as a formal device that merges subject and object, it presents itself perhaps most frequently in *Suttree*, a 1979 novel set in a 1950s Knoxville marked by poverty and decay. Here, representations of the city forcefully mingle and equate the waste that pollutes the Tennessee River, whatever the form of the items floating by:

A dead sow pink and bloated and jars and crates and shapes of wood washed into rigid homologues of viscera and empty oilcans locked in eyes of dishing slime where the spectra wink guiltily.

One day a dead baby. Bloated, pulpy rotted eyes in a bulbous skull and little rags of flesh trailing in the water like tissuepaper. (368)

Much like in the prologue to *The Orchard Keeper*, though, where the fence seems almost to intrude the tree and ultimately become an impediment for the artificers themselves (who are thus caught in their own trap, figuratively speaking), the seemingly flat ontology of this passage is eventually destabilized:

Oaring his way lightly through the rain among these curiosa [Suttree] felt little more than yet another artifact leached out of the earth and washed along, draining down out of the city, that cold and grainy shape beyond the rain that no rain could make clean again. Suttree among the leavings like a mote in the floor of a beaker, come summer a bit of matter stunned and drying in the curing mud, the terra damnata of the city's dead alchemy. (368)

In other words, as much as sows and jars are here rendered homologues, and as much as the polysyndeton of the passage heightens this equation, humanity—"another artifact" or not—has built a city that "no rain" can "make clean again" (368), a city, the reader learns, where "a sager soul" may perhaps read in the "morning traffic . . . auguries of things to come, the specter of mechanical proliferation and universal blight": a revelation of humankind as an autonomous and uniquely destructive force in the world (310).¹ In the block quotation above, then, humanity is simultaneously conceived of as singularly destructive and as a mere object among others.²

A notable trajectory in McCarthy's authorship is that, although the early novels clearly establish the problem of human destructivity, the later novels often deal with this problem much more explicitly. This is the case not least in *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1993), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998), which together make up *The Border Trilogy*: a series of texts revolving around South-Westerners John Grady Cole and Billy Parham and their excursions into Mexico in the 1940s and the 1950s. The chronicling of these excursions abound in passages that merge humans

and animals into harmonious communion, such as in *All the Pretty Horses*, where, at one point, one of the protagonists is “breathing in rhythm with [his] horse as if some part of the horse were within him breathing and then he descended into some deeper collusion for which he had not even a name” (269). At another point, the novel conflates human, animal, and the rest of the world into a unified totality that trembles “enormous and alive” and through which riders pass “in a muted fury” but still leave everything unscathed: “dust, sunlight, a singing bird” (122). The text even closes on this note, “horse and rider” passing “in tandem like the shadow of a single being” (306). Yet, it would be a mistake not to recognize how *All the Pretty Horses* establishes this world-view only to simultaneously undermine it. For one thing, as much as the relationship between human and horse is lyricized, John Grady is explicitly shown to colonize the minds of the horses while breaking them, his voice “running in their brains like the voice of some god come to inhabit them” (107). This characterization of humanity as an intrusive agent is further emphasized in *The Crossing*, where agriculture causes wolves to “brutalize[...] cattle in a way they [do] not the wild game. As if cows evoke[...] in them some anger. As if they [are] offended by some violation of an old order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols” (331). In these passages, then, and in others like them, humanity appears uniquely capable of putting the world out of joint. It is also clear that humans are both epistemologically and phenomenologically cut off from this world. In *All the Pretty Horses*, the narrator likens a horse’s breath to “news from another world” (106), and in *The Crossing*, a wolf’s eyes glow “like gatelamps to” a “world burning on the shore of an unknowable void” (381).

Both in *The Crossing* and in the 1973 *Child of God*, moreover, authorial interjections implicitly discuss phenomena such as domestication, ownership, and commerce as detriments to any kind of harmonious coexistence between human and world: “At one time in the world there were woods that no one owned and these were like them,” the narrator in *Child of God* states pensively, and in *The Crossing*, it is described how most of the forest is “cut to feed the boilers of the stampmills at the mines” (*CoG* 119, *TC* 331). Indeed, already in *The Orchard Keeper*, human greed and rapaciousness are highlighted as cardinal depravities. As Barbara Brickman points out, the reader of this novel learns from one of the protagonists, Marion Sylder, that constable Jefferson Gifford “sells his own neighbors out for money and it’s few lie that deep in the pit, that far beyond the pale” (*TOK* 227, Brickman 64). This is a sentiment that then

recurs throughout McCarthy's oeuvre, not least in the 2005 *No Country for Old Men*, where "Mammon" is repeatedly rendered a bad influence, "a false god" that "might be getting ready to take up the spare bedroom" (182, 299). Or as Sheriff Bell puts it at the close of the novel: "There is fortunes bein accumulated out there that they dont nobody even know about. What do we think is goin to come of that money? Money can buy whole countries. It done has" (303). Commercial activities in general, then, and lust for money in particular, seem here to be the prime movers of all things bad.³

Sociality

The dialectic discussed in this chapter oscillates between a symbolist merging of subjects and objects, on the one hand, and narratorial statements about what might be provisionally summed up as the destructive progress of modernity, on the other. As advertised, I will demonstrate how this dialectic is related also to a nostalgic portrayal of sociality. Ty Hawkins sets the stage for such a discussion when he problematizes what he calls McCarthy's "antipathy toward modernity" in general (438). Though this antipathy permeates most of the novels, Hawkins argues, the author "refuses to represent a form of community that would transcend the individual" and thereby pose an alternative to the threat of modernization (438–39). Introducing this claim, Hawkins quotes an interview from 1992 where McCarthy opines that the notion "that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea," as those "who are afflicted with this notion are the first to give up their souls, their freedom" (qtd. in Hawkins 437). With this interview as his starting point, Hawkins reads McCarthy's novels as "sites of preservation," sites where any kind of "assimilatory vision" is anathema (439), due to an author unwilling "to extend private acts of resistance into a shared, public space" (441).

As compelling as this argument may appear, however, Hawkins is evidently wrong. To begin with, *The Orchard Keeper* abounds, as Brickman notes, in examples of "hospitality and neighborly fellowship" (64)—and this is something that recurs with undiminished frequency in many of the subsequent novels: the 1968 *Outer Dark*, for instance, is partly populated by characters who insist stubbornly on treating strangers to supper, and who "[w]ouldn't turn Satan away for a drink" (119, 122). To "live meaningfully in the world," as McCarthy critic Nicholas Monk puts it, these characters seem to realize that they "must become part of that

world,” because “to defy community is to embrace a potentially catastrophic separation” (138). Such sentiments reach their climax in the border trilogy when John Grady travels deep into Mexico by a series of hitchhikes lined with “smiles” and “good will” with the “power to protect and to confer honor and to strengthen resolve and . . . the power to heal men and to bring them to safety long after all other resources [are] exhausted” (*AtPH* 221). Of course, Hawkins would probably object, and rightly so, that the kind of sociality referenced here is spontaneous rather than organized. However, this eventually changes: In *The Crossing*, a novel conveniently missing from Hawkins’s article, McCarthy’s collectivism takes on a new form. Consider the following passage:

They ate with a family named Mufioz. They must have looked hard used by the road for the woman kept urging food upon them and the man made little lifting motions with his outheld hands that they take more . . . A dog began to howl. Only after it seemed there would be nothing more forthcoming did the ejiditarios commence to talk again. A little later a bell tolled from somewhere off in the compound and in the long afterclang they began to rise and call out to one another. The woman had carried her corral and her pots to the house and she now stood in the lamplit doorway with a small child on one arm. She saw Billy still sitting on the ground and she motioned him up. *Vamonos*, she called. He looked up at her. He said that he had no money but she only stared at him as if she did not understand. Then she said that everyone was going [to the traveling show] and that those who had money would pay for those who did not. She said that everyone must go. There could be no thought of people being left behind. Who would permit such a thing? (528)

Here, the seemingly unconditional hospitality of the Mufioz family is explicitly linked to the ejido system, a land reform initiated after the 1910 Mexican Revolution as a response to the problem of “long-standing land-tenure inequality” (Perramond 356). Thanks to this reform, “so-called agrarian nuclei” of landless farmers were given usufruct rights to land allotted to them by the government (357). Always a controversial topic in Mexican politics, the ejido system was finally revised in 1992, one year prior to the publication of the novel quoted above (Yetman 212). In keeping with The North American Free Trade Agreement, ejidatarios now

became allowed to sell off communal land to “private interests” (Perramond 359).

In *The Crossing*, the antithesis to the egalitarian ejidatario is arguably William Randolph Hearst, the renowned American newspaper magnate who entertained a long-term and mutually beneficial relationship with pre-revolution era dictator Porfirio Díaz and who fought to the very end to retain his 1,625,000-acre ranch Babicora, mentioned several times in McCarthy’s novel (Procter 36, Head 445, *TC* 699). Some estimates suggest that the Hearsts owned no less than 7.5 million Mexican acres, parts of which were later expropriated and restructured into ejidos (Brechtin 220, H.L. Mitchell 158). In other words, the novelistic opposition between the ejidos and “all the wealth and power of Mr Hearst” is a very pedagogical one, amplified, of course, by Orson Welles’s emblemization in *Citizen Kane* of Hearst as *the* tragic antihero of American capitalism (*TC* 699).

The passage quoted above is obviously highly pedagogical too: the outstretched hands of the man, the ejidatarios’ alert recognition of desperate need, and the woman’s inability to even ponder leaving a fellow human behind—all of this amounts not to an in-depth textualization of the complexities of the ejido life, but to a nostalgic elevation of this life as an ideal sociality. The woman leaves no one behind. “Who would permit such a thing?,” she asks (528). The obvious answer, of course, is people such as Hearst and his underlings, like Quijada, from the Yaqui tribe, who works for the Babicora because “they pay” him (*TC* 699). Again, money has bought a whole country, as Sheriff Bell in *No Country for Old Men* likes to think of it.

Toward the end of *Cities of the Plain*, the last part of *The Border Trilogy*, McCarthy evokes again the idea of this kind of limitless sociality, this time extending it—androcentrically—even across the boundary of life and death:

Every man's death is a standing in for every other. And since death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love that man who stands for us. We are not waiting for his history to be written. He passed here long ago. That man who is all men and who stands in the dock for us until our own time come and we must stand for him. Do you love him, that man? Will you honor the path he has taken? Will you listen to his tale? (1034–35)

Differently put, the only viable remedy for all the violence and greed evoked in McCarthy's novels seems to be precisely this: the love of one's neighbor, distant and near. *No Country for Old Men* ends on a similar note, with the narrator recounting a memory of an old "water trough . . . hewed out of solid rock" (308):

And I got to thinkin about the man that done that. That country [Mexico, presumably] had not had a time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of. I've read a little of the history of it since and I aint sure it ever had one. But this man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years. Why was that? What was it that he had faith in? (308)

". . . I have to say that the only thing I can think is that there was some sort of promise in his heart," the narrator continues, until concluding finally that "I dont have no intentions of carvin a stone water trough. But I would like to be able to make that kind of promise. I think that's what I would like most of all" (308). Much like in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," where the protagonist learns that, formerly, a person involved in the construction of a grand religious monument often died before the work was completed, what is celebrated here is a project that outlives any individual's life span and that therefore must be considered altruistic rather than self-absorbed.

Still, Matthew L. Potts is right to argue that the carving of "a stone water trough" (308) may just as well be understood as the display of a hubristic and "narcissistic triumph of will" (Potts 77), and he is also right to suggest that such an understanding would agree well with sentiments expressed elsewhere in McCarthy's oeuvre: such as those of Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, who conceives of stonework as an attempt "to alter the structure of the universe" (77). On this note, moreover, it is important to recognize that unconditional love tends to vouch in McCarthy not only for altruism, but also for what seems to be an unavoidable anthropocentrism, grounded in the notion that the only essence epistemologically or even phenomenologically available to humans is the essence of selfless, interpersonal love. This notion emerges quite clearly on the very last page of *Cities of the Plain* when the narrative zooms in tenderly on the aging Billy Parham and shows how the mother of a family who has invited Billy to their home "patted his hand. Gnarled, ropescarred, speckled from the

sun and the years of it. The rosy veins that bound them to his heart. There was map *enough* for men to read. There God's plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world" (1037; my emphasis). Here, then, as a self-sufficient world emanates from "men," the novel suggests finally that human concern does not necessarily have to stretch beyond the species boundary.

Conclusion

McCarthy's dialectic of human insignificance and human destructivity could be summarized as follows: on the one hand, there is the formal interfusion of subject and object, the writing of a world that turns "with perfect cohesion in all its parts," and in accordance with this, the novels promote a harmonious sociality built on an integrative, unconditional love (*TC* 595). On the other hand, this love is informed by an anthropocentrism linked in the novels to epistemological and phenomenological isolation and a "*massive rapacity*" that seems uniquely capable of putting the planet as a whole at risk (*Suttree* 5). In other words, whereas the first part of the dialectic is centripetal and favors different kinds of togetherness, the other conceives a world where things fall apart.

One way of reading these inconsistencies is to draw on the nameless character in *Cities of the Plain* who suggests that "[o]ur waking life's desire to shape the world to our convenience invites all manner of paradox and difficulty" (1029). From a Machereyian perspective, this desire seems steadily at work also in literary production. Literary texts appear heteronomous to their sociohistorical contexts in the sense that they tend to textualize as well as contribute to many of the cultural complexities at work at a given place at a given time; or as another of McCarthy's characters puts it: "One could even say that what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated" (*TC* 720). Between 1965 and 2006, the period when McCarthy writes his ten novels, one of the central cultural complexities in the Western world is arguably predicated on the collective "desire" to both physically and narratively "shape the world to our convenience." Physically, this shaping is conducive to an economic growth vouching for the accumulation of unevenly distributed wealth and severe environmental degradation, whereas narratively, it is marked by a reluctance to acknowledge let alone take responsibility for these problems (hence, it is arguably no coincidence that the reader never learns what causes the cataclysm in *The Road*, for instance). What emerges here is a

human being agential enough to accumulate wealth but insignificant enough to cause any serious harm. Unsurprisingly, this late capitalist view of humanity does indeed invite “all manner of paradox,” and, thus, it provides a helpful contextual frame for an understanding of McCarthy’s treatment of human-world relationships.

Against this background, one can note with one of McCarthy’s many monologists that “[t]he storyteller’s task is not so simple” (*TC* 465): the more effort spent on a difficult question, “the more knotted” it becomes (466).⁴ Surely, however, “more knotted” may equal not only more complex but also more manifest. At least, this is the case in McCarthy, where, as I mention above, the theme of human destructivity becomes increasingly explicit in the later novels. In *All the Pretty Horses*, for instance, the Dueña Alfonsa, “a sphinx-like voice at the novel’s philosophical center,” as Gail Morrison calls her, shares with John Grady both her father’s and her own views on human agency (qtd. in Mundik, *A Bloody* 112). Her father, she explains, “claimed that the responsibility for a decision could never be abandoned to a blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences” (*AtPH* 233). This notion, the Dueña reports, her father exemplified with a brief story “of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed, cara y cruz” (233). The Dueña, however, is not impressed with this reasoning: “My father,” she says, “must have seen in this parable the accessibility of the origins of things, but I see nothing of the kind. For me the world has always been more of a puppet show” (233). For the Dueña, what is at stake here is whether the shapes people discern in their lives agree with some pre-modeled structure, or whether these lives consist of “random events” that “are only called a pattern after the fact” (233). If this pattern is set, which the Dueña suspects, this would mean that humanity is “nothing,” that it lacks significance (233). Concluding her 10-page monologue on this issue, the Dueña tells John Grady finally that she sometimes thinks “we are all like that myopic coiner at his press, taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work, determined that not even chaos be outside of our own making” (243). From this perspective, then, humanity appears hubristically incapable of accepting its own insignificance.

13 years later, however, *No Country for Old Men* illustrates the risks that might potentially accompany such a conclusion. Here too, a coin toss is central to the discussion, and here too, the issue at stake is whether

human beings are in control of their own destinies. In the dialogue below, the two interlocutors involved are Chigurh, an unscrupulous but strictly principled contract killer, and Carla Jean Moss, a woman whose husband, Llewelyn, has previously fallen prey to Chigurh.⁵ Chigurh has now made it clear that he intends to execute also Carla Jean, as this is something he threatened Llewelyn with earlier. Carla Jean pleads for her life, and Chigurh soon offers to settle the matter by coin a toss. Carla Jean chooses head, and Chigurh tosses tails:

She looked away. You make it like it was the coin. But you're the one.

It could have gone either way.

The coin didnt have no say. It was just you.

Perhaps. But look at it my way. I got here the same way the coin did. (258)

Like some caricaturized Actor-Network theorist, Chigurh not only acknowledges the influence of non-human agents on social networks, but also willingly lets himself be overridden by them.⁶ Earlier in the novel, on the occasion of another coin toss, he expounds on his stance: “Anything can be an instrument,” he says:

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. (57)

Bruno Latour has argued that “it is possible to delegate action to nonhumans,” to endow artifacts with intentions (207), and this is precisely the kind of logic Chigurh leverages to his advantage when he tosses his coin. Once embedded in the tails end, the intention to kill Carla Jean is out of his hands. And thus, the action seems legitimized, even though Chigurh has actively chosen to think about agency in a manner beneficial to his cause. Ultimately, these scenes acknowledge the human agency invested in the coin (the embodiment of Mammon), and it shows clearly the possible ethical consequences of *not* making this acknowledgement.⁷ Read in conjunction, the Dueña of *All the Pretty Horses* and Chigurh of *No*

Country for Old Men leave the human agent at a rather awkward impasse, where s/he is both self-important and self-delusively blameless.

Not unimportantly, all of McCarthy's novels take place on or close to the open wound "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds," as Gloria Anzaldúa puts it (3)—a fact overtly dealt with especially in the later novels. Like when Billy Parham and Mr. Sanders in *The Crossing* discuss borderland scalp-hunting as Sanders stubs out his cigarettes in a Chicago World's Fair ashtray labeled "1833 1933... A Century of Progress" (658). Or when a drunk Mexican in the same novel refuses to drink Billy's whisky because it carries "the seal of an oppressive government" (674). Or when Sheriff Bell in *No Country for Old Men* links Latin-American drug production to northern "dopers" who "are well dressed and holdin down goodpayin jobs..." (304). Although it would be simplistic to conclude that these relations and tensions between North and South mechanically trigger the literary tensions explicated in this chapter, it would be a mistake to ignore their significance in McCarthy as well as in late capitalist ideology at large. I make this assertion because I agree with Pierre Macherey that, partly thanks to their *not* adhering to rules of composition similar to those that govern non-literary forms of writing, forms that strive hard to cohere and make non-fictive 'sense,' literary texts are often particularly apt forums for diverse and ambivalent perceptions of capitalist ideology and the contradictions it seeks to elide (cf. Macherey 50–51). As the previously quoted but still anonymous monologist in *Cities of the Plain* suggests about dreams: there, "we stand in this great democracy of the possible and there we are right pilgrims indeed" (1029). With Macherey, then, I suggest that language too may be productively thought of as such a "democracy of the possible," and that, in endowing this democracy with a determinate form, literary production has the potential to illuminate the contradictory relationship between late capitalist ideology and the materiality of history, between the view of humanity as industrious yet ecologically benign and the indisputable fact of the Anthropocene, between the notion of neoliberal progress and the bleak reality of global inequity (Macherey 64, 72).⁸

In an episode of Netflix's *Narcos*, one of the protagonists beats up what seems to be an affluent Upper East Side cocaine fiend and explains simultaneously that every fix is worth six Colombian murders. Similarly, McCarthy's novels often textualize or hint at a violence happening "elsewhere": the westward expansionist scalp-hunting in *Blood Meridian*, the drug-related murders in *No Country for Old Men*, and Mr. Hearst's

involvement in Mexican domestic affairs in *The Crossing*—all real-life instances of violence inseparable from the politics of the North-South divide, but only visible depending on context and perspective (that is, not clearly on the surface of things for all interpreters of Western culture). Again, though, what I argue is not so much that the novels' obsession with human destructivity is determined by this violence, but that it makes sense to think about these two issues alongside one another, in- as well as outside of the texts. To recapitulate, the dialectic I have described in this chapter merges humans with a seamless ecological whole and celebrates an unconditional sociality that stretches even beyond death. The same dialectic, however, repeatedly renders human destructivity an autonomous exception from, and thus a contradiction of, this very idea of Life as unity. Right in between these two representations of humanity in general and the Western, white male in particular, there is a third story, explicitly concerned with what it means to be a global Northerner of relative socioeconomic privilege in an age when the savoring of such privilege depends on the quietist disregard of its not so savory causes, be they teenage drug smuggling in Chihuahua, slavery-like hardware assembly in Shenzhen, or coltan mining in the Congo: phenomena conveniently attributed to market autonomy rather than to human autonomy. This third story, however, McCarthy never tells, but it is, in his novels, as Macherey would put it, the “absence around which a real complexity is knit” (Macherey 113).

¹ Merriam-Webster defines polysyndeton as the “repetition of conjunctions in close succession (as in *we have ships and men and money*)” (m-w.com). This is common also in the King James Bible, as in the following sentence, where it functions much like in McCarthy: “And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth . . .” (*King James Bible*, Genesis 7:23).

² Commenting on an incident in the 1998 *Cities of the Plain* where the protagonist and his fellow travelers accidentally kill an owl with their truck, Dianne C. Luce touches on the subject of human destructivity and writes that “the dead owl is an image of the natural world crucified at the hands of man, the truck and the fence manifestations of the imposition of his mechanized world on the world of nature” (“The Vanishing” 162). Further, Nicholas Monk apparently disagrees with me when he writes about *Suttree* that whatever “destruction we visit upon the earth, a vast expanse of time will facilitate the regeneration of the planet in one form or another” (154). Differently put: once “the forces of natural disaster and geological time have softened and worn away all evidence of the imbricated sediments of modernity and the natural, no synthesis remains” (67); the “natural and the man-made” may “reside in immediate proximity to one another as part of the same purview, but there is no synthesis” (67). I urge the reader to note, though, the city that “no rain could make clean again” (which means that

modernity seems to prevail) and the “rigid homologues” (that are suggestive of synthesis)—two examples that, read in conjunction, make for a contradiction (*Suttree* 368).

³ What is more, as Monk notes while commenting on the border trilogy: since the “artifacts of the material world descend, without fail, to nothingness,” there is clearly “no point . . . in ownership” (144).

⁴ The oracular-like testimonies given by some of McCarthy’s characters appear significant not least by virtue of the vast amount of space they are allotted in the novels. This does not mean, of course, that they should invariably be construed as completely concordant with the import of the novel as a whole—but their elaborate character encourages the reader to stop and think about the world-views they communicate. Sometimes, the people who utter these testimonies are characters with which the reader becomes closely acquainted; sometimes, they are nameless passers-by. In the first case, the novels occasionally mark out a certain perspective as flawed *or* particularly insightful; in the second case, the reader usually has few options other than to read the statement in question as a piece of philosophy at least provisionally endorsed by the novel. Phillip A. Snyder and Delys W. Snyder add some precision to this observation by arguing that when McCarthy’s “descriptions turn philosophical, poetical, or lyrical, the syntax changes and becomes more complex” (34). This “marked style,” they propose, “empowers the narrator or speaker with a certain hegemonic authority over the discourse, although counter-discourse and the transitory nature of language itself tend to undercut that power as well, underscoring the necessity of close reading to unpack the subtleties of these exchanges” (35).

⁵ Interestingly, as if to disapprove of the distinction between humans and animals, Chigurh kills his victims with a slaughterhouse “stungun” (5). In a comment that reinforces this distinction, Ellis writes that, “[b]y killing people with” such a gun, “Chigurh is turning them into livestock, denying their humanity” (*No Place* 228).

⁶ Mark Seltzer also registers Chigurh’s implicit affinities with ANT and describes him as follows: “the specter of capital, incarnated in ‘some kind of ghost,’ the spectral figure with a coin, an actor-network system, a capsule of compressed air—the ascetic professional who, as he puts it, ‘live[s] a simple life’” (8).

⁷ Quoting the same passage, Raymond Malewitz draws on Bill Brown’s thing theory and argues that Chigurh *misuses* the coin and thereby “liberates” it “from its status as an object of mass production and circulation” (“Anything” 735). Thus, Malewitz rightly notes, Chigurh shows that he has “little trouble ‘secondsay[ing] the world’ and other agents “when it suits his purposes” (738). Other critics who have made similar comments include Sean Braune, who writes that “Both Chigurh and” *Blood Meridian*’s the “judge are devout fundamentalists of what” Braune calls “a chance-based religion, a perspective that supports the Darwinian fitness of the psychopath and the ability of chaos and chance to balance natural disequilibria” (5). Kenneth Lincoln, similarly, suggests that “Chigurh’s license to kill is based on an American brand of predeterminist nihilism rooted in Puritan advent” (151). “If all’s fated,” Lincoln concludes, “nothing’s consequential and anything goes” (151).

⁸ As Slavoj Žižek notes, the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene is that paradoxical era when “humanity became aware of its self-limitation as a species precisely when it became so strong that it influenced the balance of all life on earth. It was able to dream of being a Subject only until its influence on nature (earth) was no longer marginal, i.e., only against the background of a stable nature.”

3. “Dreams of the race that was”: Loss and Language in *The Orchard Keeper*

What dreams, old man?

We dream to dream of the wellsprings, green coves where in the flowering rings of water our young faces trail bright with ferns, visionary dreams of the race that was. (Wittliff 91/01/02)¹

The paragraph above is an excerpt from a passage that never made it into the final version of *The Orchard Keeper*. It is easy to see why: the combination of direct address and unrestrained sentimentalism makes for a glaring stylistic deviation from the rest of the novel.² Nevertheless, in all its crudeness, it is very much thematically in keeping with the closing of the published text, where on “the lips of the strange race that now dwells” in the novel’s Southern Appalachia, the names of those who used to inhabit this region are “myth, legend, dust” (260).³ What is more, it also hints at the novel’s symbolist fixation with the loss of some primeval unity in which humans were ontologically inseparable from those “wellsprings,” “green coves,” and “flowering rings of water” conjured in the discarded excerpt. It is the contention of this chapter that *The Orchard Keeper* seeks to redeem this loss through a “symbolic conception of metaphorical language,” to speak with Paul de Man (*Blindness* 208), i.e., through imagining the world, once again rid of distinct categories, as a place where an indefinite number of agencies mingle seamlessly and without guilt: a place where “birdcalls” fall “like water on stone” (211), where the silence “seems to be of itself listening” (251), and where “horsetails of mist” cling “under the wind to lace and curl wistfully” (199).

This symbolist use of metaphor, however, and its dissolution of ontological categories, finds its contrast in the novel’s treatment of another loss of origins, lodged at the heart of the plot: that of protagonist John Wesley’s morally derelict father, Kenneth Rattner. Killed early on in the narrative, Rattner is then in some manner replaced by two of the novel’s central characters: Marion Sylder, the man’s killer, and Uncle Ather, the keeper of his grave, both of whom are morally superior to Rattner and unaware of all these connections.⁴ In this case, metaphor is employed

allegorically, as what appears to be the text's self-conscious decision to let one thing stand in for another. In both cases, the novel attempts to mend that which has been "split asunder," to adopt a phrase from Peter Brooks (106); yet, whereas the novel's symbolic language supposedly restores "the lost unity" between human and world (de Man, "The Double" 7), the novel's plot instead *replaces* the relationship between father and son with relationships of another kind. In the first case, in other words, there is a symbolist merging of disparate entities, and in the second, there is an allegorical substitution of one entity for another.

If read in conjunction with a number of unpublished drafts written later in McCarthy's career, this conflict between symbolism and allegory seems to prefigure how the author will eventually concede that, much like John Wesley's metaphorical fathers stand in for the recognition of his own degenerate origins, the symbolist evocation of natural harmony places at one remove the realization that Western civilization poses a serious threat to the environment. Differently put, this means that McCarthy's ecocentrism is in fact only allegory in symbolic disguise—something the author himself will later acknowledge in some of his unpublished notes.

Plot

As previously mentioned, McCarthy's debut novel opens with a short, italicized prologue describing how, like some intrusive embodiment of the very modernity that will haunt large portions of the text, an iron fence has "*grewed all through*" a tree (3).⁵ This theme continues when, a few pages later, the narrative proper begins in 1934 with the introduction of a yet unnamed man, walking down a hot and dusty road lined with "newsprint and candypapers" and then entering a grocery store selling "bread and cakes, quietly lethal in their flyspecked cellophane" (7–8). This is also the inauguration of the novel's parricide theme, it turns out, since readers will eventually learn both that the man they have just encountered is Kenneth Rattner, the delinquent father of the novel's chief protagonist, and that this same Rattner is about to hitchhike down to Atlanta and there catch a ride with Marion Sylder, the man who will soon take his life.

Vereen Bell has argued that *The Orchard Keeper's* "shifts from one point of view to another" are "unpredictable" (*Achievement* 11) and Steven Frye has similarly pointed out that "McCarthy resists the temptation to unify" through "any formal devices" the separate yet highly related stories that run through the novel (22). It is unclear, of course, whether this

narrative complexity is due solely to some conscious strategy on McCarthy's part, or whether it is also a manifestation of a young author's inexperience at estimating readability. At any rate, McCarthy himself was obviously happy with the novel's overall structure: prior to publication, he told his editor that he felt the text had "a peculiar kind of unity" (Wittliff 91/01/01). One may safely assume, though, as does Frye, that most readers find it difficult upon a first or even second reading to distinguish one character from another. This difficulty, hence, warrants meticulous attention to plot structure in a critical text such as this one.⁶

The Orchard Keeper's unclear focalization is evident not least in the early stages of the novel, where the narrative repeatedly cross-cuts between Rattner and Sylder until the two ultimately meet in a night club parking lot outside of Atlanta (34). The path that leads Sylder to Rattner is paved with hard luck. Due to the repeal of the Volstead act in December of 1933, he has temporarily given up his bootlegging career in favor of a considerably less glamorous job at a fertilizer plant outside of Knoxville (29).⁷ One day at work, he gets into a fight, gets fired, gets drunk, and takes off down route 129 to Atlanta. Fatigued by the long drive but then temporarily revived by five shots of whiskey, Sylder finds his car occupied by a stranger, later identified as Rattner, whereupon the two of them head back to Knoxville. Along the drive, Sylder watches the freeloader's face "cast in orange and black above the spurt of flame like the downlidded face of some copper ikon, a mask, not ambiguous or inscrutable, but merely discountenanced of meaning, expression" (37). It seems to be implied here that the father whose death will play such an important role in the narrative was always already meaningless: a mere ikon, a hollow mask, or a projection surface, rather than a source of potential redemption. One could take this passage to suggest that, when language is used to evoke a loss of origins, for instance, it positions itself in-between the reader and the object of representation in a manner that renders this object entirely illegible, defaced, or "discountenanced of meaning" (37). Four pages later, Rattner attacks Sylder, who is thus forced to kill his assailant in self-defence (41).

Interspersed with this chain of events—and with reports of Sylder's and Rattner's respective backgrounds—are lyric glimpses of a Tennessean landscape where the Appalachian "ridges and spines . . . contort the outgoing roads *to their liking*" and where "the floor of the forest . . . has about it a primordial quality, some steamy carboniferous swamp where ancient saurians lurk in feigned sleep" (10–11; my emphasis). Obviously, these are

meditations on geologic time as well as on the agency of non-humans, and as such, they clearly serve as a foil to the implicit lamentations of modernity that appear not least in Rattner's and Sylder's narrative strands. This juxtaposition between the recent history of the southern US and a much deeper temporality is augmented further when the reader is introduced to the aged and reclusive Arthur Ownby, also known as Uncle Ather, studying from his cabin porch "the movements of stars," the meteors cannonading "the towering hump of Red Mountain," and the rain "falling now from a faultless sky" (21–22).⁸ Although Sylder and Ather never meet, their lives begin to intertwine as soon as the former gets back to Tennessee, drives past the old man's cabin, and heads for an abandoned insecticide pit where he decides to dump Rattner's body (48). When Sylder leaves the pit, a first connection is made between himself and Ather, the latter watching "the shape of the retreating" carlights "*cut[...]* among the trees"—a metaphor of violence well in keeping with the novel's understanding of modernity as intrusion (48; my emphasis). It is not until somewhat later, however, that Ather discovers the body, its "*green face leering and coming up through the lucent rotting water with eyeless sockets and green fleshless grin,*" its dark hair already merging with the water, "*ebbing like seaweed*" (58).⁹ Guided, perhaps, by his "culturally ingrained predisposition" to keep the government out of "personal matter[s]," as Dianne Luce puts it (*Reading* 44), Ather takes on the responsibility of guarding his find, each year cutting "*a small cedar tree with which to put it from sight*" (McCarthy 58). By this stage of the novel, then, its main currents start coming together: the loss of the father, the introduction of his substitutes, and, thanks to Ather, the nascent link between this drama and the possibility that resilient environments and non-human temporalities may serve as distractions from the detriments of modernity.

A few pages later, Rattner's son, John Wesley, enters the equation. Approximately seven years have now passed since his father left the neighbourhood, seemingly for no reason, but really because he had stolen money from a number of locals (24–28). In the Rattner home, however, the abode of wife and son, he is a revered war hero, peering out from "his scrolled and gilded frame" as "*soldier, father, ghost*" (66; my emphasis). For the boy, who had been seven years old when Rattner left town and who is no longer sure whether he actually remembers his father or merely his mother's "telling about him," the man in the frame is indeed more of a ghost than anything else (67).¹⁰ This ghost, however, will prove most consequential in the narrative as a whole, not only in that his absent presence

will eventually guide the boy to his new mentors, Sylder and Ather, but also in that he will contribute considerably to the novel's dialectical tensions by ultimately hinting at the idea that there are never ever any innocent or meaningful origins capable of saving us, even though symbolic language may easily fabricate such an illusion. Brad Bannon writes that "the plot structure of *The Orchard Keeper* begins to question the cost of attempting to gain comprehensive knowledge of our origins and endpoints" ("Fatal Loss" 246). As I see it, though, the real danger would not be this attempt, but the illusory and anodyne *assumption* that either our origins or our endpoints carry some kind of blessing. Obviously, the recognition of this illusion stands in stark contrast to the novel's tendency to metaphorically merge human and environment in a symbolist manner evoking some primal and innocent condition, the idea of which is presented as a possible redeemer of the ills brought about by modernity. Whereas this symbolism offers hope, the gradual and allegorically self-conscious disclosure of the fact that the boy's father was no war hero, but a man "wanted in three states," does not (249).

Not even Wesley's yearning for parental guidance, however, is consistently portrayed as stillborn. There are, as Brooks would put it, a number of narrative dilations that dwell on this very theme: spaces "of retard, postponement, error, and partial revelation" where "the problems posed to and by initiatory desire are worked out and worked through" (Brooks 92). This is most obvious in Wesley's relationship with Sylder, and it emerges already upon the first time the two of them meet, when, having resumed his illegally tax-evasive whiskey dealing, Sylder and his car crash into the creek where Wesley has presumably gone to check his wildlife traps (McCarthy, *TOK* 105). Here, as the boy is helping Sylder out of the wrecked car, the latter's hand rests on his "shoulder in an attitude of fatherly counsel" (108).¹¹ This parental intimacy continues when the boy goes back into the creek to get the keys from the car and Sylder takes his rescuer's "hand and turn[s] it over" and asks: "What'd you do here?" (109). What is more, somewhat later, Sylder and his wife invite him to their house and give him dry clothes and breakfast—and a puppy (116–18, 120): "His daddy's a blooded bluetick" and his mother is a "walker," Sylder explains—makes "as good a treedog as they is goin. You like that'n?" (120). The significance of this generous and caring act is emphasized some twenty pages later when Wesley repeats, verbatim, Sylder's description of the dog to his friends and goes on to tell them that he has "been keepin him with a feller over on Henderson Valley road raises dogs" (144). "He's

the one give him to me,” he says (144). Presently, moreover, an italicized passage describes how the boy’s mother does not allow him to keep the dog, and how, in a slightly misogynist manner, Sylder redeems the situation to bond with his new protégé: “*She must be a pistol, Sylder said when he returned with it embarrassed, explaining why he couldn’t keep it. Don’t make no difference though. He’s stit youn; you jest keep him here is all and come get him any time you’ve a mind to*” (144). The hospitality here proffered by Sylder as fatherly metaphor, then, is far more reparative for the bereft boy than the atmosphere of his own home, where his god-fearing mother—“fierce and already aging face downthrust into his, sweet-sour smell”—makes her son cry by prompting him to avenge his father’s death when he is “old enough” (72).¹²

John Wesley’s attachment to Sylder is further illustrated by his willingness to not only appear mature and responsible in his mentor’s eyes, but to actually risk his own wellbeing in his service (132–35). Pertinent examples appear when the boy visits Sylder in prison and pays back the two dollars he has “loant” in order to buy traps (224); a gesture Sylder at first refuses—“Naw...”—but then accepts as soon as he recognizes the significance it holds for the boy, standing before him with two hard-earned and “dirty” dollar bills (224). This scene changes character, however, when it dawns on Sylder that John Wesley intends to avenge his mentor’s prison sentence by getting revenge on the constable responsible for its implementation. This realization, then, forces Sylder to disown the boy, telling him that “I never done nothing on your account like you said. I don’t do nothing I don’t want to. You want to do me a favor jest stay away from Gifford. Stay away from me too. You ought not to of come here” (226–27). That these are not Sylder’s true sentiments is clear from last paragraph of this section, where he thinks to himself that “[t]hat’s not true what I said. It was a damned lie ever word” (227). Nonetheless, though, the outburst obviously breaks the boy’s heart, leaving him with “a wan smile, puzzled, like one who aspires to disbelief in the face of immutable fact,” and thus, it amounts to yet another loss on the boy’s part (227).

The Ecocentric Role Model

With a nickname close to ‘Father,’ Uncle Ather eventually emerges as the second and less clearly cut substitute for Kenneth Rattner. Admittedly, there is no overt intimacy here of the kind referenced above; rather, as Luce has shown, Ather serves more like an “ecocentric” role model

(*Reading* 60), relating to the boy and his friends stories of old with a determined authority, “benign look upon his face, composed in wisdom, old hierophant savoring a favorite truth,” the sun lowering behind him, “illuminating his white hair with a prophetic translucence” (McCarthy 157, 159). As McCarthy puts it in the first available draft of the novel, this “[o]ld man” is a “natural” “voice of the leaf” (Wittliff 91/01/02), and it is clearly he who conveys to Wesley “the transformative power” of the Appalachian wilderness (Frye 28). As Georg Guillemín rightly argues, Ather’s mission “is hardly the preservation of the pastoral middle ground,” but a “progressive immersion into wilderness,” guided by “a post-humanist impulse that draws on the old *et in Arcadia* motif but transcends it” (*Pastoral* 31, 35).

It is not primarily the anecdotes Ather tells, then, that instill in John Wesley “a more enlightened view of nature,” in Luce’s phrase (60), and thus a way “to deal with loss,” in Louis Palmer’s (“Full” 64), but rather his abodes and his antics in general. Whereas Sylder, for instance, moves through a disharmonious modernity where the “lights of the city” stand “fractured in the black river” like an “isinglass image” of “tangled *broken shapes*” (194; my emphasis), Ather has withdrawn to an idyllically simple outpost where he can hear the “faintly breathing quietude” of the “night woods” and where the rain falls “very soft and very steady” and thus summons “the earth to bridehood” (195).¹³ This is a place relatively secluded from the modernity for which as a young man he himself literally paved the way, “cuttin sleepers for the K S & E” (153), and for which there now seems to be no other remedy than McCarthy’s wistful and wishful musings on Ather’s supposedly heteronomous relationship to a world untouched by the cars, the “exhaust fumes,” and the “phantasmagoria of merchandise” that appear more frequently in the other narrative strands (85, 210).¹⁴ By firing gunshots at the epitome of this modernity—a government tank erected on a “barren spot” where “the trees had been plucked from the ground and not even a weed grew” (98)—Ather manifests his dissent against everything this tank stands for: on a general level, the relentless progress of the industrial age and society’s absurdly rationalized mapping of everything and everyone (in jail, a social worker tells Ather that “we would like to have a record of your case for our, our records, you see” [231]).¹⁵ On a more specific level, one may perhaps associate Ather’s hypermasculinist and hyperindividualist anti-statism with a very contemporary type of big government: the interventionism of FDR’s New Deal and government programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Tennessee Valley Authority—the latter of which was linked to the nuclear

Manhattan Project. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the state is represented primarily by the villainous constable Gifford and “county humane officer” Legwater (124), both of whom would seem to serve as foils to Ather’s valorized antipathy toward an increasingly meddlesome state. At any rate, knowing “*what they*”—that is, the government—“*was up to*” (242), the old man refuses to heed any part of their interpellation, albeit unsuccessfully so: in the end, he too is imprisoned and herded into his designated fold of the modern state—a lunacy home, where he momentarily begins to wither away, soon looking “older than the boy remembered him” (237). And so, both of John Wesley’s proxy fathers are out of the picture, the older one “plucked from the ground” much like the trees by the tank.

Even at the time of the arrest, however, Ather’s “blue and serene” eyes wander past the man who was sent out to bring him in and toward “the thin blue peaks rising into the distant sky with no crestline of shape or color to stop them, ascending forever,” in symbolist fashion, into realms where all is one (215). Like so many other passages in the novel, categories here merge into one another until there is no longer any discernible divide between the objects portrayed. A similar effect emerges when Ather walks through the woods and notes how a number of dogs “dipped into the cut and swarmed up the other side and out, across the fields, their brown and white shapes *losing in definition* in the confectionary landscape of mudclouds and snow until only their motion was discernible, *like part of the ground itself* rumoring upheaval” (146; my emphasis). This is an illustration, I argue, of the very seamless ecology into which the novel occasionally seeks to reinsert not only Ather but humanity at large.

Literature as Subversion

Yet another pertinent scene transpires when, as an unduly violent response to Ather’s assault on the tank, the authorities twice try to arrest him in his own house, the second time with not much short of military force—a narrative development pedagogically highlighting the government’s lack of acceptance of alternative ways of being in the world (198). After defending himself quite successfully with gun power and thus in a manner befitting some later NRA ideal (born out of the association’s 1977 radicalization), and after assuming correctly that his aggressors are bound to return a third time, Ather quickly packs a few pieces of “worthless paraphernalia” on a sledge and heads toward the “Harrykin,” a place even

further into the woods and quite likely the old man's last imaginable retreat from a world that is not for him (203). David Holloway comments on the scene:

The 'days of seclusion and peace' (*Orchard Keeper* 195), experienced by Arthur Ownby as he journeys toward the Harrykin, arise 'in a broad glade grown thick with rushes, a small stream looping placidly over shallow sands stippled with dace shadows' where 'six-pointed scars of skating waterspiders' drift, where 'dace skittered into the channel and a watersnake uncurled from a rock at the far bank and glided down the slight current, no more demonstrative of effort or motion than a flute note' (195). (Holloway, *The Late* 150)

Holloway discusses this passage in conjunction with a scene in *Suttree* where, on a Sunday, significantly enough (since landscape seems in McCarthy as opiate as religion), the protagonist takes a day off and rows and drifts "downriver in the warm midmorning" and witnesses "small cultivated orchards like scenes of plenitude from picturebooks" (*Suttree* 142). As Holloway notes, *Suttree* momentarily deconstructs this "authentic space of nature" when, in the same sentence, it lets "the septic river" bring "poison back into the 'garden'" in a manner discrediting "the categories of the 'original,' the 'authentic' or the 'foundational'" (151). Returning to the scene from *The Orchard Keeper*, where such deconstructive moves are not as conspicuous, Holloway argues that although a literary text can never achieve anything but a simulation of an unmediated environment, *McCarthy's* simulation "retains nonetheless a real dialectical charge" in that it manages to echo "an 'other' realm" of "some restored plenitude" (150). This echo, Holloway explains, emerges due to the text's rediscovery of the very materiality of language and the potential of this materiality to amass in such a manner that it seems to match the objective world in its form rather than in its content (154–55).

Holloway concedes that ecocentric styles such as McCarthy's may well frustrate political struggles by offering up 'nature' as a realm where the logic of that which is opposed is absent (157). This kind of allegedly subversive aesthetic, then, might thus function not only as critique, but also as "a palliative that deflects the need for political engagement" in a manner vouching for ideological containment (157). Holloway argues, though, that by attempting to think utopia, McCarthy's aesthetic reaches "the moment at which containment turns upon itself," at which the inherent contradictions of this containment come "to infect the containing

strategies, converting them dialectically into another, more progressive kind of ideological content” (158). For Holloway, then, McCarthy’s merging of human and environment functions ultimately as this kind of “utopian ideology” (159).

One could take issue here with the tendency in Holloway and others to impose on McCarthy or his texts a progressive politics that clearly belongs to the critics themselves. To be fair, Holloway clearly does not think of McCarthy’s supposedly radical aesthetic as the product of the ‘Author’ as unified subject, but as the product of *the artwork as mediation*. In this sense, Holloway’s book appears symptomatic of the kind of belief in the aesthetic Isobel Armstrong promotes when she writes that if “we refuse to seal the artwork off into an aesthetic terrain, and regard the artwork, not the ‘I’ who supposedly made it, as a form of mediation, a transitive, interactive form, new possibilities emerge” (59). In Holloway’s case, this view of literature is explained by the fact that he is a Jamesonian, and thus implicitly a subscriber to the idea that critics inevitably translate their findings from one code (the literary) to another (the critical). Against this background, one should probably avoid reading into Holloway’s argument the assumption that McCarthy’s aesthetic and its supposed political resistance *precedes* literary criticism, that it is the aesthetic, rather than the critic, that rebels against capitalist ideology. Still, since Holloway’s generous ‘transcodings’ tend to deflect attention from the tendencies in McCarthy’s texts that are illuminating precisely for the reason that they are *not* progressive, there is a risk that the reader is left with the illusion that these texts always ‘know what they are doing,’ to paraphrase Pierre Macherey (31).

Something similar emerges when James Dorson maintains that “standing beneath the immense cultural and economic dome that has been erected” on “the consecrated ground of modern capitalism,” McCarthy’s Westerns “contest” this dome and “make us feel the lateness of late capitalism” (*Counternarrative* 282). While Dorson grants that these novels do not exactly possess any “privileged” position “outside of what” they oppose, as the autonomist would have it, he suggests that they do indeed serve as correctives to some of the grand narratives that condition contemporary society (282–83).¹⁶ As should already be clear from the first chapters of this dissertation, I do not completely reject this proposition. Still, I would argue that well-meaning McCarthy-critics such as Holloway and Dorson occasionally seem a bit too eager to elicit a radical politics from an author who told Oprah Winfrey’s viewers that you “should be

grateful” because “life is pretty damn good” (Conlon) and who told a *New York Times* reporter—as I note in chapter two—that the notion that “everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea” (qtd. in Hawkins 437). Even though most literature may be retooled into something much more radical than its author had intended, one may sometimes learn more about a given artwork and its relationship to contemporary ideology if one avoids releasing the first from the other’s hold.

It is important to note here that McCarthy is often the object of hagiography, not least in terms of his supposed literary genius. Consider, for instance, Daniel Robert King’s recent survey of the archives at Texas State University, in which he states repeatedly—though in different formulations—that McCarthy “has always been . . . a confident, independent author with a faith in his own abilities and a meticulous approach to his work” (168). Given the abundance of such criticism, and the desire among many scholars to secure McCarthy a place in the university canon, it is not surprising that political beliefs become a sensitive subject. That this is so is aptly illustrated by David Cremean’s fervent objection to Joyce Carol Oates’s notion that the “social-conservative predilections” of Sheriff Bell in *No Country for Old Men* perhaps speak also for the author’s own (21). In a short article, Cremean goes out of his way to show that, unlike Bell, McCarthy cannot possibly be a conservative, partly because he is twice divorced, because “he long rarely saw his first son,” because he has known and respected drug dealers, because there are “numerous” and “obvious generous sympathies for the lowly of life throughout his canon,” etc. (21–22).

Even though I will refrain from fixing either McCarthy or his texts in a static political position, I think one should at least entertain the idea for a moment that there may *not* be any sharp dividing lines between McCarthy’s literary project and the sentiments expressed in his interviews. Such an idea would be supported by the latent late capitalist acquiescence of the novels’ wishful ecocentrism—the “visionary dreams of the race that was” (Wittliff 91/01/02)—as well as by a number of passages in McCarthy’s unpublished work. In one of the preliminary drafts of *The Road*, for example, on a page simply labelled “notes,” “Liberalism” is described as “the politics of the radical by definition and so the politics of the juvenile” (Wittliff 91/87/3). “They would make the world new,” McCarthy writes, “who have no sense of how much worse it can get” (91/87/3).¹⁷ It is impossible, of course, to determine for certain whether notes such as these reflect the author’s own sentiments (to this extent, I agree more than

willingly with Cremean), but if one reads them alongside the Leibnizian musings seen in the interviews, it seems equally rash to rule out the possibility that they do.

This is not to say, however, that McCarthy should be designated as either a liberal or a conservative, but that critics should never restrict themselves by assuming that literary texts always produce rational and politically consistent responses to the issues they deal with. Such a critical fallacy would be suggestive of Shoshana Felman's assertion that by favoring one out of many possible meanings, by claiming that a piece of literature means *either* this or that, critics often tend to perform anew the oppositions of a literary text, to become part of these oppositions, instead of *readers of them* (113). Further findings to be made in the McCarthy archives may be instructive in this respect, both in regard to this literary theoretical issue and in regard to one of the main arguments of this chapter, stating that even though *The Orchard Keeper* undeniably offers a scathing critique of modernity, its recurrent allusions to environmental interconnectedness and deep time could simultaneously be made to resonate with the widespread tendency in our age to ignore environmental problems that, if they were to be acknowledged, would force people to radically change the way they live. Differently put, McCarthy's use of "symbolic language as the restorer of unity" may serve to counteract the sense of urgency necessary for readers to take action in matters of environmental sustainability (de Man, "The Double" 11). If humans are not much different from rocks or plants, they are perhaps no more agential and no more culpable either.

The Archives

There is, in other words, a fair amount of political ambivalence here, and this ambivalence is particularly pronounced in some of the unpublished texts in the McCarthy archives. See, for instance, the unusually overt hints at responsibility and shame that appear in the early drafts of *The Road* but that are nowhere to be found in the final version. In folder 3 of box 87, the reader learns that survivors of the recent cataclysm pass "in their hundreds" without ever stopping "to ask of another his news," their "eyes averted in a sort of *collective shame*," and each of them bound "for the land of the other's abandoning" (Wittliff 91/87/03; my emphasis). The invocation of this shame suggests that the novel's indeterminate apocalypse is indeed anthropogenic, and that it is significant that there are no such

clues in the published text. Another relevant example emerges when the father wakes up from a dream and calls “to the darkness” that he has done “nothing wrong”—“[n]othing at all” (91/87/03). Surely, the father’s forceful insistence on his own innocence implies that it “takes work” to escape accountability, as Kari Marie Norgaard puts it in relation to climate change denial (93); and this is revealing both with regard to the efforts of this character in particular and to the efforts of McCarthy’s ontologically flat symbolism in general.

This tension between the acknowledgement of culpability on the one hand and denial on the other is even more prominent in *Whales and Men*, an unpublished screenplay from the mid 80s that deals explicitly with the precarious relationship between human and environment—making it “a key work to consider . . . for those interested in McCarthy’s ecological imagination,” as Stacey Peebles puts it (*Performance* 56).¹⁸ Heavily punctuated with lengthy monologues on human destructivity and its possible causes, the plot of this unfinished work revolves around a socioeconomically privileged quartet made up of a natural scientist, an Irish aristocrat, an affluent med school drop-out, and his girlfriend, whose occupational status is, perhaps symptomatically, not as clearly defined: she “is kind and good,” as Michael Lynn Crews puts it (257). These characters—Guy, Peter, John, and Kelly—meet up in 1984 in a Florida “tennis and yacht club” and then embark on a research trip that soon leads to a traumatizing encounter with commercial whaling (Wittliff 91/97/01). Like most unfinished drafts, *Whales and Men* is rather crude, but it is so in a manner that facilitates readerly attempts at identifying the text’s central ideas and how these ideas relate to one another dialectically.¹⁹ More specifically, *Whales and Men* calls attention to how McCarthy’s literary production tends to involve grappling with an ideology that seems never to be in conflict with itself, but whose ambiguity and discord may be revealed as soon as it is gauged against historical facticity. One of the rewards of reading this unfinished draft, then, lies in discovering that it still bears a rather distinct imprint of the ideologically conditioned and highly therapeutic process of obscuring the fact that capitalism is an incorrigibly exploitative system that risks leading to the utter depletion of the Earth’s resources. Still uncompleted, though, this process makes for a rather unwieldy text, aesthetically speaking: Nicholas Brown would hardly have labelled it a product that conforms to the ‘agreeable’ standards of the market—and this is precisely the point. *Whales and Men* is not ‘good’ literature in this sense, but it is arguably better ideology than some of

McCarthy's published novels. Peebles touches on this, in a way, when she argues that unlike all other McCarthy texts, *Whales and Men* takes an "activist stance" to the extent that it treats environmental issues unambiguously (59). This claim seems correct in that the screenplay speaks bluntly of human responsibility and imagines a future where "we have slaughtered and poisoned everything and finally incinerated the planet itself" and so left "that blackened lump of slag" to revolve "in the void forever" (Wittliff 91/97/01). Such overt condemnations are, to my knowledge, nonexistent in the rest of McCarthy's oeuvre. One is reminded of John Updike's declaration that he writes fiction "because everything unambiguously expressed seems crass" to him (qtd. in Hilfer 173). *Whales and Men* is indeed crass, by McCarthy's standards, but this is simply to say that the text has not yet been crafted into an aesthetic object that more or less successfully conceals its own ideologically conditioned contradictions. Perhaps this part of literary production in general and McCarthy's symbolism in particular is somehow related to an author's felt need of producing universalisms rather than partisanisms, and of thereby having to disguise his or her "own personal stake in the story," as Fredric Jameson puts it (*Allegory* xiii).

To get a better idea of how *Whales and Men* makes visible the ideological process of shunning inconvenient truths, one may begin by noting the suggestion that humans "secretly" yearn "for the destruction of all things including themselves," and that nothing or no one else is to blame for the imminent end prophesized by the text: "It wasnt the serpent. We are the serpent. No one else. Agents. No one else," as McCarthy puts it in a handwritten note in one of the margins (91/97/01). This would not be the first McCarthy text to take this issue seriously, of course, but what is indeed remarkable about *Whales and Men* is that the notion of a destructive human agency is clearly paired up with the suggestion that quietism, the act of "not caring," is "a tactic for survival" (91/97/01). An anecdote recounted by Kelly helps clarify this:

It's about an Englishman visiting America and he's in the bar at the Waldorf [where] the barman says to him: My father had a child and it wasnt my brother and it wasnt my sister. Who was it? And of course he cant answer and he says I give up, who? And the barman says: It was me! And the Englishman laughs uproariously and he goes home and he's at his club or whatever and he tells his friends: My father had a child and it wasnt my brother and it wasnt my sister. Who was it? And of course none of them can answer, they all

give up and he says: It was the chap at the Waldorf Astoria back in America! I told you it was dumb. It's become sort of a metaphor for John and Peter. An in-joke for a certain kind of half-witted disavowal of responsibility. I think Peter feels sometimes that we are all the chap at the Waldorf but we don't know it. (91/97/01)²⁰

The screenplay goes further, however, by letting Peter give voice to the very kind of quietism he allegedly finds problematic: "the reason there are billions of stars," he says,

is the same reason there are billions of eggs. To allow for failure. The planets operate on the same set of laws as flowers. Physics and chemistry are the same for flesh as for rocks. Among those billions of planets there must be countless other experimental stations just as this one. *Each one expendable. Not one that would be missed.* The only thing that is nonexpendable is the experiment itself. *An individual failure means nothing.* We may well be on the edge of such a failure. Our notions of our own sacred uniqueness are just that. Our notions. *We will not be missed.* (91/97/01; my emphasis)²¹

On the same page, McCarthy seems to hint at the potential consequences of such views: "ART is failed religion," he scribbles in the left margin (91/97/01)—a most apposite comment in relation to the passage just quoted since the deep temporal and deep spatial notion of the expendability of the Earth and all its inhabitants certainly affords a provisional redemption of the "collective shame" alluded to in the early draft of *The Road*. Differently put: the sentiments in the quotation above are arguably of the kind that trigger observations such as those by Natalie Grant, that "there is" in McCarthy "no difference between the magnificence and meanness of man and the beauty and violence of the natural world" (82). This is of course absolutely true; yet, one should be careful to note that, unless they are problematized, assertions of this kind risk reifying any kind of destructive behaviour on humanity's part.

Notably, *Whales and Men* does indeed seem to consider this risk, if only in a roundabout way, by making it clear that *language* is actually the root of the problem, the "aberration by which we" have "come to lose the world," or by which we have "made the world unknown" (91/97/01). In other words, instead of containing this world, language has rendered us aliens with "no way of even knowing what's been lost," since all we can

now know is our allegorical substitution for ‘the world out there’ (91/97/01, handwritten note). As Peter, the Irish aristocrat, explains, the endgame here is destruction: “We were put in a garden and we turned it into a detention center. Then we left. But we couldn’t quite leave so there seemed to be only one solution. Blow it up [“Destroy it” added by hand]. This is not something new. This has been coming for a long time. We just didn’t know how before” (91/97/01). What is striking here is that McCarthy seems to suggest, self-reflexively, that language is both the cause of humanity’s destructive autonomy *and* the only tool available for people in general and himself in particular to evasively “dream of the wellsprings” of an innocent past in a manner so as to substitute this dream for our current predicament of ecological emergency (to substitute word for world). That is to say, McCarthy acknowledges in this rare and unpublished moment not only “the ultimate failure of human responsibility” (Prather, “Like something” 45), but also his symbolist evasion of it; and thus, he implicitly calls attention to the prevalence of this evasion in the early parts of his corpus. The critical takeaway here is the notion that although language is decidedly allegorical in the sense that it invariably stands in for an object of representation with which it can never be united, this language can still symbolically feign such unity between word and world, or between human and environment.

Narrative Dilations

In *The Orchard Keeper*, the onslaught of modernity seems to rapidly increase the distance to the lost innocence bemoaned by McCarthy’s novels. Time, in other words, is not on our side, and it is constantly measured—by “the rainless silence of the roof” (186), by some “flypaper” revolving “in slow spirals,” and by a “clock” unwinding laboriously “as if about to expire violently in a jangle of wheels and leaping springs” but then tolling “off four doomlike gongs evocative of some oriental call to temple” before hushing “altogether” (192). The novel responds to this steady march to ruin with a few key strategies. Wesley’s tacit adoption of Sylder and Ather is one, serving temporarily to save him from the insight that his origins are anything but innocent. The swerves into deep time is another, serving to render humans a phenomenon of little consequence, and the novel’s formal merging of the human and the non-human is a third, serving to reify the environmental damage done by the first of these categories. Perhaps Brooks is right when he suggests that people are “always trying to

work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing, of course, that we cannot,” that “all we can do is subvert or, perhaps better, pervert time: which is what narrative does” (111). In any case, Brooks offers a fitting description of the strategies just described, which all seek to deflect attention from the inevitability of death as well as from humanity’s forfeiture of that transcendent home in “the wellsprings.” Brooks finds a similar strategy in Balzac’s *La Peau de Chagrin*, where the protagonist, Raphaël, “wishes to will himself into the ‘conservative law of nature,’ hoping in his retreat to the mountains of Auvergne to become like a lichen on the rock—nearly quiescent, almost inorganic. The effort,” Brooks explains, is “of course, doomed, and superseded by a last outburst of desire, and then total quiescence” (110). As McCarthy puts it in a handwritten note in the first draft of *Whales and Men*: “The Thing [sic] we long for does not exist” (8).

Nevertheless, *The Orchard Keeper* keeps alluding to this “Thing,” this nonexpendable experiment, this Life itself, of which humanity was allegedly once part. Yet another means with which this is done is the novel’s italicized passages that almost invariably indicate an analepsis, or “a displacement in time,” as McCarthy himself describes it to his editor (Wittliff 91/02/02).²² In Brooksian (or originally Barthian) terms, these temporal displacements are textbook examples of narrative ‘dilations’ that temporarily halt the movement of the plot proper. Drawing on Fredric Jameson’s notion of a postmodern intensity that detaches the experiencing subject from historical continuity, Holloway close-reads one of these passages and suggests that, rather than recontextualizing “the present” by providing an explanatory background for a given detail—in this particular case Sylder’s “aching toes,” rendered so by an old gunshot wound—the analepsis that follows immediately after the mentioning of this detail counteracts “the precise realism of the world” that comes before it: when italicized type takes over and Sylder suddenly remembers how he was shot in the foot during a “raid by the coast guard cutter,” a violent accretion of “impressionistic fragments” soon engulfs “character and reader within a hallucinogenic dissolution of the historical fictive world per se” (*The Late* 81–83).²³

The Orchard Keeper’s specific use of analepsis is very much in keeping with the symbolist attempts throughout McCarthy’s corpus at gesturing toward a temporal logic and a temporal scope that transcends the duration not only of modernity but of the human race as a whole. When Ather has been institutionalized and is sitting one day among his

“aimless” peers, another italicized flashback makes this even clearer, as it describes the

mountain road brick-red of dust laced with lizard tracks, coming up through the peach orchard, hot, windless, cloistral in a silence of no birds save one vulture hung in the smokeblue void of the sunless mountainside, rocking on the high updrafts, and the road turning and gated with bullbriers waxed and green, and the green cadaver grin sealed in the murky waters of the peach pit, slime-green skull with newts coiled in the eyesockets and a wig of moss.
(236–37)

Obviously, the world remembered here is beyond the reach of any social worker’s records, a world where the paratactic amassment of participles past and present—“laced,” “gated,” “waxed,” “coming,” “rocking,” “turning”—renders all things simultaneous and mutually determining: the road, the tracks, and the void seem capable of modifying each other endlessly, and even the skull is here part of a ceaseless ‘becoming,’ providing, as Bell has noted, a home for salamanders and a bed for plants millions of years older than humankind (*Achievement* 20). To adopt Charles Feidelson’s labeling of Whitman’s symbolism, this is a “process of becoming” that makes no distinctions between people, word, and world (18), and that thereby recapitulates several of the novel’s central and decidedly interrelated tendencies: its tentative halting of time, its suspension of the idea of death, and its symbolist search for lost origins, to name a few.

Another narrative dilation that apparently meant a lot to McCarthy during the writing process are the two scenes where all the novel’s human characters are left behind in favor of the focalization of a house cat. In his early drafts, McCarthy struggles with the placement of this scene and notes to himself that “something must be done about cat” [Wittliff 91/01/01]). The primary function of these digressions seems to be to show that with or without human tribulations in general and the recent incarceration of Sylder in particular, ‘Life’ in a broader sense goes on. However, the scenes also hint more specifically at humanity’s exclusion from what used to be its ‘natural’ habitat: the cat comes across as a true hunter and a true hunted, batting at some crows that soon “harry” her away, and then picking up the scent from a dead and neglected mink wasting away in one of John Wesley’s traps (185). These scenes, furthermore, tie in with a passage earlier in the novel where it is implied that most things in the world are characterized by an instinctually conditioned mode of subsistence no

longer available to humans: here is the “crawfish” with “stemmed eyes,” the “high killy and stoop of a kestrel,” and the “morning spiders and their crewelwork”—all lit by the “sun running red on the mountain” (92). With his mass-produced tools, however, and with his lack of hunting success, John Wesley appears most alien to this community of predators. As John puts it in *Whales and Men*, people are “not really hunters. We’re pseudo-hunters. Real hunters understand life and death in a way that is probably impossible for us. They stand in a relationship to the hard facts of existence that we only play at” (Wittliff 91/97/01). When the cat returns 22 pages later, a snapshot image of this relationship and these “hard facts” is briefly conjured. Moving like clockwork, with its belly swinging “lean but pendulous” and its “head low and divorced of all but linear motion, *as if fixed along an unseen rail*,” the cat is clearly as much in harmony with her surroundings as the predatory bird that momentarily strikes “her back like a falling rock” and thus carries her off (228–29; my emphasis).²⁴

Immediately following the account of John Wesley’s failed attempt at trapping, however, is Ather’s comingling with the agencies of the soil and the seasons, a “light pale as milk” guiding his “steps over the field to the creek and then to the mountain” and its enormous and dateless biodiversity: “bearded hickories,” “trailing grapevines,” and “shells of ossified crustaceans from an ancient sea” (93). As he passes “catlike” through this scenery (93), and thus in a manner suggesting that he is closer to the natural world than the other characters, the sky seems “to lie below him in a measureless spread, flickering like foil by half-light and gleaming lamely into the shadow where it folded to the trees” (94). If one thinks of metaphor symbolically rather than allegorically, this literary device comes across as “a test case of the aesthetic,” questioning rather than affirming “categories,” as Armstrong puts it (37). With the assistance of simile and personification, such questioning is precisely what emerges here, when the moon is “watching” and Ather’s feet are moving “ahead of him, disembodied and unfamiliar” (McCarthy, *TOK* 94), so that agency no longer seems a privilege reserved solely for a coherent human subject; so that “things, animals, and humans” are all assigned “equal existential status” (Guillemin, *Pastoral* 29); so that we “are not allowed to forget how imperfect our assumed transcendence is” (Bell, *Achievement* 17). This effect, moreover, is soon amplified further when it is described how it takes “a year’s weather to fret” into “aromatic humus” the cedars Ather puts once a year in the pit to conceal Rattner’s body (95).²⁵

Conclusion

The Orchard Keeper even closes on this note of immutable resilience, by describing, as K. Wesley Berry observes, how the boy returns as a young man to the house where he once lived with his mother and there finds “the roof of the house deep-green with moss, or gaping black where patches had caved through” (258, Berry 60). Yet, there is a dialectic at work here, suggesting that rural Tennessee is “under joint siege,” as Guillemin puts it (*Pastoral* 29). Not only ‘nature’ but also modernity might be to blame for the kind of deterioration that has beset the house: walking away from his former abode, the boy watches how an old man on a wagon pulled by a “ragged mule” dissolves “in a pale and broken image” (258).²⁶ The reader will probably recognize this imagery from Sylder’s passing the “tangled broken shapes” of the city lights (194), and here, these clichéd markers of modernity—dissolution, brokenness, fracture—seem to help obscure a way of life already in decline (258). As Palmer argues, the elegiac form that was traditionally employed to “commemorate and confront the lost one” has by modernisms such as McCarthy’s been extended to accommodate “a cultural exploration of loss, expressed on a variety of levels: historical, communal, familial, interpersonal, and psychological” (63).²⁷ On the second to last page of *The Orchard Keeper*, at least two of these categories, the historical and the familial, seem present when, like a modern-day response to the “rattle and squeak” of the departing wagon, a car carrying “a man and a woman” emerges and rolls “to a stop” (259). The boy waves to them, but to no avail: “the man turned, saw the green light and pulled away, the white oval of the woman’s face still watching him. So he waved again to her just as the car slid from sight behind a hedgerow, the wheels whisking up a fine spray from the road” (260). And so, the novel simultaneously fractures the protagonist’s conception of an innocent past, illustrated by the man, the mule, and the wagon, *and* sends off two unresponsive parental figures in an automobile, the emblem of modernity *par excellence*.²⁸

Yet, environmental resilience clearly outweighs the influence of modernity in the novel’s closing scenes: the bones of the “dead” are “brindled with mold and the celled marrow [is] going to frail stone” (259), and the tombstone of John Wesley’s mother has in a matter of three years acquired “a gray and timeless aspect, glazed with lichens and nets of small

brown runners” (259).²⁹ Finally, the last paragraph mourns the demise of a human race that seemed closer to that primeval unity the novel so consistently laments; it also suggests, though, that this unity lives on, regardless of the outcome of human history, because over “the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses” (260). There is, in other words, “a new escapism” here, “a continued pastoral hope,” as Guillemín calls it (*Pastoral* 37), built on the realization that “the revolution of life and death moves on, regardless of human striving” (Berry 61).

Although Berry contemplates the question of what kind of cultural work McCarthy’s evocation of this non-human resilience might be said to perform, he seems unwilling to consider the possibility that this evocation is anything but politically progressive. The “ominous tone” of the Appalachian novels, he writes, is “to an extent *mitigated* when the collapse of human structures is viewed in light of the American literary philosophical tradition of inhumanism”—“a *weltanschauung*,” he argues further, “that ‘contains a vital critique of the prevailing humanism (i.e., chauvinistic humanism) which has contributed greatly to the [environmental] crisis’ (Morris)” (59; my emphasis). For Berry, too, in other words, as for so many other critics, McCarthy’s aesthetic is unequivocally one of resistance, not only when it operates didactically by calling attention to how a “once healthy forest” bleeds “bloodred” rain (53), but also when, conversely, it renders anthropogenic impact an issue of little significance (68). Indeed, as Macherey puts it, this comes across as a critical position built on “the hypothesis of the work’s unity,” and the idea that, should the work ever appear to deviate from this unity, the critic is probably mistaken (46).³⁰

Given the nostalgia for lost origins referenced in this chapter, one could suggest instead that critics take Guillemín’s notion that McCarthy’s is an *escapist ecopastoralism* even more seriously than Guillemín himself (*Pastoral* 37), and that they do so by thinking of the corpus in general and *The Orchard Keeper* in particular as a line of discourse “thickened by reminiscences” and (metaphoric) “alterations,” to speak with Macherey (111), or a number of dilations, to speak with Brooks, all serving to defer ‘the end’: the end of the novel, of course, but also, by extension, the notion of the end of the world as we know it, and the suspicion that human agency has always been a major determinant in regard to this development. Read through the lens of Macherey, Brooks, and McCarthy’s own unpublished drafts, *The Orchard Keeper* comes across as a symbolist attempt to reckon with the pain born out of this suspicion: that we “are the serpent,” and

that the transcendent home we long for perhaps never existed in the first place (Wittliff 91/87/01).

¹ This is very likely a reference to Cades Cove, a valley in Southern Appalachia now part of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park. As K. Wesley Berry mentions, this place was deeply affected in the early 20th century by “[p]rogressive or ‘scientific’ agriculture”—a revolution that eventually forced small-scale farmers to leave for nearby towns (53).

² In all likelihood, this passage was one of many “incantations” that were supposed to function as “chapter introductions” (King 50–51). As Daniel Robert King notes, both Larry Bensky, McCarthy’s first editor, and Albert Erskine, who soon took over Bensky’s job, were concerned with this idea (50–51).

³ As Robert L. Jarrett argues, quoting these very words, there is an “absolute separation between the consciousness” of the race that used to be and the race that now is (qtd. in Horton 306).

⁴ This plot is indicative of the “widely acknowledged” fact, as Palmer puts it, that “McCarthy’s fictional world” is “masculine-centered” and “defined by male relationships and patterns of homosociality” (64). Commenting in particular on *The Orchard Keeper* and *The Road*, Palmer maintains that the “central human relationship” in these novels is that of “father/son” (62). Already in 1988 Vereen Bell noted similarly that “Sylder and Ownby between them form a surrogate paternity for John Wesley” (*Achievement* 25). What is more, although “Sylder supplants the man he kills and perhaps acts more like a father than Kenneth Rattner ever would have,” as Barbara Brickman argues (59), it is important to note, as does Dianne Luce, that the “incarceration of” him and Ather “repeats the primal loss of parents with which John Wesley has been struggling much of his young life” (*Reading* 60).

⁵ Matthew R. Horton rightly argues that this passage hints at “a transitional age in history defined by overlapping, interrelated, and clashing times” (288), and Lydia R. Cooper suggests aptly that the fence and the tree make for a “graphic image of the infection of industrialization in the natural world” (“McCarthy, Tennessee” 43).

⁶ On a similar note, Horton writes that McCarthy “spins” the different narrative “threads discontinuously, interweaving episodes of varying lengths that confuse the sense of temporal cohesion and chronological order” (288). He also agrees that this “inevitably generates confusion” (289), and that it forces “the reader to discover order by way of hindsight” (295).

⁷ Berry contextualizes this by noting that “Tennessee’s extensive phosphate rock deposits placed the state second to Florida in production of phosphate for commercial fertilizer” (49).

⁸ Frye rightly argues that, in “all this, through a series of extended and lyrically rendered descriptions, nature becomes a character, a truly dynamic presence within the novel” (22), and Georg Guillemin agrees (*Pastoral* 37). Frye adds further that, for Ather, “right living comes from understanding and participating in a humble interaction with” the world’s “primordial forces” (24).

⁹ “Notice,” Erik Hage points out, “how this horrific image picks up on the central imagistic themes: the green skull and seaweed hair blurring the line between human and nature...” (126).

¹⁰ In one of the first drafts of the novel, McCarthy writes that the boy “could remember when they first moved to this house even though he could not remember his father,” but then

corrects himself in a handwritten note that says “Why not remember his father? He was 7 years old!” (Wittliff 91/01/03).

¹¹ Brickman, too, notes this detail (60).

¹² As Luce points out, however, John Wesley “rejects his mother’s program of vengeance for the loss of his biological father, which amounts to his violent heritage, and replaces it with a healthy pattern of mindful, ethical, and self-reliant dealings with the world. In electing his fathers [Sylder and Ather], then, John Wesley repudiates not only his biological father but also his death-seeking mother” (*Reading* 55–56). Discussing the novel’s ending, David Paul Ragan similarly notes that some of the things the boy remembers here make it clear that these “are the men whose values he has embraced as an adult”: there is the wood smoke that alludes to the occasion when he saved Sylder’s dog, and there is the “old man’s wine” that alludes to Ather (17).

¹³ As Natalie Grant notes, even Ather’s “house, a small board shack with ‘laths curling out like hair awry’ seems to be an extension of the ground on which it stands, [‘]green with fungus’ (56). He does not question nature’s power or mutability, and his atonement reemphasizes his shamanistic attributes” (77). Ragan, further, points out that Ather’s “traditional lifestyle enables an almost mystical connection to the cycles of nature” (16).

¹⁴ On this note, Prather maintains that John Wesley is the novel’s narrator, and that, since he “has lost his sense of at-homeness in the world,” the images he conveys become “measures of the gap between the world as it is and the world as it is wished, the world of existentiality and that of anthropomorphism” (43).

¹⁵ Wesley G. Morgan writes that the tank has been construed by different critics as a container for “atomic waste,” for “whisky stored by the ATU,” and for “insecticide” (“government” 94). Morgan himself suggests that the tank is an “air traffic control station,” since this would explain the authorities’ disproportionately aggressive response to Ather’s transgression (95).

¹⁶ To be clear, Dorson “reads Cormac McCarthy’s Westerns as counternarratives in both the sense of disruptive hegemonic narratives and performing as a model for renewed narrative meaning” (*Counternarrative* 16). Even more specifically, Dorson argues that these “Westerns are exemplary counternarratives in their subversive appropriation of national myth,” “their reflexive concern with narrativity,” and “their unleashing of desires submerged in romance and genre fiction” (16). The potential of McCarthy’s Westerns, then, derives not only from content, but also from form and affect.

¹⁷ I should add here that this line of the draft has been crossed out at some point.

¹⁸ On this note, Luce concludes that the screenplay was probably written “sometime in the period from 1984 or ’85 to ’87, between McCarthy’s most intensive work on *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *All the Pretty Horses* (1992)” (Luce, “The Road and the Matrix” 216). In *Blood Meridian*, as Luce points out, “McCarthy makes reference to a horse standing on the Pacific shore, watching ‘out there past men’s knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea” (216).

¹⁹ For this reason, all references made here to *Whales and Men* will be to the first draft.

²⁰ This passage is heavily annotated by hand. I have chosen to include these annotations in my transcription.

²¹ Cf. this with how another author of symbolist inclination, D.H. Lawrence, has one of his characters think to himself: “After all, what is mankind but just one expression of the incomprehensible. And if mankind passes away, it will only mean that this particular expression is completed and done” (59). Moreover, note Katja Rebmann’s (now Laug) conclusion in “Cormac McCarthy’s Topologies of Violence” that McCarthy dedicates *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road* “to the examination of mankind’s vain failure to understand that in the grand scheme of things the soil upon which they build their self-importance is

indifferent to their very existence" (119). See also Vereen Bell, who calls *The Orchard Keeper* "a meditation upon the irrelevance of the human in the impersonal scheme of things" (*Achievement* 10)—a notion he seems to share with Guillemin, who writes about the same novel that, together "with the theme of natural cycles and seasonal changes," there is an "epic sense of time" here that "implies a belief in fate while minimizing the influence of human agency on the course of things" (*Pastoral* 29).

²² Frye, too, notes that "the linear flow of time is often broken by the extended reflections in memory clearly identified in italics" (22).

²³ Here are two thirds of the passage Holloway refers to: "The pike had been cleared some time in the afternoon so that he didn't even need the chains after he came off the orchard road, dark now, something after six o'clock, the rear end of the car heavy and swaying low over the wheels even with the love joys set up as far as they would go. It was very cold and his toes had not yet thawed under the gas heater. He thought how the stump of a toe in his left boot was particularly sensitive, remembering *again the sweep of the cutter's lights on the stanchions of the bridge, the glazed and blinding rye of the spotlight when it picked him out, standing on the forward deck under a canopy of mangrove with his foot braced on the cleat and holding the anchor rope. When the light caught him he yelled once down into the cabin and began hauling in on the rope. The starter whirred and the motor coughed gutturally at the water, the boat jostling, already moving. He got the anchor in and watched the cutter-lights. Even above the high wheening of their own motor he could hear her revving the big double Gray engines as she swung about, then voices, commands, detached and sourceless on the steamy calm of the Gulf. The cutter's spot followed them, swamping them in light as they came out of the backwater. He might have been a ballerina pirouetting there. He could see the twin spume flaring from the prow of the cutter, rising as she took speed, and the running lights bobbing and bobbing again in the black wash of the cutwater. He heard the shots too, quite clearly, but made no association between them and himself. It didn't occur to him that he was being shot at until a real flurry broke out and he could see muzzleflashes minute and intermittent like cigarettes glowing and hear the pebbly thoop thoop of the bullets in the passing water. Then he jumped and started for the cabin. Instantly there came the sounds of splintering wood and then something tore at his foot and threw him to the deck. He crawled to the companionway and slid down it on his belly*" (171–72).

²⁴ I disagree with Guillemin's notion, then, that the hunting scenes in *The Orchard Keeper* "link the characters (again both human and animal) in a cycle of hunting and being hunted, death being the ultimate huntsman . . . everybody may in turn be hunter and prey" (*Pastoral* 27).

²⁵ Prather, too, comments on this, arguing that the narrator's "descriptions work to rupture" the "arbitrarily drawn boundaries" between what is human and what is not, not least by way of similes that liken humans to animals and animals to humans (43). Hage, too, touches on this and concludes that "McCarthy uses the descriptive strategy of the grotesque—a creative flourish often attributed to the Southern Gothic style of Faulkner, Carson McCullers and others—to fuse humans and the natural world in an unsettling manner" (125).

²⁶ Horton notes how this "vehicle represents an older age" that "creeps by in its decrepitude, and slowly moves away" (290). This clearly stands in contrast with the violent speed of the car, "whisking up a fine spray from the road" (*TOK* 260).

²⁷ John M. Grammer, however, finds no modernist modification of the elegy in McCarthy's novel. "*The Orchard Keeper*," he writes, "is a more or less straightforward elegiac celebration of a vanishing pastoral realm," in "the tradition of Virgil's *Eclogues*, Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* and the Agrarian's *I'll Take My Stand*" (30).

²⁸ Guillemin argues that this scene is “much overinterpreted,” and that John Wesley “waves merely to signal” to the couple “that the lights have changed” (*Pastoral* 22).

²⁹ This is in keeping, moreover, with the fate of the “jerrybuilt shacks” from the beginning of the novel (11). These “more modern houses,” as Luce calls them (*Reading* 8), appear almost organic, “like great brooding animals rigid with constipation” (11). Still, not even “the speed with which they were constructed” can “outdistance the decay for which they” hold “such affinity” (11).

³⁰ Indeed, though, the novel’s closing nudges us away from this kind of reasoning. When the boy returns to his old hunting grounds, he seems, as Bell puts it, impervious to “thematic stress,” sitting “on a gravestone with one shoe off, testing his sock for wetness, and whistling softly to himself” (*Achievement* 31). The message here, Bell concludes, “is a nicely wholesome and incongruous one, about how memory and an assured inner life overcome the sedition of dread” (31–32). This is a crucial observation, well in keeping with my contention that *The Orchard Keeper* reads as an evasion of inconvenient insights and the anxieties these insights produce.

4. “The audience sits webbed in dust”: *Suttree*’s Symbolism

In the sculptor’s art there always remains something unsaid, something waiting. (McCarthy, *Suttree* 307)

To explain the work is to show that, contrary to appearances, it is not independent, but bears in its material substance the imprint of a determinate absence which is also the principle of its identity. (Macherey 89)

Literary analysis, Pierre Macherey suggests, should always try to enunciate what the work itself is not saying, because only thus does this analysis stand a chance of producing “new knowledge” (168). Obviously, though, even this kind of analysis has to begin with that which the work *does* articulate. In *Suttree* (1979), McCarthy’s fourth novel, the reader is immediately introduced to a blighted 1950s Knoxville where the eponymous protagonist lives by as well as off the toxic Tennessee River, listlessly running his trotlines and occasionally landing a catfish or carp to be sold or bartered. Unsurprisingly, this makes for no life of plenty, but unlike most of his comrades, Suttree survives, if only just. For him, moreover, this setup is a self-chosen means of escaping an affluent yet dysfunctional family in favor of a more egalitarian life in the slum of McAnally Flats, this “[e]ncampment of the damned” (4) that will soon be torn down to make room for Interstate 40 (567). Here, before finally leaving town, Suttree leads a meandering and largely drunken existence that includes incarceration (43-74), hospitalization (228, 545), two brief love affairs (428, 465), the death of his estranged son (178), and the constant awareness of his own mortality, counterpointed by the novel’s numerous references to clocks and watches (3, 11, 15, 23, 32, 34, 90, 96, etc.). At the level of plot, then, this is the novel’s foundation.

As Fredric V. Bogel points out with regard to literature in general, however, whatever else a text may be—“a play of themes, a historical document, a production of a particular author or era, a real-world political manifesto—it is fundamentally” language that “makes it any of those other things” (4). On this note, quite a few scholars have suggested that *Suttree* is remarkable perhaps not primarily for its storyline, but for the style of

its execution. The narrative begins with an italicized and thematically ambiguous four-page prologue abounding in obsolete and scientific jargon, conveyed by parataxis, polysyndeton, and anthropomorphic and zoomorphic similes, all of which sets the tone for and is stylistically consistent with the novel as a whole. More specifically: much like a “mise en abyme,” as David Cowart notes (392), the prologue foreshadows how *Suttree* will read at once symbolically, as a text set on restoring the “lost unity” between human and world (de Man, “The Double” 7), and allegorically, as a text that speaks of humanity in general and Western civilization in particular as temporally finite, uniquely destructive, and thereby ‘other’ to the rest of the universe (allegory: allos=other; ēgorein=to speak). Conjuring an “eternal, indivisible, and essential unity” that supposedly pre-exists “the historical,” a set-up Jim Hansen suggests is typical of symbolism in general (670), the prologue indulges in ontologically flattening similes where “foetal humans” are “bloated like young birds” (5) even as it portrays the city of Knoxville as thoroughly historical, “constructed on no known paradigm,” and not at all in harmony with the ground on which it is built: although described symbolically as a “carnival of shapes,” it “has dried up the sap of the earth for miles about” (4).¹ Further emphasising this theme of human destructivity, the prologue ends on an unmistakably allegorical note, highly suggestive of nuclear devastation, and thereby connected both to the atomic fear of the novel’s period of gestation and to the fact that, between the 1930s and the 1960s, McCarthy’s own father held a key position in a federally owned company that produced energy for the production of the bomb (Prather, “Color” 42).² As a new day breaks in *Suttree*’s first few pages, a “curtain is rising on the Western world,” revealing a “fine rain of soot, dead beetles, anonymous small bones” and an “audience” that “sits webbed in dust” and in witness, it seems, of the culprit: one of their own, a “hanged fool” dangling “from the flies” (6). Whereas the text’s symbolist elements invite readers to partake of a timeless realm where humanity seems of little significance, passages such as this one direct the readerly gaze back to the historically specific, to a temporal realm where human actions occasionally have disastrous consequences and where the literary text is able to make these consequences legible.

In terms of the historically specific, *Suttree* should be considered in relation not only to the increased environmental degradation that figures so prominently in the novel, but also to the Cold War and its constant threat of planetary-scaled destruction: a context, clearly, that offers

enough atrocities to trigger a symbolist search for a mode of writing that would be untainted by the traumatic history in which it participates. The angst triggered by this history is arguably that which in *Suttree* remains largely “unsaid,” as McCarthy himself puts it, and this silence is highly pertinent both to the novel’s aesthetic of evasion and to that on which this evasion seems predicated: the possibility—discussed in my previous chapter and repeatedly evoked in *Suttree*—that evil might be a “man-made creation” (Wittliff 91/97/01), that Western civilization is “the serpent” (91/97/01), exceptionally destructive, and altering the world “forever for purposes godlike in their inscrutability” (91/19/13). Although, unlike McCarthy’s later works, *Suttree* never acknowledges its own tension between this explicitly historical acknowledgement of anthropogenic impact and a symbolism that glosses over it, it is illuminating to read this tension allegorically, as something that stands in “for larger, sociohistorical contradictions and/or ontological problems” (Hansen 669-670). Granted, *Suttree* is not an allegory in the traditional sense; it does not proffer a clear moral purpose and it is not populated by one-dimensional characters that embody certain types or ideas. Yet, there are elements here that nudge the reader’s attention back from the purportedly eternal, where even literature itself would seem to merge with what it depicts, to the temporally specific, where literary writing may instead be seen as a commentary on its own historical moment. Whereas in the first scenario, literature seeks to ‘identify’ with a world that thus swallows it whole, literature insists, in the second scenario, on its ability to ‘reflect’ on the conditions in which it was produced (cf. de Man, “The Double” 12). In the case of *Suttree*, this last scenario means that, for the critic so inclined, the novel reads potentially as an allegory for the difficulties of dealing emotionally and aesthetically, in post- and Cold War America, with the anxieties caused by environmental degradation and the threat of nuclear war.

“A watery isomer”

A number of *Suttree*’s commentators have called attention to how the novel’s form challenges notions of human exceptionalism, and many of these commentators seem to have in mind the very features I have labelled symbolist. Greg Hyde, for instance, suggests that McCarthy uses words “to describe light” as a means of immersing characters as well as readers in “a state of existential dusk or dawn” where there is no distinction “between man and nature” (62) and where “ne(i)ther day or night, dark or

light, good or evil, body or soul, life or death dominates” (63). On a similar note, Béatrice Trotignon argues that, as McCarthy bypasses the tripartite structure of the linguistic sign and pretends instead that this sign exists in a mimetic relationship with the referent, he “manages to indite within the symbolical construction stylistic and aesthetics [sic] shifts by which an idea of the non-human, non-symbolic world is given form” (“Detailing” 91). The result, Trotignon submits, is a style that privileges the object world rather than the “conscious ‘I’” (92).³

Although it is certainly true that McCarthy repeatedly attempts to de-privilege the human experience, one should note that *Suttree*’s shifts of perspective usually begin with a point of view that is unambiguously human and that often slips “from consciousness to consciousness,” as Douglas Canfield puts it (668), until it arrives finally at a symbolism that erases ontological differences. This element of McCarthy’s novel comprises both the shift of focalization from one character to another as well as the *erlebte Rede*-styled blending of the narrator’s perspective with that of the protagonist (668, 671). The second kind of slippage occurs, for instance, when Suttree leaves a bar where he has met a few friends and it is described by what seems to be an omniscient narrator how in

the lobbies of the slattern hotels the porters and bellmen are napping in the chairs and lounges, dark faces jerking in their sleep down the worn wine plush. In the rooms lie drunken homecome soldiers sprawled in painless crucifixion on the rumpled counterpanes and the whores are sleeping now. Small tropic fish start and check in the mossgreen deeps of the eyedocctor’s shopwindow. A lynx rampant with a waxen snarl. Gouts of his glass eyes bulge in agony. Dim tavern, an alleymouth where ashcans gape and where in a dream *I* was stopped by a man *I* took to be my father, dark figure against the shadowed brick. (32; my emphasis).

In the next paragraph, though, the perspective again shifts back to third person: “*He*,” McCarthy continues, “marches darkly toward *his* darkly marching shape in the glass of the depot door” (33; my emphasis).⁴ Occasionally, as the above example suggests, these slippages involve a shift from a focus on the external world to a focus on the protagonist’s psyche or sensory perception, a narrative device that appears as early as in *The Orchard Keeper*’s recurring use of analepsis.⁵ While one could argue, like David Holloway, that this foregrounding of a character’s experience of the world functions potentially to affirm human agency, to counteract the

passivizing dominance of the Sartrean practico-inert (*The Late* 123), the example provided below would seem, rather, to have precisely the opposite effect.⁶

What appears to be the novel's first shift of attention from world to psyche occurs only a few pages in. The section begins with Suttree "[p]leering down into the water" (7), drifting in his skiff, and pulling his fishing lines through the "wrinkled face" of the "heavy old river" (8), this anthropomorphized underworld filled with "yellow condoms roiling slowly out of the murk like some giant form of fluke or tapeworm" (7), "keelboats rotted to the consistency of mucilage" (8), and "a thick muck shot with broken glass, with bones and rusted tins and bits of crockery reticulate with mudblack crazings" (9). "Reticulate" is indeed a fitting word here, signifying, as it does, not only a mesh of "veins" or "fibers" but also an "evolutionary change" based on the "genetic recombination" of "diverse interbreeding populations" ("reticulate"). This kind of change appears to be exactly what is underway when *Suttree's* natural world returns things "easily into their primal anonymity," as McCarthy puts it in an early draft (Wittliff 91/19/13). Soon, the protagonist notes in the midst of this flat ontology how a group of "rescue workers" are "taking aboard" a suicide victim (10). The victim's "window-dummy" body is stiff (10), but Suttree observes "with a feeling" he is unable to name that the watch "on the inside of [the] wrist" is "still running" (11), as though to emphasize that, in the larger scheme of things, the death of a single individual is of little consequence: much like "Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*," as Jay Watson notes, "the dead man has hurled himself into the river from a bridge by night (10), and," again "like Quentin, he has failed in the attempt to defeat time and change with his own death" (90).⁷ The watch ticks on, and later the same day, when Suttree is watching from his houseboat the "river flowing past," the recollection of this ticking sets off a chain of associations:

He turned heavily on the cot and put one eye to a space in the rough board wall. The river flowing past out there. Cloaca Maxima. Death by drowning, the ticking of a dead man's watch. The old tin clock on Grandfather's table hammered like a foundry. Leaning to say goodbye in the little yellow room, reek of lilies and incense. He arched his neck to tell *me* some thing. *I* never heard. He wheezed *my* name, his grip belied the frailty of him. His caved and wasted face. The dead would take the living with them if they could, *I* pulled

away. Sat in an ivy garden that lizards kept with constant leathery slitherings. Hutched hares ghost pale in the shade of the carriage-house wall. Flagstones in a rosegarden, the terraced slope of the lawn above the river, odor of boxwood and mossmold and old brick in the shadow of the springhouse. Under the watercress stones in the clear flowage cluttered with periwinkles. A salamander, troutspeckled. Leaning to suck the cold and mossy water. A rimpled child's face watching back, a watery isomer agoggle in the rings. (15; my emphasis)

This passage is strikingly similar in kind to something Erich Auerbach highlights in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: a representation of consciousness that deprives "the exterior events" of their "hegemony" and uses them instead to "release and interpret inner events" (538). Comparing Woolf to Proust, Auerbach describes both these writers' 'aesthetic of interiority' as "a fusion of the modern concept of interior time with the neo-Platonic idea that the true prototype of a given subject is to be found in the soul of the artist" (542). This philosophic reference brings to mind Paul de Man's notion that, in the nineteenth century, "Neoplatonic tradition asserts and maintains itself" in how poets of a symbolist inclination seem convinced that, through "the discipline" of "literary form and symbolical invention," they will be able to reach the "unified totality" of "a full, ordered universe" (de Man, "The Double" 8). Widening his frame of reference, Auerbach suggests that James Joyce's *Ulysses* reads symbolically in the sense that its "technique of a multiple reflection of consciousness and of multiple time strata" aims "at a symbolic synthesis of the theme 'Everyman'" (544). A key result of such writing, Auerbach concludes, is that it gives prominence to "the elementary things" human beings "in general have in common" (552)—an aesthetic tendency that seems well in keeping with how the monistic Neoplatonists conceived of the world as structured around one single principle.

The first part of Auerbach's thesis is evident enough in the block quotation above. The notion of the watch sparks in Suttree the reminiscence of the suicide, which in turn triggers the now internalized event of the death of a grandfather; and suddenly, the protagonist is no longer "he," but "I." Importantly, moreover, there is a noteworthy dramaturgy to this chain of memories. Intimidated by his grandfather's imminent death, and perhaps by the tick-tocking of the "old tin clock," itself a humanizing plotting of time that reminds people of the End (cf. Kermode 45), Suttree

pulls away, and thus instigates a peripeteia in the episode as a whole.⁸ Soon, the theme is not death, but the interconnection of Life decentralized: lizards keeping the garden, periwinkles and watercress in the clear stream, a salamander, and amidst all this, the reflection of Suttree's face, appearing as an "isomer" ("isos"=equal, and "méros"=part). In the natural sciences, an "isomer" generally denotes "one of two or more compounds, radicals, or ions that *contain the same number of atoms of the same elements but differ in structural arrangement and properties*" ("isomer"; my emphasis). Thus, one could suggest, with Jane Bennett's adaption of Gilles Deleuze, that, in the passage above, although they may be "formally diverse," Suttree and water are "ontologically one" (qtd. in Bennett xi). In this manner, the protagonist's inner events convey a symbolist realm where not only the common denominators between "different peoples" become apparent, but where, in an "exploratory type of representation," the affinities "shine forth" between all that is alive (Auerbach 552). Here then, as one could also put it, McCarthy, too, comes across as the kind of Neoplatonic symbolist discussed by de Man, convinced that even the smallest thing in the world derives from some unified absolute and that literature may render this connection visible. In a sense, the ecstasy believed by the Neoplatonists to be necessary for such sense of connection appears here in literary form, in an epiphanous moment revealing to the reader that human and world are one, that there is an indisputable connection between Suttree's "blood on its appointed rounds" and life in other places: in "narrow crannies. In the leaves, the toad's pulse. The delicate cellular warfare in a waterdrop" (McCarthy 14). This, of course, is why *Suttree's* Harrogate is able to feel, later in the novel, "as large as all the universe and as small as anything that was" (332).

Following immediately on the daydream of the "ivy garden," Suttree remembers how in his "father's last letter he said that the world is run by those willing to take responsibility for the running of it" (15). "If it is life that you feel you are missing," the father goes on, "I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent" (15). First and foremost, this is obviously a rejection of Suttree's lumpen lifestyle; it would also seem, however, that the father's espousal of bourgeois self-fulfillment successfully disrupts the novel's symbolist escape. The meaning of life consists, from the father's perspective, not in the recognition of how people and periwinkles are infused with the same kind of energy, but in social positioning. If this

historically oriented notion temporarily puts the brakes on *Suttree*'s symbolist aesthetic, though, this aesthetic soon returns in a bleaker form, in the idea that all the world's things are transient and that death functions as an ontological leveler.⁹ "From all old seamy throats of elders, musty books, I've salvaged not a word" (15), Suttree thinks to himself, thus countering his father's world-view. "In a dream," he directly continues, "I walked with my grandfather by a dark lake and the old man's talk was filled with incertitude. I saw how all things false fall from the dead" (15). Rather than rejecting his father's individualism by championing a more egalitarian collectivism, all of which would concede, after all, that meaning does indeed reside in the social arena, Suttree refuses the very temporal logic of his father's reasoning and resorts instead to a symbolist outlook that conceives of all historical matters—not just bourgeois career building—as short-lived and therefore meaningless.

Symbolism, Allegory, and Context

Although symbols invariably spring from specific historical conditions, they are always designed to appear as if they do not, and as if their attempts at concealment never have anything to do with the conscious or unconscious motives of a given author or a given reader at a given point in time. This false appearance is precisely why symbols lend themselves so well to what Macherey refers to as the "attempt at *reconciliation*" to be found at "the source of ideology" (16). Due to their logic of unity and timelessness, symbols are perfectly equipped to construct vast atemporal continuums in which ideology may be readily reconciled with whom- or whatever it is actually exploiting: the colonial subject, the working poor, or the environment, all of whom and which require for their liberation an understanding of the historical situation in which the exploitation is taking place. This reconciliatory quality, then, explains how McCarthy's symbols can function so as to gloss over capitalism's exhaustion of the environment. Notably, ideology itself emerges here *as symbol*: apolitical, ahistorical, and devoid of motive.

Lionel Trilling has argued that, as opposed to its European counterpart, the American novel seeks a reality that is "only tangential to society" (8). Even should this be true, however, that the American novel is generally uninterested in the social causes of its own being, it cannot be denied that, despite its evasions, a text such as *Suttree* is full of the kind of "social observation" Trilling finds missing in the American tradition at

large (18). Environmental degradation, for instance, is in McCarthy's novel a multifaceted issue that sprawls all over the text and that involves such seemingly disparate—but both highly social—phenomena as the absent presence of the atom bomb and the overtly depicted sufferings of Knoxville's poor. A good place for a historically oriented reading to begin, for this reason, is the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Founded in 1933 as a Keynesian response to the Great Depression, this federally owned corporation was assigned to create employment opportunities and electricity for the region's population. Significantly, from the McCarthy critic's point of view, this project would involve the commission of six dirty fossil plants ("Coal") and the construction of 30 hydroelectric dams ("Hydroelectric") that already in 1946 had caused the dispossession of more than 70 000 people (Prather, "Color" 42), many of whom, surely, served as inspiration for the "pariahs" who populate *Suttree* (McCarthy 356): people who live in "endless poverty" (356), who answer the calls of "factory whistles" that seem "sad beyond all telling" (479), who are forced to relocate to "high ground" (135), and who certainly render ironic the still TVA slogan, "Built for the People" ("Built for the People"). Originally, the TVA was indeed part of Roosevelt's New Deal attempt to get the economy back on track and to mitigate the suffering of those hit hardest by the depression.¹⁰ Still, this attempt arguably amounted in equal parts to the rescuing of American capitalism as such and thus to the perpetuation of the inequalities built into the system. At any rate, beginning with World War II, the TVA was to supply electricity to Oak Ridge, a city built secretly by the government 25 miles west of Knoxville with the purpose of providing a location for the manufacturing of "the nuclear materials needed for the" atomic "bomb"—a fact still boastfully broadcast on the TVA's official website ("TVA Goes to War"). In "1955, the year" McCarthy's novel ends as "Suttree hitchhikes out of Knoxville," 50 percent of the electricity produced by the TVA still went to the production of "nuclear energy and weapons" (Prather 41).

It is important to note here that although *Suttree* was not published until 1979, McCarthy seems to have been working on it since 1959 (Luce, *Reading* viii). To begin with, this means that parts of the novel were conceived much closer in time to their historical content. It also means that *Suttree*'s production was concurrent not only with two decades of atomic fear, but with the United States' 1971 abandonment of the Bretton Woods Accord, the corollary liberalization of capital flows, increasing market instability, and greater risk for the kind of crisis that had led to the

establishment of the TVA in the first place and that would occur again with the “first oil shock” of 1973 and the stock market crash of 1973-1974. As William Prather notes, moreover, the links between *Suttree* and the TVA are not merely temporal and geographical: in 1939, McCarthy’s own father “was made Assistant General Counsel” of the corporation “and put in charge of land acquisition and condemnation” (42).¹¹ By association, in other words, Cormac was himself personally involved in a project that aptly illustrated the kind of social as well environmental harm humanity is capable of, even when it is trying to assuage the consequences of a stock market meltdown. It should not be surprising, then, that, in one of the drafts of the unpublished screenplay *Whales and Men*, McCarthy has one of his characters compare the phenomenon of evil to the phenomenon of “hydroelectric dams” (Wittliff 91/97/01).

In order to move beyond the ahistorical and therefore unproductive notion of ‘evil,’ though, one may instead read *Suttree*’s historical underpinnings through the lens of Trotsky’s concept of *combined and uneven development*. Elaborating on this concept, and harnessing it for literary critical use, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) begins by noting how capitalist development or progress for some is invariably bought at the cost of *underdevelopment* for others: “the face of modernity,” the collective states, “is not worn exclusively by the ‘futuristic’ skyline of the Pudong District in Shanghai or the Shard and Gherkin buildings in London; just as emblematic of modernity as these are the favelas of Rocinha and Jacarezinho in Rio and the slums of Dharavi in Bombay” (12–13). Global capital, then, is not a “tide lifting all boats” (22), but rather, a phenomenon of “combined unevenness” (13). Having established this, WReC goes on to suggest that contemporary literary production often bears the imprint of this unevenness in the sense that one may identify in one single work the “simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous” (Bloch qtd. in WReC 12): older literary codes that have survived into modernity and that now mingle with codes that seem to materialize as responses to the imposition of capitalism on a given geographical region (52–53). Drawing on Franco Moretti and quoting his discussion of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, WReC calls attention to how, evidenced “in various technical devices conventionally associated with modernism—digressions, restlessly shifting viewpoints, subversions of conventional causality, chronological disjunction, recursiveness—the form of the novel gestures to the uneven results of forced integration to the modern world-system” (Moretti qtd. in WReC 54).

This quote might as well have been a comment *The Orchard Keeper* or *Suttree*, both in regard to the styles in which they are written and in regard to how these novels register the brutal introduction of capitalist modernity into the lives of their characters. This appears perhaps most conspicuously in the institutionalization of uncle Ather, but clearly, *Suttree*, too, fits the bill. One may witness in this novel the simultaneous non-simultaneity of two distinct historical realities and their crystallization in different “aesthetic modes” (53): the previously mentioned shifts of perspective, for instance, and the traces of regional storytelling that were even more prominent in earlier drafts of the novel (Luce, “Tall Tales” 213), but that also survive to some extent into the published text. Besides the swift banter that pervades all of *Suttree*, examples include Nigger’s anecdote about Irish Long (McCarthy 29–30) and the train wreck stories that are related about halfway through the novel (219–21). All of this dialogue is written in local vernacular, and Dianne Luce is probably absolutely correct to think of “McCarthy’s depiction of playful liars” as “a tribute to the irrepressible inventiveness and narrative energy of East Tennessee’s oral storytellers” (Luce, “Tall Tales” 243). As for the historical modes of existence captured by these different styles, the novel introduces already in the prologue an old community of settlers, the 1950s version of which is a social sphere where the protagonist is still able to survive by bartering—and bantering—with local merchants. This residual way of life allows Suttree to escape, with some success, the daily routines of an alienated worker (and this is visible not least in how he forms several non-commercial relations with other people, such as Harrogate, J-Bone, and Trippin Through the Dew). In *Suttree*, though, as is typical of “semi-peripheries” such as post-war Knoxville (cf. Moretti qtd. in WReC 53), this historical reality exists side by side with the indisputable fact and presence of global capital. There is the hydroelectrical dam, there is the specter of the atomic bomb and the cold war, and there is the I-40. What comes to the fore here, in other words, is indeed combined and uneven development: the development of the bomb and the new infrastructure is predicated in part on the *underdevelopment* and neglect of Knoxville’s poorer neighborhoods. These two polar opposites of capitalist progress are combined, uneven, and legible in the novel’s form—in its reproduction of the oral tradition of East Tennessee and in the shifts of perspective and occupation with interiority examined earlier in this chapter.

Considered in relation to this intersection between history and literary form, it appears significant that McCarthy’s writing draws heavily

on scientific discourse, often so as to elide precisely the kind of historical matters discussed here. Responding to this tendency, but ignoring its ideological aspects, a certain kind of McCarthy critique has emerged that—in symbolist fashion, and thus *with the grain* of the novels—calls attention to the ways in which the behavioral patterns of humanity tie in with the behavioral patterns of the cosmos. One of the most recent and most ambitious examples here would be Bryan Giemza’s well-researched and well-substantiated discussion on *Suttree*’s fascination with the phenomena of “chirality,” a concept denoting “handedness” and the way in which everything from stones to people spins, leans, and spirals according to certain fundamental patterns (8). Giemza’s article is bound to fascinate anyone even mildly interested in the workings of the universe. However, given what this dissertation suggests about McCarthy’s symbolism and the way this mode of writing functions ideologically, Giemza’s tendency to yield to the totalizing logic of chirality comes across as rather problematic. “Perhaps,” his article concludes, “we might even speculate that our felt sense of profound mythos, and whatever logos that reason may extract from the world, has its underpinnings in the chiral dance of symmetry and asymmetry” (24). As intriguing as this notion may be, one should note that, much like the symbolist tendencies of McCarthy’s novels, it ignores, to speak with Hansen, “the unavoidable ‘situatedness’ of the interpreting subject in a context or discourse” that by necessity “forecloses on the possibility of transhistorical or universal-historical modes of sensemaking” (668). Differently put, when McCarthy’s novels show how people and plants are determined by the same universal laws, and when Giemza suggests that McCarthy’s writing, too, may be under the sway of similar influences, there is a very real risk that one loses track of how *Suttree*’s symbolism means in very particular ways due precisely to how it coincides historically with phenomena such as the TVA’s emission of flue gas, its evictions of the poor, and its contributions to the development of the atomic bomb. Even though McCarthy’s novel emerges in some sense, to adopt Giemza’s phrase, in the midst of “nature’s time-so-deep-as-to-be-timeless” (1), its 1950s Knoxville is “characterized,” as John Vanderheide notes, “not merely as the product of geological movements but of the historical individuation of the American nation” (“Doom’s” 194).

Rich in texture, Giemza’s article actually offers several potential starting points for a more contextually sensitive reading of McCarthy’s text. For instance, commenting on an oft-quoted passage that touches—like so many other places in McCarthy’s oeuvre—on the seemingly

incompatible concepts of agency and determinism, Giemza homes in on the possibility for an organism to “go against the grain” (20), a possibility that seems closely related to McCarthy’s representation of modernity as some kind of uniquely destructive aberration. The passage from the novel is set in Abednego Jones’s tavern boat, slightly upriver from Suttree’s home, and it occurs moments after the narrator has described “the greenish phosphorescence” of a “*sinister* mold” on the panels in Jones’s bathroom (135; my emphasis). “He,” that is Suttree, the narrator begins,

sat with the back of his head against the board wall and his mind drifted. Moths crossed the mouth of the lamp in its scroll iron sconce above his head, the shape of the flame steadfast in the pietin reflector. On the ceiling black curds. Where insect shadows war. The reflection of the lamp’s glass chimney like a quaking egg, the zygote dividing. Giant spores addorsed and severing. Yawing toward separate destinies in their blind molecular schism. If a cell can be lefthanded may it not have a will? And a gauche will? (135)

Worth noting here, first, is how McCarthy’s free indirect discourse blurs the distinction between narrator and protagonist so that the reader is unable to tell who is asking the questions; second, how, by way of simile, the passage destabilizes the ontological divide between a lamp’s reflection and “a quaking egg”; and third, how the simultaneous occurrence of “destinies,” blindness, and “will” renders indeterminate the question whether a cell or a person may at all choose its path in the world. What is more, as Giemza argues, the theme of lefthandedness brings to mind the idea that, if one accepts that the world is governed by chance and that “randomness” made most of this world righthanded, perhaps this “makes the existence of opposite chirality—call it the sinister aspect—all the more intriguing” (13). Echoing *Suttree*, Giemza asks rhetorically whether “the cell that rejects the dominant chirality” is “in some sense . . . ‘willful’?” (13). Giemza ponders this question in relation to the protagonist’s stillborn twin and the protagonist’s suspicion that, as a dextrocardiac, he might very well be the evil mirror-image of this dead brother (20). Yet, the kind of willfulness evoked here may also be read fruitfully in relation to *Suttree*’s introductory remarks about the “*old teutonic forebears*” of white American civilization (McCarthy 5): that abnormally sinister and willful group of people who invaded this continent “*with eyes incandescenced by the visionary light of a massive rapacity*”; that group of “*lean aryans,*” “*mindless and pale with a longing that nothing save dark’s total restitution could appease*”

(5); that group of Puritans, one may assume, who erected a city that, after all, did not become—although Knoxville is indeed built on a hill—“a sign for all that God has shed his grace on,” but, rather, the locus of a “technological progress” that “leaves destroyed lives in its wake” (Canfield 674).¹²

In these examples from *Suttree*'s prologue, modern American society comes across as incorrigibly destructive. In concordance with this view, McCarthy writes in one of the earlier drafts of the novel that the city's “dirt” and the “bituminous humus in the alleyways” and “in the cellars” appear “as if” it “were impervious to the reconstitution of cyclic matter” (91/19/14). It is clear, then, that, “cloaked” by a “pestilential miasma” (207), this is a city “that no rain” can “make clean again,” as reads the published text (368). It is equally clear, however, that this perspective on Knoxville clashes with *Suttree*'s frequent evocations of natural resilience. For instance, it is described at one point how an “old locomotive” is “half swallowed up in kudzu,” how “enormous lizards lay sunning on the tarred coach roofs,” and how the sun is slowly peeling off the paint from a “tender and rotting daycoach” (438). In the previously mentioned train wreck passage, an “old man” relates a memory of when, back in the winter of 1931, in the Colorado mountains, he accidentally sets fire to a railway coach and then quickly jumps out in the snow: “if I live to be a hunnerd year old” (220–221), he says, with a fascination reminiscent of the futurists' celebration of destruction and “eternal, omnipresent speed” (Marinetti), “I dont think I'll ever see anything as pretty as that train on fire goin up that mountain and around the bend and them flames lightin up the snow and the trees and the night” (221). As Georg Guillemin puts it, this is a passage where “[m]an, machine, and nature seem to be in perfect harmony in an aesthetic that is based on the relatedness of things, and not on the incongruity of the machine in the garden” (*Pastoral* 16). In a word, this aesthetic is symbolist, and as such, it challenges the elements in the novel that render the (toxi)city of Knoxville too serious to be overcome.¹³ Borrowing from Fredric Jameson's reading of Conrad's *Lord Jim*, one could suggest here that *Suttree*'s “ultimate ambiguity lies in its attempt to stand beyond history” (*Political* 237).

Conclusion

Kari Marie Norgaard suggests about global warming (this “hyperobject,” as Timothy Morton calls it [*Hyperobjects*]) that it “takes work” to produce the kind of ideological quietism fit to help people endure such a crisis (93).

The “management of unpleasant and ‘unacceptable’ emotions,” Norgaard writes, “is carried out through the use of a cultural stock of strategies and social narratives that are employed to achieve selective attention, perspectival selectivity, and the stopping of thought” (213). Although the focus of Norgaard’s study is climate change denial at the turn of the millennium, it draws heavily on Robert Jay Lifton’s work on nuclear fear, presented three years after the publication of *Suttree* and proposing that, in the Atomic Age, people live with “the knowledge on the one hand that we, each of us, could be consumed in a moment together with everyone and everything we have touched or loved, and on the other our tendency to go about business as usual—continue with our routines—as though no such threat existed” (4-5). If one thinks in literary terms about the “work” or coping mechanisms Norgaard mentions, it seems reasonable to draw a parallel here to Jameson’s notion—referenced in the introduction to this dissertation—that human “experience has as its most fundamental structure work itself” and that, in the case of the author, work is more or less the “conscious and unconscious artistic elaboration” of the “original content,” that is, history (“Meta” 17). In *Suttree*’s case, this elaboration appears to be dealing with a historical content that consists to a significant degree of the kind of anxiety touched on by Norgaard and Lifton both; and in McCarthy’s hands, this anxiety turns into an aesthetic that oscillates between a rather vague mapping out of socio-historical conditions that involve poverty, pollution, and nuclear armament, on the one hand, and a symbolist “stopping of thought,” on the other, that conceives of such phenomena as unavoidable and ultimately insignificant results of mechanisms that escape human control (Norgaard 213). This stopping of thought hinders *Suttree* from ever really engaging in the kind of social struggle that appears most explicitly in the protagonist’s father’s claim that there “is nothing occurring in the streets”—a claim Suttree ends up countering not by reminding his father that “the helpless and the impotent” always help build the wealth of people in “law courts, in business, in government,” but by questioning the value of having this kind of discussion at all and by once again reminding the reader of the transience of all human affairs (15). Rather than spending any time and energy on the complicated and highly interrelated ways in which representatives of law courts, businesses, and governments are involved in the exploitation of the poor, in atomic war-mongering, and in the abuse of the environment (all of which are factors without which McCarthy’s novel would never have been written), *Suttree* seeks refuge in the purportedly ahistorical world of

symbolism. The novel's distinctly political reason for being, then, or "the principle of its identity," in Macherey's phrase, figures most prominently as a "determinate absence" (Macherey 89).

Like most of McCarthy's early writing, *Suttree* does not offer any explicit autoreferential comments on its own symbolism. The closest one gets in regard to this novel is a discarded passage from the archives where McCarthy writes about Harrogate that he is "attended by the old adumbrations of *fatalism* [inserted by hand: 'predestination' and 'divine intervention'] with which straitened opportunity has always afflicted the impecunious"—a comment, it seems, on how the disavowal of human agency potentially offers a way out of suffering (Wittliff 91/19/13; my emphasis). "Grace comes in the absence of will," as McCarthy puts it in the same draft (91/19/13). In the published text, however, these sentences have been weeded out, with the result that the novel's exploitation of symbolist logic seems largely unchallenged. It is important to note here, moreover, that this exploitation is performed not primarily by any of the novel's characters, but by the omniscient narrative voice itself: it is *Suttree* and not Sutt-tree that describes how "the city lights . . . lay fixed among the deeper shapes of stars and galaxies fast in the silent river" (305).

Suttree's tension between the acknowledgment and the evasion of history calls into question the critical notion that *Suttree* "achieves perfect resolution" (Young 120), offers "thematic unity" (Walsh 190), or "gathers" its "emblems, banter, tall tales, and monotonous syntax into a unified aesthetic" (Guillemin, *Pastoral* 11). In all fairness, it is certainly possible to find aspects of the novel that would make it seem aesthetically consistent, such as the paratactic style and the recurring shifts of perspective. Yet, there is a risk here that the desire to resolve literary tensions results in what Macherey calls "the interpretive fallacy" (11), a fallacy caused by "the hypothesis of the work's unity" (46) or the presupposition of "the active presence of a single meaning around which the work is diversely articulated" (86). For Macherey, conversely, the work is invariably "decentered" (meaning that it does not have any *one* central meaning) and "complex" (meaning that it says many things at once) (113). As such, moreover, it may beneficially be read in conjunction with historical contexts that are themselves also characterized by "the confrontation of separate meanings" (88); contexts where, as New Criticism pioneer William Empson puts it, "human life is so much a matter of juggling with contradictory" and indefinitely proliferating "impulses (Christian-worldly, sociable-independent, and suchlike) that one is accustomed to thinking people are

probably sensible if they follow first one, then the other, of two such courses” (197). *Suttree*, for one, follows the impulse to acknowledge the brutalities of its own historical moment no less than it follows the impulse to symbolically evade them. Thus, social texture is alternately disclosed and concealed.

Later in his career, in novels such as *Cities of the Plain* and *The Road*, McCarthy will comment self-reflexively on this tension, at least implicitly, by accommodating the critical insight that, due to its multiple affordances, literature does not always mean the way its author intends it to.¹⁴ The symbolist aesthetic, for instance, might serve both to help readers imagine a more sustainable relationship with the environment *and* to help people escape responsibility. At this stage of his writing, McCarthy comes closer to what de Man describes as the later symbolism of Mallarmé: an aesthetic that recognizes the fact that, since language is the poet’s only tool, s/he should not relinquish this tool in the hope “for direct, unmediated contact with Being”; rather, to survive, and to make any kind of difference at all in the world, poetry must assert its difference from that which it describes (de Man, “The Double” 12). Therefore, de Man notes, Mallarmé asks that we “sacrifice our desire for what is not ourselves, to increase clarity and insight within our mind” (16). Such an endeavour, surely, would be allegorical for a number of reasons: first, because it homes in on the otherness of ourselves; second, because it acknowledges the otherness of language; and third, because it pays attention to its own ontological problems. In *Suttree*, McCarthy’s writing has not yet taken this turn. Still, it helps lay the foundation for the autoreferential aspects to be found in the later novels.

¹ Other instances of *Suttree*’s symbolist similes include “candled woodknots” that shine “blood red and incandescent like the eyes of watching fiends” (18), “bridgelights” that tremble “in the black eddywater like chained and burning supplicants...” (34), and “lightbulbs” that peer “from the slowly heaving jetsam like great barren eyes” (144). As Karissa McKoy points out, this “form of presentation” clearly “confuses and pollutes categorical boundaries” (109), so that *Suttree*’s world appears, as David Holloway puts it, as “a place where human objects (dead ‘foetal humans’) are merely one kind of matter among others” (*The Late* 115). Bryan Vescio, too, notes how McCarthy’s writing “doesn’t merely place flowers alongside rusted auto parts, but makes them virtually indistinguishable parts of one integrated landscape” (79).

² As Georg Guillemin submits, “the prologue is all parable” (*Pastoral* 11). I do not argue, though, that the rest of the novel is similarly designed. Yet, even though *Suttree* may not be

intentionally crafted as allegory, this does not mean that it cannot be read as such, as a literary artifact that 'stands in' for some of the historical contradictions of its time.

³ Other critics have made similar comments. See, for instance, Gerhard Hoffmann, who suggests that McCarthy links together "rain, river, the trash of the city, Suttree the fisherman, and the enigma of life, without rift, just through the force of rhetoric" (238) or pioneering McCarthy scholar Vereen Bell, who argues that McCarthy's precision of language renders "the raw materiality of the world . . . both charismatic and overpowering" and "the ego . . . as fragile and as transient, and perhaps as illusorily, as any imagined form" ("Ambiguous" 39).

⁴ See also Holloway (*The Late* 118), and note, moreover, as have other critics, such as Luce, that there is evidence in earlier drafts of *Suttree* "that an emotionally and spiritually healthier Suttree is the retrospective third-person 'narrator'" of the novel ("Tall" 217). This possibility, that Suttree and the narrator are actually one and the same, potentially goes some way in explaining McCarthy's recurring shifts of perspective. Extending this discussion to *The Road*, Brian Evenson suggests that "McCarthy's deliberate refusal to indicate the narrative level" blurs the distinction between the narration that calls the novel's world into being and the utterances the author makes in "the real world" (59).

⁵ See, for instance, pages 144, 173, and 236.

⁶ Elijah Guerra draws on Holloway as well as Sartre when he suggests that Suttree is able to shed his passivity: "Through his reevaluation and projection of himself," Guerra writes, "Suttree learns that the real self is comprised of his physical body, his situation, and the decisions he makes" (12).

⁷ On this note, Georg Guillemin compares Suttree himself to Quentin: "Both characters," he writes, "have an academic background; both are haunted by their families' past. Here, as there, suicidal neuroses articulate themselves in obsessions with time and the chiaroscuro of light" (*Pastoral* 7).

⁸ As Stacey Peebles puts it, the "tick of the clock signifies the pull of the past and of death on Suttree himself, and he hears this most clearly when he reflects on the fact that his own time will eventually run out" ("Soundscapes" 177).

⁹ I would like to mention, on this note, that, although he reads McCarthy consistently as an allegorical writer, Guillemin recognizes, when commenting on *Suttree*, the levelling—and thus, I would argue, symbolist—function of death in this novel. "What is most important, then," he writes, "about the death-centeredness of *Suttree* is that death assumes a leveling function" (*Pastoral* 8).

¹⁰ For exhaustive discussions on *Suttree*'s class politics, see Christopher J. Walsh, Louis H Palmer III, and to some degree, McKoy. Recognizing that the attention to political matters ties in with the novel's allegorical nature, Cooper writes that McCarthy's Tennessee "novels combine a horror-drenched and heavily allegorical aesthetic style with historically rooted commentary on social ills, such as issues of race, class, urbanization, and industrialization, to bring into focus repressed social anxieties" ("Tennessee" 41). On this note, however, Jay Watson argues, importantly, that *Suttree*'s "egalitarian posture" is somewhat undercut by a "racial panic" evident in scenes "where we witness what amounts to white vertigo at racial intimacy" (97). "One might argue," Watson writes, moreover, "that *Suttree*'s TVA content, along with its Depression-era iconography of river slums and shantytowns, simultaneously serves as a kind of historical screen memory welling up into the 1950s to take our eyes off the biggest prize at stake during this period" (98). Linda Woodson, similarly, rightly points out that although in "his interaction with individual blacks," Suttree "exhibits an affection, care-taking, and tenderness that cannot be questioned," the novel's "more general images" belie that "sensitivity" and "place Suttree, the narrator, and the reader at a less painful distance from the poverty and discrimination of the region" ("Visual" 218).

¹¹ As Woods Nash points out, the TVA's recruitment of McCarthy's father seems to have been the very reason the family moved to Knoxville (74).

¹² A number of scholars pay attention to "McCarthy's ironic reference to Knoxville as the 'city on the hill,'" as Walsh puts it (234). Besides Walsh, see, for instance, Canfield (674) and Cowart (408).

¹³ Commenting on human destructivity, Walsh notes how, when Suttree's McAnally quarters are being torn down, "key themes and motifs assault the reader" in "a nightmarish vision where man-made machines destroy the earth" (211). John Lewis Longley Jr., similarly, notes that in McCarthy's novel, "only man is vile"; or, "more accurately, man and all his works: the abandoned mines, the junked cars, the rotting shacks, the endless shopping centers that rear their lovely heads" (82). Furthermore, Young notes that, in *Suttree*, "the fundamental organization of human life precludes it from resuming its original place in the world" (107). On a related note, Rachel Furey comments on "McCarthy's decision to write in fragments" and argues that this decision highlights, among other things, how "'wholeness' is something impossible to achieve" (53). The "deteriorating city," Furey writes, "will 'never repair itself and become whole'" (53). Guillemin suggests about the prologue in particular that the sentences I quote from there allude "to the ideas of the Puritan errand into the wilderness, of Manifest Destiny, and of white supremacy" (*Pastoral* 13). "This legacy," Guillemin concludes, "is identified not just as obsolete but also as *pathogenic*" (13; my emphasis).

¹⁴ In an optimistic take on this increased self-reflexivity, Linda Woodson suggests that McCarthy arrives ultimately at the insight that "fiction opens the way for multiple meanings, commodious enough to accommodate courage to move to the future" ("Heroes" 24).

5. Scalphunters and Voodoo Dolls: *Blood Meridian's* Dialectic of Agency

In estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life activity, estranged labor estranges the species from man. (Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*)

Where each is all the eye turns inward... (McCarthy, Wittliff 91/38/3)

“Your ideas are terrifying and your hearts are faint. Your acts of pity and cruelty are absurd, committed with no calm, *as if they were irresistible*” (Valéry qtd. in McCarthy, *BM*; my emphasis). Thus read the opening lines of the first epigraph to McCarthy’s 1985 *Blood Meridian*, a novel concerned with how a group of scalphunters harry the southwestern US and northern Mexico in the aftermath of the Mexican-American war (1846–1848). The words from the epigraph are significant for at least two reasons: first, written by French symbolist poet Paul Valéry, they prefigure how the narrative voice in McCarthy’s novel will repeatedly conjure, in symbolist fashion, some unfathomable interconnectedness between all the world’s matter, and second, they suggest, as does the novel, that human acts of cruelty *may* be unavoidable. This uncertainty, this ‘may’ and this ‘as if,’ is an apt description of how *Blood Meridian* deals in ways seemingly both conscious and unconscious with a number of issues that all tie in with an underlying focus on human agency and human destructivity. These issues include, first, the idea that the waning of organized religion may contribute to the kind of excruciating violence evoked in the plot; second, the unresolved question as to “whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (5); and third, the novel’s implicit claim that the ways in which a person is able to perceive and engage the world are highly restricted—a claim voiced primarily through the symbolist aesthetic of “optical democracy,” which gets its name from a passage in this novel. Obviously, all of these questions are pertinent to how McCarthy’s mercenaries ransack the Mexican-American borderlands for scalps of the native peoples whose drastic

decimation was a precondition for the westward expansion of white capitalist America.

These questions are of utmost consequence, too, both for a writer working in the 1980s and for a reader of the 2020s: now, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, no less than in the 1800s, the notion of human agency is central to how people understand their relationship not only to one another, but also to an environment that suffers increasingly due to unrestrained capitalist accumulation. I will argue in this chapter that although the ‘as ifs’ of McCarthy’s aesthetic arguably downplay human culpability in relation to such matters, the novel simultaneously displays a strong sense of guilt, potentially predicated on modern forms of exploitation related to the atrocities portrayed in the novel: the slaying, scalping, and commodification of native tribes, and the coeval near-extinction of the buffalo. The peculiar and, as I will argue, capitalist nature of this guilt, however, never allows it to lead to any type of change. Since capitalism depends for its survival on a constant expansion that results by necessity in overproduction and waste, it seems to ceaselessly induce guilt. If this feeling were actually to result in change, though, it would pose an unacceptable challenge to the system that produced it. Thus, it must remain inert, and it remains so due to how capitalism allows people to think of themselves not only as subjects, capable of determination and diligence, but also as objects, not to be blamed for any potential side-effects of human industry, such as environmental degradation or mass-extinction. In McCarthy and elsewhere, the capitalist subject remains agential only for as long as his or her actions seem benevolent; as soon as this changes, the subject is stripped of its subjecthood and declared a force whose impact on the world—positive as well as negative—is negligible. When *Blood Meridian*’s expression of violence, guilt, and evasion is read in this light, so that the novel’s historical and ideological specificity comes into light, this specificity functions potentially as a corrective to McCarthy’s tendency to render human destructivity a timeless manifestation of immutable cosmic patterns. Such a perspective, in other words, encourages the reader to suspect that McCarthy’s ostensibly timeless aesthetic might after all be quite typical of its time.

A Modernist Atheism

Blood Meridian begins in 1847 with the introduction of the 14-year-old protagonist, “the kid,” in whom, the reader learns, “broods already a taste

for mindless violence” that, predetermined or not, will dominate much of the novel’s plot (3). The kid grows up in East Tennessee but soon “wanders west as far as Memphis” (4), thus signaling already in the novel’s first few pages his participation in the westward expansion that will eventually take him all the way to the Pacific coast, to the state of California, conceded by Mexico to the US in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Long before his arrival in the West, however, he makes it, as a 16-year-old, to another of Mexico’s recent concessions: Texas, and more specifically, Nacogdoches. This is a place known as the state’s oldest town, and a place, as Steven Frye points out, that is significantly “located on the ninety-eighth meridian, identified by Frederick Jackson Turner as the boundary line that separates the frontier and the wilderness” (69). This is also where, in a “ratty canvas tent” (6), and in the middle of a spirited sermon, the judge, one of the key figures of *Blood Meridian*, accuses a preacher—falsely, it turns out—of imposture, bestiality and pedophilia (7). Presently, abundant gunfire is released, whereupon the tent, “this nomadic house of God” (6), soon buckles under like a “huge and wounded medusa,” as if the pillars supporting Christendom finally have given way (8). Thus, a few of *Blood Meridian*’s central themes are already established: the possibility that aggression might be etched into the human genome, the purportedly manifest destiny of the United States, and the idea that these atrocities stand in stark contrast to organized religion. If considered in conjunction with the novel’s preoccupation with violence and guilt, moreover, the novel’s Christian collapse reads also as a hint at the historical transition from one mode of redemption to another: from the possibility of finding solace in a humility before God’s omnipotence, to the possibility of resigning in the face of a capitalism that has been reified to the point of utter inalterability.

Via an array of religious symbols, defaced or decayed, the Christian debacle that inaugurates McCarthy’s novel can be traced all throughout its subsequent plot line. The reader is told, for instance, that “a dead Christ in a glass bier lay broken” on a chancel floor (64), that victims “lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust” (57), and that the kid wakes once “in a ruinous church, blinking up at the vaulted ceiling with their faded frescos” (27). At one point, moreover, an old Mennonite tries to warn the novel’s filibusters that “[h]ell aint half full” (43).¹ As this warning is not heeded, however, both icons and portents are left behind in the dust, whereas McCarthy’s itinerants trek on, like “disciples of a new faith” (137), through a barren landscape stretching out like “a great stained

altarstone” (109). Here, in a country “thirsty” for the “blood of a thousand Christs” (109), the waning force of Christianity is displaced to the periphery. In this land “under darkness,” as McCarthy terms it, the vacuum of God’s supposed absence is filled with havoc (109).²

György Lukács has argued that modernist literature tends to voice an atheism that perceives “the empty heavens” as “the projection of a world beyond hope or redemption” and that hears in divine silence not “a liberation,” but “a token of the ‘God-forsakenness’ of the world” (“The Ideology” 208). From this perspective, Lukács suggests, the only point to the nothingness of transcendence is that it reveals “the *facies hippocratica* of the world” (208): the facial appearance of someone—or in this case, something—marked by impending death. This is a strikingly accurate description also of how *Blood Meridian* repeatedly puts Christianity forth as a defeated antithesis to an imperialist killing spree. In McCarthy’s universe, “God’s removal from the scene” seems to be a tragedy vouching for destruction and death, rather than a possibility to move beyond the limits imposed by Christian epistemology on people’s ability to think of themselves as sovereign beings (Lukács, “The Ideology” 208). However, considering how McCarthy’s aesthetic in general repeatedly seeks to relativize such sovereignty by way of gauging it against forces much larger than humanity, it appears as though it might prove productive to think of *Blood Meridian*’s focus on the waning of Christianity as predicated precisely on the sense that this religion is no longer able to either successfully minimize the significance of human agency—in relation to God’s—or to credibly offer humans absolution. At any rate, the novel’s juxtaposition of religion and violence clearly triggers the question as to what extent human beings are in charge of their own lives, and to what extent they should feel guilty for any kind of brutality in which they partake.

A Dialectic of Agency

Blood Meridian’s concern with agency and free will has received much critical attention. This is understandable, considering how ambivalently McCarthy treats these subjects. At times, the author seems unwilling to allow for even a scintilla of human agency, like when Toadvine, one of the few characters who make it almost to the end of the novel, sets fire to a hotel and runs down the street, laughing and crazily waving his hands above his head, looking “like a great clay voodoo doll made animate” (14), or when, later in the novel, the kid is “lying on his belly holding the big

Walker revolver in both hands,” letting “off the shots slowly and with care as if he’d done it all before in a dream” (116). Arguably, these scenes render humans all but “marionettes,” as the novel terms it (293), animated, perhaps, by some Hobbesian ‘war of all against all,’ supposedly unavoidable in the face of God’s absence.

This rejection of human agency, though, is clearly recanted elsewhere in the novel. On one occasion, this opposite view is voiced through a retired slaver who puts the kid up for the night and who holds in his hand a “dried and blackened” heart once “hung inside” the chest of one of his human chattels (19). People “can do anything,” the slaver proclaims, and *make* anything, even an “evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it” (20). Notably, though, the slaver contradicts himself here, by first asking the kid what “world’s he seen that he liked better?,” to which the kid responds that he “can think of better places and better ways,” to which the slaver replies: “Can ye make it be?” (20). “No,” the kid says, thus conceding that humans are unable to shape the world to their liking (20). Still other instances in the text, however, support the slaver’s claim that humans are capable of almost anything: the previously mentioned Mennonite, for example, maintains that “only men have the power to wake” the “wrath of God” (43), and, when bitten by a bat, a character named Sproule lets off “a howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulsebeat of the world” (70).

As the above examples demonstrate, *Blood Meridian* establishes a dialectic by juxtaposing two divergent ideas of historical agency. On the one hand, humans appear, by way of figurative speech, “like blood legatees,” like “men invested with a purpose whose origins” are “antecedent to them” (160); on the other hand, however, the same humans are acknowledged to have a will of their own in this world where “anything is possible,” to speak with the judge (258). As I have demonstrated, this view emerges, for instance, both as an element in character dialogue and in the narrator’s comments. The ambivalence generated here is reflected in the novel’s criticism: Christopher Douglas, for example, proposes that “McCarthy accepts evolutionary violence and historical violences as givens” (15), while Sarah L. Spurgeon claims that, in *Blood Meridian*, “man’s will is the most potent of forces” (90); Dana Phillips sides with Douglas by arguing that “the novel soon makes it clear that creation cannot be shaped to man’s will” (“History” 439), and so does Lydia Cooper, who writes that the “almost complete absence of any indications of the kid’s thoughts or motivations reinforces the reader’s impression that the kid cannot control his

destiny” (Cooper, *Heroes* 66). Dan Moos seems to disagree, though, when he suggests that the violent markets in McCarthy’s novel are “fueled by American expansionist politics” (37).³ I argue, however, as does Brad Bannon and J.A. Bernstein, that it appears simplistic to suggest either that McCarthy believes in agency and free will or that he does not. “Clearly,” Bannon writes, “the matter of sorting” these things out “is rather complex” (Bannon, “Divinations” 79): “To say that McCarthy does or doesn’t believe in human agency is probably a gross simplification, since he wrestles with it in his writing” (Bernstein qtd. in Bannon, “Divinations” 79). Similarly, when commenting on a scene where the kid has just let go of a chance to kill the judge, who is likely a threat to the protagonist’s life, Scott Esposito argues that whether the kid’s “agency, real or imagined, made any difference in the outcome,” is a question the novel does not answer (Esposito). “Is there a point in which a person can...choose his course in the world,” Esposito asks, and then states that McCarthy is “intentionally vague” on this matter (Esposito).

One of the most nuanced examples of this vagueness emerges when the narrator describes how Glanton, the captain of the scalphunters, reflects on his own life:

He watched the fire and if he saw portents there it was much the same to him. He would live to look upon the western sea and he was equal to whatever might follow for he was complete at every hour. Whether his history should run concomitant with men and nations, whether it should cease. 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 ever be in the world and all that the world would 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. (256)⁴

“The will in him was long augmented into a contempt for all consequence,” reads one earlier draft of this passage, thus emphasizing the point of Glanton’s musings: that he has actively chosen to disregard the outcomes of his actions, whatever their causes (Wittliff 91/38/3). In the same draft, McCarthy scribbles three words in one of the lower margins: “discretionary, autonomous, blind,” all of which seem to refer to “the riders” and “human soul[s]” that appear on the same page (91/38/3).

Arguably, this note suggests that the author imagines humans to have will and agency, but that these humans are also *blind to the consequences of their actions*—a blindness, at least in Glanton’s case, that may indeed be willed into existence.⁵

The character with whom Glanton has the closest relationship, a “terrible covenant” (*BM* 133), as one of the other scalphunters puts it, is the judge—a seemingly omnipresent and supernatural “degeneration of the trickster figure,” in Rich Wallach’s words (qtd. in Josyph 104). The judge is a character who seems to represent, even more so than Glanton, “all of our worst impulses, and the tendency to rationalize away their moral significance in favor of the sheer pleasure of self-indulgence” (qtd. in Josyph 104).⁶ It would arguably be a mistake, then, to take seriously everything the judge says: he repeatedly contradicts himself so that, if taken together, his frequent orations on subjects varying from “geological cataclysms” (90) to the Anasazi (153) seem to constitute less a coherent position than, as Philip A. Snyder has it, “language use” as such: “a force which transforms materiality into textuality” (130). For these very reasons, the judge’s slipperiness, and his lack of interest in taking responsibility for any consistent position, it makes sense to read him in relation to Glanton’s disregard for consequences. Toward the end of the novel, when the kid has returned, some two decades after the scalphunting spree, from the west coast to Fort Griffin, Texas, he there meets the judge, who soon bursts out in a lengthy monologue pertinent to the subject (344). A dance is about to take place at the dancehall where the two are sat down, but when the judge talks about dancing, it is clear that he is thinking more of life in general than of this particular event:

As the dance is the thing with which we are concerned and contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well. In any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories and none here can finally comprehend the reason for his presence for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists. In fact, were he to know he might well absent himself and you can see that that cannot be any part of the plan if plan there be. (346)

It seems to be suggested here that even though a person’s actions indeed have consequences, these consequences tie in with patterns too large to comprehend. There is no way of knowing the “dancer from the dance,” in

Yeats's phrase (Yeats 217), and thus, the best this dancer can do is dance: "Men are born for games. (Homo ludens) Nothing else," as the judge puts it in the unpublished draft quoted above (Wittliff 91/38/3), thus referencing, one must assume, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's claim that "[p]lay is older than culture" (1).

It would be rash, of course, to take the judge's opinions to reflect those of the author. In a recently discovered private letter sent by McCarthy to psychologist Robert Coles not long after *Blood Meridian's* publication, McCarthy expresses dread at a world where morals would matter as little as they do for the judge:

There are a few people investigating the notion as to whether there is such a thing as innate morality (in other words, such a thing as morality at all) but to most people I think even the question must appear odd. Kant's admiration of the 'starry sky above and the moral law within me' must appear a quaint and misinformed confusion of realities attributable to the times. Sort of like alchemy.

The kicker of course is that if people are really just discrete and somewhat freakish biological entities rather than expressions of some spiritual order of the universe then we are obliged to allocate them only those rights and that status and that degree of humanity which is convenient to us to acknowledge. How children are going to continue to survive this I don't know. (Giemza qtd. in Hillier, *Morality* 67-68)

This letter suggests clearly that McCarthy does not warm to the judge's notion that "[m]oral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak" and that "[h]istorical law subverts it at every turn" (263). Yet, there are, in *Blood Meridian*, tendencies other than this character that question the value of human morals. In the final passages not least, where, like some automaton, the kid seems to seek out his own death, the novel appears to imply that, no matter what routes they take, all things material arrive ultimately at a predestined end: moments before the kid is supposedly murdered by the judge in the jakes outside the dancehall, he stands under the stars that "were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness" (351). The judge's and Glanton's response to this predestination is to accept it as fact and to partake in its brutality, to let themselves be weighed violently against other forces and to think of themselves not in terms of moral law but in

terms of their imbrication in larger patterns, as parts of the enormous movements of the cosmos.⁷ Again, though, even if McCarthy often assents to the truth of the world-view that underpins the actions of these two characters, this does not mean that his texts endorse the actions per se. As evidenced not only by *Blood Meridian*, but by all of McCarthy's novels, an alternative answer to the judge's outlook is the espousal of interpersonal love and sociality: since the life of a human is fated to last only for an instant, these novels suggest repeatedly, be kind; love, and be loved.⁸

John Rothfork is therefore absolutely right to suggest that *Blood Meridian* "presents an argument between the view that human behavior is instinctively driven by violence to gain power and the recognition that such a theoretical belief is pragmatically indefensible" (23). It would be wrong to argue, though, like Dennis Sansom, that, in the final instance, *Blood Meridian* resolves this argument by critiquing the notion of "divine determinism" (18), or that it rejects any kind of determinism, for that matter, that would call into question the value of morals as a tool to assess the soundness of a person's actions (18). Rather, as I will demonstrate, the judge's view of morals actually receives support from the novel's "optical democracy," the symbolist idiom that has become for McCarthy something of an identifying mark, and that repeatedly evokes in his novels the notion that people are ontologically similar to rocks, grass and cacti: no more consequential, and no less predetermined.⁹ Another aspect of optical democracy, moreover, that comes into view in the paragraph in *Blood Meridian* where the term originally occurs, is that the ontological flatness of this supposed democracy renders the human subject unable to engage the material world in any way either conscious or sustainable. It will be argued here, however, that, rather than buying into McCarthy's tendency to render this inability a transhistorical truth, the critic should try instead to historicize the alienated perspective from which it seems to spring.

Optical Democracy and Objectification

In its entirety, the paragraph that introduces the notion of "optical democracy" reads as follows:

On a rise at the western edge of the playa they passed a crude wooden cross where Maricopas had crucified an Apache. The mummied corpse hung from the crosstree with its mouth gaped in a raw hole, a thing of leather and bone scoured by the pumice winds off the lake and the pale tree of the ribs showing through the scraps of

hide that hung from the breast. They rode on. The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (260–61)¹⁰

A number of things are here worth commenting on. First, the “mummied corpse” that hangs from the tree is reified: it is a “*thing* of leather and bone,” an object among others. Second, the ground trudged by the horses is “alien,” as of another world, unknowable to the human mind. Third, there seems to be a pun hidden in these lines: the “eye” that “predicates the whole on some feature or part” reads almost as the “I,” the self that appears to be losing its coherence in a landscape where nothing can “put forth claim to precedence.”¹¹ As the Wittliff archives show, this is a passage that has gone through numerous revisions, a few of which add valuable critical possibilities. It is evident that the published version affords an eco-critical ethos, made possible by the text’s de-privileging of the human agent. Some of the discarded formulations from earlier versions, however, help shed light on the paragraph’s potentially passivizing logic, on the way in which the paragraph not only highlights how human beings are ontologically similar to their environment, but how it insists also that this environment is alien to them. For instance, McCarthy writes in one of the earlier drafts that, “in the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena are equal, none puts forth claim to precedence or *singularity*” (91/38/3; my emphasis). The addition of “singularity” makes this sentence stress even more forcefully that, here, in these landscapes, all is one. For McCarthy, this is not without consequence: “Where each is all,” he writes in the same draft, “the eye turns inward” (91/38/3). The eye/I, then, is cut off from its surroundings, even as it is declared an inextricable part of it.¹²

In his *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx offers a view of humanity that appears at first sight to be well in keeping with McCarthy’s: “as a natural, corporeal, sensuous objective being,” Marx writes, “the human “is a suffering, conditioned and limited creature, like animals and plants” (69). What distinguishes this view most explicitly

from that of optical democracy, however, is that Marx is careful, for obvious, revolutionary reasons, to retain a sense of agency for his human subject. Key here is the concept of objectification, which denotes the crucial ability of living beings to take as object something or someone outside of themselves: “The sun is the object of the plant,” Marx writes, “an indispensable object to it, confirming its life—just as the plant is an object of the sun, being an expression of the life-awakening power of the sun, of the sun’s objective essential power” (69). Since, for Marx, moreover, “nature is” humanity’s “body” (31), these things apply to people as well:

To say that man is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being full of natural vigor is to say that he has real, sensuous objects as the object of his being or of his life, or that he can only express his life in real, sensuous objects. To be objective, natural and sensuous, and at the same time to have object, nature and sense outside oneself, or oneself to be object, nature and sense for a third party, is one and the same thing. (69)

It should be clear, then, that as opposed to commodification, which turns every relation into a commercial one, objectification for Marx is a precondition for the establishment of any kind of conscious relation, be this a relation of love or mere physical nourishment.¹³ Thus, Marx concludes that a “being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being, and plays no part in the system of nature. A being which has no object outside itself is not an objective being . . . it is not objectively related. Its being is not objective” (69). The inability to objectify, in other words, makes for a being who does not actively form relations to its environment; and this, of course, is precisely what happens, according to Marx, in a society where the worker is separated not only from his or her own product, due to the division of labor, but also from the people who produced the objects s/he consumes (32). This leads to a situation where the objective world appears to dominate the subject, who is no longer a “species-being” consciously at “work upon the objective world” (32). “This relation,” Marx explains further, between the worker and the product, “is at the same time the relation to the sensuous external world, to the objects of nature, as an *alien world inimically opposed to him*” (30–31; my emphasis). Like the desert travelled by McCarthy’s scalphunters, in other words, the world appears to this worker as “alien ground” (McCarthy 261).

For benevolent objectification to take place, some kind of “singularity” or difference needs to be acknowledged, because if drowned in an

overwhelming “strange equality” where “the eye turns inward” and where no “preference” is thus possible, there is no way for the human being to take as object that external thing or creature that s/he truly needs. Importantly, though, if Marx is to be believed, McCarthy’s eye does not turn inward due to some transhistorical inability of the human being to engage the environment, let alone comprehend his or her entanglement with it, but due to this being’s alienated condition.¹⁴ When McCarthy’s novels treat this failure as a timeless constant, then, they naturalize, according to Marx’s logic, not only a flaw specific to the capitalist society in which the novels were produced, but also this society as a whole. Thus construed, the optically democratic form suddenly comes across as highly ideological, as a regression, in a way, to a religious mode of thinking, the ruins of which are repeatedly bemoaned throughout McCarthy’s novel, but the force of which returns here with a vengeance, once again instilling in human subjects the notion that their agency is restricted by forces they will never fully understand.

Admittedly, there are obvious risks with objectification as well, such as they are manifested, for instance, in the judge’s appropriative objectification of all the things and all the creatures he records in his “ledgerbook” (147), an activity emanating from his determination to dominate, to become “suzerain of the earth” (209). In Marx, too, there are tendencies that fasten on the exceptionalism of humanity, on humanity’s “advantage over animals” (32), and that may indeed lend themselves to an objectification of a less life-affirming nature. To let go of objectification completely, though, is to relinquish also any kind of meaningful human agency, and any kind of relation, consciously predicated on need, between the human being and that which this being is *not*. From this it follows, moreover, that, as relational beings now without relation, without any knowledge of *the self through the Other*, humans become incapable of finding “the resources to respond to” how “the call” of this Other prompts us to act responsibly and “forbids us to kill,” to speak with Levinas (89, 86). If one construes this Other as Marx’s “external sensuous world” (Marx 30)—that is, the environment—and if one recalls how this environment has been rendered alien, it is clear that the human being no longer has any way of knowing what it should be responsible for. It should hardly be surprising, then, neither that the capitalist subject fails to live sustainably, nor that it conceives of this failure as a transhistorical given.¹⁵ As I will suggest, however, although this fatalism certainly undermines

people's capacity for change, it does not necessarily stop them from experiencing guilt.

The Novel as Confession

Walter Benjamin has argued that capitalism “developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West” (*Selected* 289), and that this capitalism now “serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers” (288). In other words, where religion no longer serves to undercut the notion of human agency as something historically consequential, capitalist ideology steps in to perform this very task. An important difference, though, between Christianity and capitalism, Benjamin explains, is that “historical man” under capitalism does not convert, atone, purify, or repent, but merely intensify (289). Nietzsche's superman—an embodiment, for Benjamin, of “capitalist religious thought”—“is the man who has arrived where he is without changing his ways” (289). Marx is “similar,” Benjamin adds, because for him, socialism is the inevitable result of a capitalism that does not change, but that eventually leads, simply thanks to its internal contradictions, to another, more benign phase (289). This streak of predetermination or historical necessity, of course, appears somewhat ironic in a school of theory so focused on the instrumentality of human agency. In any case, none of this assumed inalterability means that humanity under capitalism is incapable of experiencing guilt; on the contrary, this economic system is extreme, Benjamin submits, not only in that every day is “a feast day,” in that every day is wasteful, but in that it “creates,” perhaps for this very reason, a “vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief” (288).

As is well-known, *Blood Meridian* was partly modelled on a memoir significantly titled *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, written by Samuel Chamberlain, set between 1844 and 1849, and recording the author's exploits with the Glanton Gang, the group of scalphunters McCarthy's protagonist, too, joins early in the novel. As Cooper has noted, though, neither Chamberlain's text nor McCarthy's contains any “true confession” (*Heroes* 73): readers, Cooper concedes about the novel, “may recognize” and perhaps even share “the overwhelming guilt of the characters,” a guilt largely caused by the material manifestations of “the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny” (74); since these characters “do not admit to” this guilt, however, *Blood Meridian* “denies readers any sense of ethical assurance” (74). This is an apt reading, and it is quite consistent with Benjamin's more sweeping assessment of capitalism as a system that, although

it instills guilt in its denizens, never allows for this guilt to result in change. However, a subject under capitalism may still possess the impulse to confess. The acknowledgment of guilt is one thing; *the pledge to change* is another, and as I will go on to show, although *Blood Meridian's* characters may not admit culpability, the novel as a whole reads potentially as a confession. Yet, much in keeping with the novel's wavering stance on human agency, this is a confession that seems uninterested, as does Benjamin's "historical man," in the prospect of change (Benjamin, *Selected* 289).

Even though *Blood Meridian's* characters may not ever successfully confess, they sometimes get close. Toward the end of the novel, for instance, the kid at least "attempts . . . to perform the act of confession," as Spurgeon puts it (103). Kneeling before an old woman he has encountered in a "desolate scene" where some past horror seems to have left her the sole survivor, he speaks to this woman "in a low voice," shares with her an account of his life and his hardships, and offers to "convey her to a safe place" (332). This recently acquired eloquence, however, is met with silence: "No puedes escucharme" ("can't you hear me"), the protagonist inquires before realizing that the "[a]buelita" ("granny") is long dead and nothing but "a dried shell," standing monument to a destructiveness she likely has had no part in (332).¹⁶ Thus, the kid's attempt at confession is rendered pointless.

Few readers probably fail to note either the close to complete absence of women in McCarthy's novels in general or the fact that *Blood Meridian* is no exception. In the novel here under consideration, the blood red sun that lights up the desert massacres resembles, as described, the head of male genitalia (47), and the constantly imminent violence of the anti-plot is exclusively executed by men.¹⁷ It is hardly a coincidence, then, that the kid speaks his mind before a representative of the sex that seems to represent, in *Blood Meridian*, an essentialized corrective to the failed sociality of McCarthy's scalphunters. Built primarily on shared aggression, this sociality repeatedly produces situations where the hunters turn on each other and where some of them even meet their demise.¹⁸ The gendered counterforce to this destructivity, by contrast, makes brief appearances in the novel and thus counters the "solitariness of man" that seems to plague most of the characters (Lukács, "The Ideology" 198). This emerges most explicitly when a group of women bathe a mentally retarded man whom the scalphunters have been transporting in a dirty cage:

She handed him down, him clinging to her neck. When his feet touched the ground he turned to the water. She was smeared with

feces but she seemed not to notice. [. . .] The Borginnis woman waded out with her dress ballooning about her and took him deeper and swirled him about grown man as he was in her great stout arms. She held him up, she crooned to him. Her pale hair floated on the water (271–72)

Toward the end of the passage, where the syntax is more frequently punctuated than what is usual in this novel, the pace abates while the man is leisurely baptized into *Blood Meridian*'s only utopian space: a female realm that, depending on perspective, either lazily naturalizes male aggression and female care or meta-critiques the novel's own androcentrism. At any rate, the passage shows how, in Lukács's words, "the desire for salvation lives on with undiminished force in a world without God" ("The Ideology" 208), and how, when this God is no longer a viable source of redemption, this redemption needs to be sought in other places. Both of the scenes referenced above, however, also make clear that this search is ultimately futile: not only is the abuelita a hollow husk, incapable of indulging the kid's confession, but, as Jason P. Mitchell notes, the bathing scene, too, proves unsuccessful, as the man taken care of is "soon naked again" (301). Conversion, then, again proves impossible: McCarthy's "man," like Benjamin's, arrives "where he is without changing his ways" (Benjamin, *Selected* 289).

Another near-confession emerges no more than two pages after the kid's failed attempt to engage the abuelita. Here, an "old buffalo hunter" remembers, deliriously and without pause

the dead animals scattered over the grounds and the herd beginning to mill and the riflebarrel so hot the wiping patches sizzled in the bore and the animals by the thousands and tens of thousands and the hides pegged out over actual square miles of ground and the teams of skinners spelling one another around the clock and the shooting and shooting weeks and months till the bore shot slick and the stock shot loose at the tang and their shoulders were yellow and blue to the elbow and the tandem wagons groaned away over the prairie twenty and twenty-two ox teams and the flint hides by the ton and hundred ton and the meat rotting on the ground and the air whining with flies and the buzzards and ravens and the night a horror of snarling and feeding with the wolves half crazed and wallowing in the carrion. (333–34)

“I wonder,” the hunter concludes, guiltily, “if there’s other worlds like this . . . Or if this is the only one” (334). The hunter’s paratactic syntax is that of optical democracy, non-hierarchically stacking one sentence upon another, but the effect here is not so much a levelling of subject and object as it is an unflinching and seemingly unstoppable presentation of human brutality and wastefulness: the hunter needs to unload, and suddenly, everything pours forth. In this manner, then, and regardless of what either this character or McCarthy makes of the philosophical dilemma of human agency, they both give voice to a lived experience of guilt.

The argument has often been made that *Blood Meridian*’s depiction of violence is unsentimental, that, although it dispels the bowdlerized versions of westward expansion, its “Western settlers seem no better or worse than those they replace” (J. Mitchell 300): all are equally violent, all part of some Schopenhauerian striving for survival.¹⁹ Be this as it may, it would take quite some effort not to find sentiment in the scenes with the abuelita, the caring woman, and the buffalo hunter. What is striking about these scenes, rather, is the novel’s espousal of defeatism. The kid is guilty, as is the hunter, and the woman’s impulse to bathe the retarded man is quite touching, albeit problematic in its reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Yet, none of this matters in a world where all things have “their destinies in dust and nothingness” (351) and where, if at all possible, the changing of one’s ways will ultimately be of little consequence. Gareth Cornwell is right to suggest “that the epic distance” of McCarthy’s “narrative mode renders inappropriate contemporary ethico-political emotions such as pity, regret, shame, or guilt” (541). One should be careful to note the irony, though, that *Blood Meridian* might indeed be seen as an expression of the very emotions its style of narration, in Cornwell’s words, simultaneously “renders inappropriate.”²⁰

Conclusion

Ideology, as Pierre Macherey’s previously quoted phrase suggests, “exists precisely in order to efface all trace of contradiction” (146). This, one could argue, is the very reason why late capitalism is able to interpellate its centered subjects as agents, when this serves a purpose, and as innocents, when this seems more useful: the neoliberal entrepreneur is an agent, industrious beyond belief, and a pillar of society; in the face of environmental degradation or mortgage meltdowns, however, the same entrepreneur soon turns into an innocent. In the “neuter austerity” of such purportedly random “phenomena,” to travesty McCarthy, no agent may “put forth

claim to precedence” (261). This same logic also explains why *Blood Meridian* is able to describe history as at once alterable and reified, and humanity as both agent and marionette—views that are obviously inconsistent with one another, but that for this very reason are consistent with capitalism’s “false resolution of a real debate,” to speak with Macherey (146). Humans “can do anything” (20), as McCarthy’s slaver puts it, but still, their “destinies are given” (256). The ideology at work here is anthropocentric by its very nature, not only in that it bulwarks the privileges of its Anthropos, but also in that it allows this Anthropos to evade the responsibilities that come with such a centered position. This evasion of responsibility is made possible by alienation: bereft of any objective relation to the external world, the alienated “I” is not a very likely instrument for change. What is more, when ideology “proclaims itself to be unlimited (having an answer for everything),” there no longer seems to be any room for improvement (Macherey 147). Capitalism is always on the right track. Yet, as Macherey suggests, literature potentially “challenges ideology by using it” (149), by making legible its “enclosed, finite” nature (147) and the “significant incongruity” of its utterances (149). Readers of *Blood Meridian*, then, may recognize, thanks to its literary form, how there is an outside to this finitude, how there is indeed a need for change, and how, although a 19th century scalphunter’s disregard for consequences may for this hunter be self-preservational, such an operational principle will ultimately prove to be less so for the human collective as a whole.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how certain elements in *Blood Meridian* tend to relativize the significance of human agency: people are likened once to “voodoo doll[s]” and twice to marionettes (230, 293), and the optically democratic form emerges in the novel as a literary means not only of stressing the ontological similarities and the common destiny of all things material, but also as a hint at the subject’s ‘turning inward’ and this subject’s corollary inability to engage the world in an active and sustainable manner. Although this phenomenon is portrayed in the novel as transhistorical, one could argue, with Marx, that such an experience is symptomatic of the kind of capitalist alienation that makes it impossible for the human subject to recognize how s/he fits into a whole that s/he is able to affect and not only be affected by. Ideologically speaking, optical democracy reads in *Blood Meridian* as redemption via a relinquishment of agency, and, as such, it brings to mind Adorno and Horkheimer’s notion that the “enlightenment” ultimately “returns to mythology,” and that, today, in its capitalist form, mythology still has “the essence of the *status*

quo: cycle, fate, and domination of the world reflected as the truth and deprived of hope” (27). Whereas the priest at the beginning of McCarthy’s novel is obviously unsuccessful in providing solace for his audience, optical democracy arguably has the potential, as it reifies capitalist exploitation, to at least convince people that “they themselves are” a totality “over which they have no control,” and that they will therefore never be able to bring about a better world (Adorno and Horkheimer 29). Thus, *Blood Meridian* glosses the historical transition from a religious to a capitalist mode of evasion.

Other strategies in *Blood Meridian*, however, aim for redemptory release by different means. As previously discussed, and as Spurgeon shows, McCarthy’s text does not exclusively neglect the human race as a force for either good or evil; contrastingly, it also tells the reader, in Spurgeon’s words, that “[t]hrough his will man can make himself suzerain of the earth, though in doing so he must destroy that which he would rule” (98). In order to thrive and annex new territory, McCarthy’s Western civilization kills off countless hordes of buffalo and whole tribes of Native Americans whose existence checks the progress of nation building and whose body parts are therefore reduced to merchandise. Viewed against the backdrop of humanity as a potent force, *Blood Meridian*’s depictions of these phenomena become suggestive of a confession, a declaration of guilt, which obviously stands in stark contrast to the evasions with which they are juxtaposed. In this manner, the novel calls attention to how late capitalism’s contradictory relationship to historical facticity manifests itself in questions which the ideology itself has provoked, by relentlessly promoting unlimited growth on a fundamentally limited planet (cf. Saito 259), and then answered inconclusively, by describing humans as at once agential and predetermined.

Thus, to conclude, McCarthy’s novel stages for the reader an ideological indeterminacy born out of a historical moment in which the resolution of this indeterminacy would potentially contribute to the end of the ideology as such: a complete relinquishment of agency would not work, since this would undermine the image of the industrious subject as creator of capital. Even more importantly, however, if certain lifestyles were indeed declared to have a negative effect on the environment, so that “the bourgeoisie” would no longer be allowed to “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere,” and in so doing ensure capitalism’s constant expansion and generation of surplus, this system’s only mode of existence would suddenly be under threat (Marx, *Manifesto*).

Differently put, such a confirmation of culpability would make impossible the acquiescence that lets capitalism intensify even when the dire consequences of such intensification become apparent. This ideology needs, in other words, to have it both ways: the capitalist subject has to emerge in a never-ending loop first as agent, then as innocent; first as scalphunter, then as “voodoo doll” (McCarthy 14).

¹ Prior to the tent-scene, moreover, the protagonist sees a “parricide hanged in a crossroads hamlet...” (5)—a hint, perhaps, at God’s demise. Neil Campbell, too, comments on this, and writes that the “images of dead fathers represent the past and the process of time that must be usurped by the Judge. The novel echoes that with its precise references to patricide” (60). On a similar note, Wilhelm S. Randall notes that the “landscape of *Blood Meridian* is littered with ruined churches” (154).

² Christopher Douglas reads *Blood Meridian*’s treatment of religion somewhat differently, arguing that “McCarthy is not comforted by the evidence of design he discerns in the universe”; for McCarthy, Douglas suggests, “that design is evidence of a no-longer benign creator whose dark purposes can be discerned in the awful silence of an empty landscape” (14). In other words, God exists, but God is malevolent, and his original ill intentions have spawned a “world marked by systemic violence” (Douglas 14). This violent world God created, whereupon he “absented himself from creation” (14). Douglas’s reading, then, recognizes in McCarthy’s novel an understanding of history as preordained, and of humanity as an impotent force in relation to its own destiny. Other critics who comment on this include Petra Mundik, who suggests, with Diana Curtis, that “organized religion ‘has proved to be as insubstantial as the support of the now-collapsed cross, and as empty as the disembowelled ‘alter-christ’” (“Striking” 87), John Emil Sepich, who states that the “frontier is, literally, a Godless place” (553), and Manuel Broncano, who maintains that *Blood Meridian* takes place in “a universe . . . abandoned by God to the chaos of death” (45).

³ Further examples of critics who weigh in on this include Tom Pilkington, who suggests that, in “any case humans are seen to be puny and insignificant creatures who are hardly masters of their fate and captains of their souls” (314), only to add that, “unlike Crane and the other turn-of-the-century naturalists, McCarthy does not posit a wholly deterministic universe. Humans do make choices—frequently bad choices, but choices nonetheless—that critically affect their destinies” (315). Adrian V. Fielder, by contrast, argues that *Blood Meridian*’s humans seem to lack agency: “the novel,” he writes, “suggests that this rupture between perception and noumen allows the kid (and his companions) to become scripted un-wittingly into a text of which they are not the authors” (33).

⁴ There are striking similarities here to the passage in *Pierre* where Melville calls attention to the “dark, mad mystery in some human hearts, which, sometimes, during the tyranny of a usurper mood, leads them to be all eagerness to cast off the most beloved bond” (180). Pierre, the protagonist, does not display the same disregard for human life that characterizes McCarthy’s scalphunters, but much like Glanton, he thinks that “all the horizon of his dark fate was commanded by him” and that “all the minor things”—including “the whole wide world”—are “whelmed in him” (181). On the next page, though, Melville makes it clear that although his protagonist may think that he is “arguing Fixed Fate and Free Will,” they are actually “arguing him”—and “Fixed Fate got the better in the debate” (182).

⁵ From a distant perspective, or even from Glanton's perspective by the fire, this agency might appear largely inconsequential, "encompassed," as humans may seem, "like animalcules in a waterdrop" (Wittliff 91/38/3). Yet, the notion that these humans do not have the power to affect their own lives or their immediate surroundings would be something completely different, and here, the novel remains undecided.

⁶ The judge has been compared to a number of characters, literary as well as historical (as Stacey Peebles puts it, critics "trying to pin down the judge often resort to multiple comparisons" ["Yuman" 234]). Examples include P.T. Barnum (Bernhoft 29), "Milton's Satan" (Evans "American" 535), "Linneaus" (Godden 453), Joyce's Mulligan (Randall 158), and "Faust, Ahab, Lea, and Macbeth" (Campbell 58). James Dorson adds a few more figures to this list; namely, "death, Zarathustra, Shiva, Krishna, [...] Moby Dick, [...] Mephistopheles, King Lear, a Gnostic Archon, the Yuma god Coh-coh-mak," and his own suggestion: "*the law*" (*Counternarrative* 108). Some critics have also construed the judge as an Enlightenment agent (Frye 69), or as a reference to the "the modern scientific project" (Cusher 225), and indeed, by way of example, his statement that the "man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear" (209) does evoke Adorno and Horkheimer's proposal that "[m]an imagines himself free when there is no longer anything unknown" (16). The "disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy" (3), to speak with these theorists, lie evident in the judge's speculations, which ironically render him a mystery and a "hoodwinker" in the minds of the other scalphunters (McCarthy 266).

⁷ As Brent Edwin Cusher puts it: "In short, the one who chooses to live in the light of the truth about the world—Holden clearly represents this man—would devote himself to war in brash contempt of the principles of justice" (227). In relation to such moral matters one should also note, with Dan Sinykin, that, as "if to suggest the novel's rejection of progress, McCarthy considered the following as an epigraph: 'There is a deep truth in what the school of Schopenhauer insists on—the illusoriness of the notion of moral progress. The more brutal forms of evil that go are replaced by others more subtle and more poisonous' ('Holograph')" (365).

⁸ As John Rothfork writes, beautifully—and this is highly relevant in relation to the need to historicize a novel, to make it productively *mean* for readers here and now: "Of course life has meaning, but it is from the point of view offered inside of a specific, historic life, not the illusory promise of a view of outside of life where things purport to have an absolute value or none. Transcendence is the lie; we always speak to each other" (34).

⁹ Dianne Luce argues that the judge presents false contradictions in relation to the notion of free will, but as she herself almost acknowledges, it is not merely the judge who embodies these conflicts, but the novel as a whole: "The dilemma of human nature," she writes, "is established several times early in *Blood Meridian* in contexts not explicitly involving the judge" ("Ambiguities" 25). On this note, moreover, Lydia Cooper references how Denis Donoghue argues that McCarthy's style "subsumes questions of ethics within larger, cosmic perspectives in which human interactions seem puny and futile at best," but that "it would be a mistake to assume that this 'neuter' narrator's voice is McCarthy's; 'Nietzsche,' Donoghue says, 'is Judge Holden's philosopher, not McCarthy's' (277)" (*Heroes* 66). I would argue, though, that regardless of whether McCarthy believes in morals, *Blood Meridian* relativizes their importance.

¹⁰ The last two sentences in this passage are two of the most oft-quoted and oft-discussed in McCarthy's whole oeuvre. One of the most interesting critical accounts is offered by Georg Guillemín, who argues that "it is in a very negative sense that *Blood Meridian* stylizes frontier history into an egalitarian 'natural history' of man in nature (see Phillips, 'History' 443)" (*Pastoral* 101), a sense evoking the "the universal truth of entropy and death" (100)—a death,

perhaps, that makes character “disappear into the landscape,” as Thomas Pughe puts it (376). Yet, Guillemin continues, “its effect on the reader is a positive, therapeutic one,” since the “insistence on articulation . . . induces a strange euphoria, both in the melancholy narrator crafting the emblem and in the reader susceptible to its meaning” (101). What is problematic with Guillemin’s reasoning, though, is that he gives in to the novel’s fascination with entropy—a death that swallows all—and neglects to discuss the potential ideological implications of this fascination, and the implications of the possibility that the novel functions therapeutically by inducing pleasure, thanks to the act of signifying the unsignifiable: the inevitable death or transience of all things. At any rate, Guillemin’s reading of optical democracy is more helpful than those that simply state that “McCarthy’s omniscient narrator’s radically equalizing vision refuses any anthropocentric point of view” (Powers 66), that the “narration of the novel seems to refuse singling out human beings as subjects superior in significance to the landscape of mindless objects that surround them” (Boguta-Marchel 37), or that “McCarthy’s vision of the natural world . . . challenges and questions the symbolic boundaries and apparent borders between word and flesh, subject and society, photographer and environment” (Lilley 163).

Lee Clark Mitchell provides another useful reading when he suggests that, since language—or the person wielding it—always discriminates, always chooses, optical democracy as a non-anthropocentric language is an impossibility (“A Book” 270). David H. Evans seems to agree when he states, with Wallace Stevens, that a “nonhuman language is a fantasy only humans could forge” (426), that the “absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” (Stevens qtd. in Evans, “True West” 426), and so does Shaw, who writes about *Blood Meridian* that “the ‘names’ through which humans give word to the land quite often refer back to humanity and human experience” (224). This assessment, that optical democracy is an impossibility, is obviously absolutely correct; however, one must separate this fact from the hypothetical impulse that prompts McCarthy to merge the human and the non-human as well as from the affordances that this style possesses—affordances that allow for ecological visions as well as political quietism. These affordances exist, regardless of the fact that language can never be made to perfectly mirror that which it seeks to represent, and regardless of whether one believes, like Mitchell, that the choices made in language hint at the “the possibility of ever greater moral discriminations, ever more humanly distinctive modes of sympathy and appreciation” (“A Book” 276).

¹¹ Without explicitly calling attention to the possibility of reading this exact sentence as a pun, Jonathan Pitts refers to the narrator in the novel as the “genius eye/I” (9).

¹² Although he does not comment on the unpublished draft at all, William Dow helps show how this formulation—“the eye turns inward”—has an obvious intertext in how Thoreau urges “his readers to ‘Direct your eye sight inward’ and ‘be an expert in home-cosmography’ (*Walden* 320)” (97).

¹³ Commodification is all the more present in the novel. The scalphunters harry the villages and encampments of the desert in hunt for the high-ticket scalps of the indigenous population. Homicidal success vouches, for example, for “a hero’s welcome” and a “fantasy of music and flowers” in the town of Chihuahua (174), where the protagonists—themselves with scars making them resemble commercial “articles requiring inventory”—are “promised full payment in gold” for their deeds (176). The streets in the Mexican cities are generally crowded with “rude apothecaries . . . vendors and mendicants,” all partaking in bazaars exhibiting human heads pickled in “carboy[s] of clear mescal” (73). Out in the badlands, the scalphunters parade with valuable collections of heads “like . . . strange vendor[s] bound for market” (165). Here, body parts appear as items of exchange separated from the brutal conditions in which they were produced. Furthermore, even though a price is put on Indian scalps

exclusively, commerce in *Blood Meridian* is blind: buyers can be fooled and anyone with the wrong hair quality is a potential item. The reader learns also that not only the imperialist Westerners are corrupted by the incentives of material profit: the “savages” of the Yuma tribe, too, are described, when they sit by the fire, victorious after battle, “each with his new goods [gold and silver] before him,” as being “no less bound or indentured” (290–91).

¹⁴ On a similar note, Patrick W. Shaw draws on Sartre and discusses violence in *Blood Meridian* as potentially caused by alienation (104).

¹⁵ Against this background, it becomes clear what is lost if one fails to see how collective challenges are often specific to a given historical situation, and, conversely, what is gained if one succeeds in noting, like Ted Benton, that the “concept of ‘modes of production’ immediately undermines any attempt to explain our ecological predicament in such abstract terms as ‘population’, ‘greed’ or ‘human nature’” (Benton). “Each form of society,” Benton explains, “has its own ecology. The ecological problems we face are those of capitalism—not human behavior as such—and we need to understand how capitalism interacts with nature if we are to address them” (Benton).

¹⁶ A number of critics have weighed in on this scene. Broncano, for example, writes that it shows how the kid “has turned into a generous and sympathetic creature who offers protection to the helpless” (44), an assessment with which Wallach agrees when he says—in an interview—that the scene “indicates that an enormous change has taken place” (qtd. in Josyph 83). Zachary A. Williams, further, writes about the scene that it “alerts us to” the kid’s “desire for redemption” (331). Perhaps Inger-Anne Søfting would include this passage, moreover, in the list of “rare occasions” on which the kid “does show humanity” and thereby makes the reader side with him (“Desert” 28). Patrick Shaw, on a different note, fastens instead on the scene’s quixotic nature (113).

¹⁷ Naturally, then, this is something countless critics have commented on. Susan Kollin, for instance, argues generously that “McCarthy may be said to have erased the presence of women in order to argue a case about the place of Anglo masculinity in nation-building projects” (“Genre” 569), and Cant simply notes—without passing judgement—the fact that “the female principle is” often “referred to, *in absentia*, as an aspect of a living fertility without which patriarchal power generates an arid waste land and the vitality of the ‘ardent-hearted’ male is filled with the aforementioned ‘taste for mindless violence’” (Cant, *The Myth* 162–63). Cant also registers how the protagonist’s mother “did incubate in her own bosom the [male] creature who would carry her off” (*BM* 3, Cant, *The Myth* 162). Another example that should be mentioned here emerges when, right before the closing of the novel, the protagonist does not want to leave the female space, as though suspecting that this will be the end of him: “[y]ou need to get down there and get you a drink...[y]ou’ll be alright,” a prostitute tells him after what seems to have been a failed sexual encounter, not only in terms of it being commodified; “I’m alright now,” the kid answers (*BM* 350).

¹⁸ See, for instance, the racism-laden conflict between a white man and a black man—both named Jackson—that results eventually in the death of the white man (113). As Holden tells the kid, life is a “solitary game, without opponent...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?” (347).

¹⁹ As Dwight Eddins puts it, “the indiscriminate and endlessly repetitive carnage seems to belong to the ground of being itself, as for Schopenhauer in fact it does” (27). Mundik puts it similarly, though without Schopenhauer: “*Blood Meridian*,” she writes, “establishes no dichotomous opposition between the natural and moral evil, suggesting that the condition of all life on earth is one of violence, suffering and brutality” (“Striking” 78). Steven Frye, too, seems to agree, when he writes that there is a “deeper skepticism in the novel’s texture that transcends history, culture, and politics” and thereby “invites the supposition that the evil

manifest in the gang and their leaders is not exclusive to them or to the political and economic interests they represent" (75). Also Douglas chimes in on this: "*Blood Meridian*, he writes, "presents us with an ecosystem of finely balanced predation and starvation, wherein humans and non-human animals are integrated and mutually implicated" (99). The potentially quietist implications of this world-view become clear when Douglas adds that when "we are agents of suffering and destruction, that is not because we were their first cause, but rather because we resulted from a process in which those elements are intrinsic and constitutive" (103). Even when this violence is seen as specifically human, moreover, it is often thought of as "a simple continuation of a state of violence that has been part of human behavior since prehistoric times," as Christian Kiefer submits (44). Perhaps this is symptomatic of the novel's affinities with the "biblical epic," a genre, as Justin Evans notes, characterized by "universal historical claims" (412).

In any case, such readings risk "obscuring," as Billy J. Stratton argues, "the fact that at its most basic level the wrangle over power endemic in this conflict had much less to do with survival than it did with an imperialist desire for land and the accumulation of wealth" (158) (Stratton, though, argues ultimately that *Blood Meridian* functions effectively to counter the myths "developed to keep traumatic events such as these buried in the dustbins of history" [167]). As Dorson rightly points out, on this note, readings that conceive of *Blood Meridian's* violence as a transhistorical fact tend to reveal "a basic ahistorical tenet" ("Demystifying" 107).

Treating the novel as an artifact exclusively preoccupied with 19th century violence, moreover, is equally problematic. Such a focus, as Jonathan Imber Shaw puts it, "significantly distracts readers from whatever data, historical and/or cultural, they might draw from those dark conclusions and apply to contemporary conditions" (214). Many critics agree, and *Blood Meridian* has been read, often convincingly, as a symptom of contemporary conflicts involving the US military—examples include atrocities in El Salvador (Shaw 215, McGilchrist 166), Nicaragua (McGilchrist 166), and Vietnam (Cant, *The Myth* 174). Shaw quotes a witness account from the massacre of El Mozote in El Salvador and points out that this narrative "rivals any scene McCarthy has imagined and articulated in *Blood Meridian*, but...is, terribly, not a work of the imagination" (209, 215). As Shaw notes, the atrocities at El Mozote were committed by warriors of the Atlacatl battalion, an army unit trained by US advisers (215). Like McCarthy's scalphunters, these warriors were seemingly out of governmental control, but caught up in a larger imperialist pattern (and in the latter case, the Cold War). One could add here, moreover, that also in the later privatized "war on terror," mercenaries in kind not too different from McCarthy's scalphunters have been prevalent. As Jeremy Scahill puts it, in Iraq, Blackwater units operated "in a legal gray zone, seemingly outside the scope of both U.S. civilian and military law and immune from Iraqi law" (35). What is more, commercial structures related to those of *Blood Meridian* still prevail, albeit in modified forms, and they include by necessity similar kinds of condoned lawlessness to those displayed in the novel. McCarthy's questioning of sovereignty, agency and violence is not, in this perspective, restricted to the mid-19th century. For instance, as readers may learn from Robert Saviano—author of *Gomorra*—his Italy "could never have met the economic requirements for entry into the European Union" had not "the northern Italian businesses that fuel the country's economy...sold their toxic waste to the Camorra on the cheap..." (Donadio). Furthermore, as portrayed by Saviano, this Camorra, a kind of conglomerate mafia that has made the killing of a human being "the equivalent of manufacturing something" (Saviano 103), provides European merchants with "oxygen," by way of consumer goods offered at a percentage "no sales rep" can match—and percentages, Saviano writes, "are what make or break a store, give birth to new shopping centers, bring in guaranteed earnings and, with them,

secure bank loans" (14). *Gomorra*, then, shows clearly how today's Glanton gangs constitute a criminal undersurface that lubricates the wheels of global capitalism, much like McCarthy's scalphunters paved the way for 19th century imperialism.

²⁰ Cornwell also quotes Richard B. Woodward's labelling of McCarthy as "a radical conservative" (541), and finds this label convincing. David Willbern, too, seems to suspect that this might be an accurate description (92). A majority of critics, however, tend to avoid such assessments and instead treat McCarthy's novels as potentially progressive.

6. “He was like a child again”: *Cities of the Plain* and the Affordances of Optical Democracy

Somos ceniza. Este es la verdad final. (McCarthy, Wittliff
91/71/5)

As many critics have noted, the third and final instalment of McCarthy's border trilogy differs considerably from the first two novels of the series in how it envisions the relationship between human and environment. For instance, whereas *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) and *The Crossing* (1993) both repeatedly conjure an ontologically flat world where humans and animals breathe “in rhythm” (*AtPH* 269) as if “joined together by some unseen cord or unseen principle” (*TC* 398), *Cities of the Plain* (1998) teems instead with instances of animal cruelty violent enough to leave the characters responsible shaken beyond recovery. Hundreds of jackrabbits “freeze in the lights” of a fast new car and go “Blap. Blap” when they hit the grille (763), a “large owl” is killed and fixated “cruciform across the driver's windshield of” a truck (776), and a number of wild dogs are roped by the novel's protagonists so as to “burst in the air” or slam “to the ground with a dull thud” (911).¹ With few exceptions, the protagonists deal instantly with the sense of guilt triggered by this violence through opening a bottle of whiskey or lighting a cigarette (763, 764, 779, 912), but it is clear that these measures in no way prevent the pain from evoking other losses: a “dead brother” (778), or a precious horse lost in Mexico a few years back (765). What emerges finally as a successful restoration of innocence, however, are the dreams that appear in the novel's epilogue. Here, one of the protagonists, Billy Parham, meets a Mexican wanderer who shares an anecdote about a dream he once had of a man who, in turn, was also dreaming. In this dream within a dream, the dreamt man is offered a liquid that makes him feel “like a child again,” that bestows on him “a great peace” and the abatement of “his fears” (1025).² Significantly, the dreamt man's dream is told in a manner that would seem to link the redemption they offer to what this dissertation has labelled McCarthy's symbolist style: the optical democracy that frequently and sometimes harmoniously merges human and environment in the author's earlier writing, but that seems to have been pushed back in *Cities of the Plain* by an aesthetic that shuns any such harmony in favor of a formally plain portrayal of human

destructivity, even as it retains the paratactic features critics have come to associate with McCarthy's texts. Structurally, the novel reads as follows: first, the main body of the text displays a declarative and unflinching mimesis of guilt-inducing violence, and then, the epilogue offers an autoreferential commentary on how an aesthetic that erases the ontological differences between the human and the non-human may redeem this kind of guilt, if only at the cost of *forgetting history*.

The gist of this commentary seems to be that, although such an aesthetic potentially alerts readers to their entanglement in a vast ecology where humans are far from exceptional, and although this realization may indeed counter the contemporary tendency to prioritize short-term economic gain over environmental sustainability, it may also occasion a sense of insignificance, resulting, in turn, in the quietist notion that, in the larger scheme of things, human actions do not much matter. Finally, however, as it homes in on the affordances of optical democracy's ontological leveling of human and environment, the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain* may be taken to suggest that, rather than having any set meaning in and of itself, this aesthetic can arguably be made to resonate, as can all literature, with ethical and political sentiments exceeding anything its author might have expected. This conclusion serves simultaneously as a corrective, not only to how certain strands of McCarthy criticism have taken for granted the eco-ethical benevolence of the author's symbolism, but also to how such an assumption is currently bolstered by the rise in the academy of trends such as new materialism and posthumanism, both set on remedying, in a manner not unlike McCarthy's, the ills of the anthropocentric view of the world.

Much McCarthy criticism is unsatisfactory in how it shuns the question of how readers should respond to the fact that, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, McCarthy is grappling with a number of environmental issues he is unable or unwilling to resolve—issues that generally come down to the question if humanity at large should be considered a consequential force in the world. Commenting on McCarthy's ambivalences in general, Michael Lynn Crews takes McCarthy's high regard "for those [authors] who express 'the soul of the culture'" to mean that, whatever "the state of our geist, it seems clear that McCarthy [too] aspires to paint on a wide canvas" that allows for a multitude of contradictions (128). Needless to say, this insight is crucial, but it is not of much value unless the critic proceeds to interpret the historical significance of the canvas at hand and the "the confrontation of" its "separate meanings,"

to speak with Pierre Macherey (88).³ Imagine, to provide another example, a reading of Edmund Spenser's musings on free will and agency that completely ignores 16th century England's rift between Catholicism and Protestantism and their different views on this matter. With the help of *Cities of the Plain's* epilogue, this chapter will try to bridge the imaginary disconnect between McCarthy's aesthetic and the historical situation from which it springs. More specifically, this will mean identifying the ways in which McCarthy's optically democratic style might be said to respond as well as contribute to how people under late capitalism think of their ability to affect the future of the planet.

The Border Trilogy

McCarthy's border trilogy begins in the late 1940s with the introduction of the 16-year-old yet already morally upright Texan rustic John Grady Cole and his disintegrating family. The reader quickly learns about John Grady's troubled veteran father who will soon be forced to sell the family farm, about the death of his grandfather, and about his strained relationship to his mother: all typical McCarthy features that touch on a loss of origins and that prompt the protagonist to mitigate this loss. Soon, in pursuit of a traditional cowboy life that no longer seems possible in the United States, John Grady and his cousin Rawlins head to Mexico, where the two of them encounter Blevins, a runaway a few years younger than themselves who will ultimately cause himself as well as his travelling companions considerable problems by losing his horse and then trying to steal it back from a group of Mexicans. This feat, and a few actions triggered by it, result in the death of Blevins and the incarceration of John Grady and Rawlins. Before these trials ensue, however, the last two are employed at a large ranch in Coahuila, where John Grady showcases his extraordinary horsemanship by breaking in 16 horses in four days and where he falls in love with the ranch owner's 17-year old daughter, Alejandra, a romance that is later ended not so much by Grady's trouble with the corrupt and Kafkaesque authorities as by Alejandra's resistant grandmother, the Dueña Alfonsa, who saves Grady and Rawlins from their imprisonment on the condition that Alejandra promises to refuse Grady's courtship. Upon release, Rawlins returns immediately to the US, and after a number of narrative dilations, so does John Grady, riding the desert among "chittering" birds and fading smoothly into "the world to come" (306).

The trilogy's second novel, *The Crossing*, begins in 1941 with no clear connection to the first. The setting is no longer Texas, but New Mexico, and the protagonist is no longer John Grady Cole, but Billy Parham: another 16-year-old, similar to John Grady, but not as much of a paragon (his two-year-younger brother, Boyd, seems the wiser and morally superior of the two). Billy too, however, displays an almost unbelievable technical dexterity, not least in his entrapment of a pregnant wolf that will be the center of attention during a large portion of the novel and that Billy will try, unsuccessfully, to reconvey to the mountains across the Mexican border. Returning home from the failure of this self-imposed mission, Billy finds that his house has been plundered and that his parents have been killed, presumably by a party of Native Americans, one of whom Billy had treated to dinner prior to leaving with the wolf. Accompanied by Boyd, Billy soon embarks once again on a trip to Mexico, this time with the object of reclaiming a number of horses that were stolen in connection with the murder of the boys' parents. Just like in *All the Pretty Horses*, Mexican corruption and lawlessness prove difficult foes, resulting ultimately in the murder of Boyd. Finally, and again much like the previous novel, *The Crossing* concludes with the surviving protagonist's return to the US, where an irregular heartbeat prevents him from enlisting for World War II, and where, in the early morning of July 16, 1945, he unknowingly witnesses the artificial "white light" of the Trinity nuclear test (740), just before the novel closes with the "right and godmade sun," rising "once again, for all and without distinction" (741). In both of these novels, then, the protagonists finally fade into some symbolist landscape where a Muirian "storm of beauty" devours without difficulty any conceivable human ill (Muir 6).

Commencing in 1952, the trilogy's last part brings together John Grady, now 19, and Billy, now 28, both of whom are employed at a ranch in New Mexico, close to the Texan border town of El Paso, and both of whom frequent pubs and brothels on the other side of a Mexican frontier now traversed by tracks that "lay embedded" like "great surgical clamps binding those disparate and fragile worlds" together (749). As a fair number of scholars have noticed, in *Cities of the Plain*, Mexico is no longer the place of transcendence evoked in the previous novels: here, rather, it is portrayed from the outset as thoroughly commercialized, as a locus of "neon signs" (745) and "trade and traffic" (749), and hence, it offers no refuge from the seemingly unstoppable modernity that plagues McCarthy's characters in the trilogy and elsewhere. Early on in the narrative,

moreover, the reader learns that John Grady has fallen in love with one of the countless commodities peddled on the streets of Juárez: Magdalena, a 16-year old prostitute who answers to her knife-wielding pimp, Eduardo, and who has been bought and sold several times already and so illustrates most aspects of feminist sociologist Maria Mies's claim that all coercion of women involve "an interplay between men (fathers, brothers, husbands, pimps, sons), the patriarchal family, the state and capitalist enterprise" (146). Insisting stubbornly on rescuing this girl from her current situation and marrying her, John Grady causes eventually not only his own death, but also hers. The novel concludes with Billy's growing old and being cared for by strangers, a narrative development well in keeping with the recurring motif in McCarthy of an egalitarian sociality, demonstrated not least in *The Crossing's* idealization of the communally administered ejido.

Declarative Mimesis

As Rick Wallach and Russel M. Hillier note (Wallach, "Theater" 19, Hillier, "Like some" 6–7), *Cities of the Plain* was actually the first of the three border texts to be conceived: originally written for the screen, the earliest drafts date from the late 70s and were then revised and extended a number of times until finally published as a novel in 1998. Obviously, this means that the production of *Cities of the Plain* coincides with almost two decades of political history, encompassing, for example, the ecological ethics and environmental agendas of four different presidents: from Carter's ambition to continue the regulatory work of the 70s, a decade that had seen the consolidation of the modern environmental movement, to the anti-regulatory attitudes of the Reagan administration in the following decade. Written at the beginning of this period and resonating with its conflicted public discourse on phenomena like acid rains, poor air quality, and strip-mining, already the early drafts of the screenplay contain, despite their brevity, seeds for many of the ecological themes that would eventually manifest themselves in the trilogy as a whole. Examples include Billy's relationship to wolves, but also, and more generally, the juxtaposition in *Cities of the Plain* between human violence, human guilt, and non-human suffering (Wittliff 91/69/9, 91/71/5).

Of pertinence here is a scene from the screenplay where John Grady lies in his bed and watches how a "white pigeon" is being scared away by one of the trucks that now intrude on the New Mexican farmland: "The truck pulls away outside, blowing the horn twice. He watches overhead.

Another white pigeon flaps past, leaving the barn” (91/69/9). It is difficult here not to think of these birds as references to the white doves that explicitly embody God in Matthew 3:16 and Luke 3:22, and it is equally difficult not to conclude that modernity, that is humanity, appears to have plucked the olive branch that is often lodged fast in the beaks of this animal (*King James Bible*). Even though this overt imagery does not survive into the published text, the sense of human guilt toward which it gestures does. For instance, one key passage in the novel informs the reader that all of John Grady’s “early dreams were the same. Something was afraid and he had come to comfort it. He dreamed it yet” (948). As Robert L. Jarrett rightly notes, this “narrative gloss points” not only to John Grady’s tender care for horses and his rescuing of the puppies who were orphaned by the dog hunt mentioned in the introduction this chapter; it also ties in with his decision to save Magdalena (327), who might be said to epitomize all that is sacrificed in the “primitive accumulation” of the Mexican-American borderscape (Marx, *Capital*), be the losses human, animal, or spatial: a girl sold “at the age of thirteen” (883), a jackrabbit head jammed into the front of an Oldsmobile whose driver thus contributes to the clearing up of the highway as a space designed primarily to accommodate commerce (764), or a place that just “aint the same” anymore (753). All these instances seem in keeping with Marx’s thesis that “conquest, enslavement, robbery,” and “murder” are prerequisites for the creation of capital (Marx, *Capital*).⁴ The novel suggests pedagogically, moreover, that these atrocities and the profits they generate are usually spatially separated: the Mexican bordello where Magdalena works, the reader learns, is owned by a “businessman” who “has nothing to do with any of this” (989).

The examples of Magdalena’s innocence and vulnerability are numerous: sexually victimized by the narrator, too, she fusses “with the hem of her dress like a schoolgirl” (748), smiles “thinly with her painted child’s mouth” (810), and sits “with her hands composed in her lap like a debutante” (828). Ironically, then, on the level of plot, it is ultimately a human being who ‘gives face’ to the largely non-human losses hinted at in the border trilogy—losses represented, for instance, by the “solitary bull” in *All the Pretty Horses* that rolls “in the dust against the bloodred sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment” (306). One should also note, however, in *Cities of the Plain*, the grins and the “crazy lookin” (764) eyes of the previously mentioned jackrabbits as well as the owl who moves “its head slowly as if to better see” its executioners before it dies, crucified on the windshield of a truck (777). Both of these sudden deaths render the

‘natural’ world legible precisely at the moment of its erasure, and the declarative and concise form in which they are portrayed—“Billy shut off the engine. They sat looking at it” (777)—agrees well with the plain and matter-of-fact style that characterizes most of *Cities of the Plain* and that arguably constitutes an antithesis to the “great democracy of the possible” the reader will eventually encounter in the dreams described toward the end of the novel (1029). Whereas such a logic of possibility clearly informs the occasionally hopeful optical democracy of *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, thus allowing for visions of a closer relationship between humans and the environment, much of *Cities of the Plain* is marked instead by what could be labelled an aesthetic of impossibility, emphasized by the restricted agency evoked by Billy’s heart that rattles on, “no will of his” (1010), and by John Grady’s wondering “for all his will and all his intent how much of” his life “was his own doing” (952). This waning of agency endows the violence described in the novel with a sense of inevitability that may be construed in at least two ways: either one takes it to suggest that humans are bound by natural laws that make them respond instinctually to their surroundings, or one takes it to imply that McCarthy’s culprits are part of a larger scheme of ideological violence, the dynamics of which they are unable to fathom. Depending on theoretical outlook, the latter may seem somewhat less hopelessly deterministic than the former.

At any rate, this seemingly inevitable violence is captured by an aesthetic that seeks to map rather than evade its brutal character, and surely, this contrasts sharply with how the brighter spectrum of McCarthy’s symbolism tends to envision a way out of human destructivity. The most unequivocal example of this matter-of-factness emerges during the previously mentioned dog hunt. Here, accompanied by the other farmhands (Joaquín, JC, Troy, Travis, and Archer), John Grady and Billy set out to hunt a pack of feral dogs that have been attacking the ranch’s livestock. Soon, a scene of carnage ensues that seems beyond the control of the perpetrators themselves. When a “big yellow dog,” for instance, gets caught “taut between the two ropes” of John Grady and Billy so that blood bursts “in the air before them,” this appears “as bright and unexpected as an apparition. Something evoked out of nothing and wholly unaccountable” (911): “Damn,” says Billy, “I didnt know you was goin to do that,” whereupon John Grady responds that he “didnt either” (912). Other closely depicted moments of brutality from this scene include, in chronological order, a dog that “snapped into the air mutely” and “cartwheeled soundlessly

and landed on the gravel with a soft dead whump” (906), a dog that bounced “behind over the rocks and through the creosote at the end of the thirty-five foot maguey rope” (906), a dog that “went sailing and bounced and skidded and then scrambled up and stood looking about” (907), a dog that “went bouncing and slamming mutely in a wide arc and then went dragging through the bush and gravel behind him” (907), and a dog whose dead “eyes were glazed and” whose “lolling tongue was stuck with chaff and grass” (912). Clearly, the style here employed does not abandon the parataxis commonly associated with optical democracy; yet, instead of gesturing by way of metaphor, simile, or personification toward an ethic of responsibility, these sentences seem to highlight instead what happens when such an ethic is suppressed.

Notable here is that although both Billy and John Grady clearly display a concern for the Other (be it a wolf, a horse, or a foreign prostitute), they still repeatedly contribute to its suffering. Another relevant scene takes place when Billy and his colleague, Troy, the war veteran, accidentally hit a rabbit that makes “a soft thud under the truck” and thus inspires Troy to share an anecdote of how he and an old friend named Gene once killed hundreds of rabbits in the same fashion (763). If Troy is to be believed, he is clearly cognizant that he and Gene are hitting rabbit after rabbit: “I looked over at Gene and I said: What do you want to do about these rabbits?” (763). Nonetheless, he is shocked to finally witness the physical manifestation of this cruelty:

The Oldsmobile had this big ovalshaped grille in the front of it was like a big scoop and when I got around to the front of the car it was just packed completely full of jackrabbit heads. I mean there was a hundred of em jammed in there and the front of the car the bumper and all just covered with blood and rabbit guts and them rabbits I reckon they'd sort of turned their heads away just at impact cause they was all lookin out, eyes all crazy lookin. Teeth sideways. Grinnin. I cant tell you what it looked like. I come damn near hollerin myself. (764)

Again, the agents of violence have managed to temporarily disregard the consequences of their actions, and again, the style in which these consequences are given form is markedly devoid of the symbolist features that render humans at one with the environment.

An Ecological Vision

It should be mentioned here that although the plain, declarative and occasionally terse style referenced above gains momentum in McCarthy's later works (*Cities of the Plain*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*), it is by no means unique to them. Rather, in its nascent form, this style is employed at least as early as in *Child of God*, where it serves, for example, to document serial killer Lester Ballard's handling of his victims, one of whom, the reader learns, "rose slumpshouldered from the door with her hair all down and began to bump slowly up the ladder. Halfway up she paused, dangling. Then she began to rise again" (90). The same goes for optical democracy, which appears in different hues throughout McCarthy's whole corpus: from the predominantly dark optical democracy of *Suttree*, conjuring, as previously quoted, a "dead sow pink and bloated and jars and crates and shapes of wood washed into rigid homologues of viscera" (368), to the predominantly bright optical democracy of *All the Pretty Horses*, conveying lyrically, as I note in chapter two, how the shadows of "horse and rider" pass "in tandem like the shadow of a single being" (306).⁵ Whereas lines of the first kind evoke an indifferent and violent mesh that binds all things material, and whereas these lines seem related to the determinism of McCarthy's declarative mimesis, lines of the second category invoke a hopeful sublime where people are borne "up into the swarming stars so that they" ride "not under but among them" (*AtPH* 31). It is the merits of this last kind of optical democracy that will eventually be called into question in *Cities of the Plain's* epilogue.

With reference to the brighter spectrum of optical democracy, quite a few critics have debated whether the border trilogy espouses some kind of environmental ethos, and, if so, what this ethos might be. For example, although she comments extensively on how McCarthy evokes "the predatory nature of man and his drive for civilization," Dianne Luce suggests that, in spite of their allusions to the atomic bomb, these novels and their "ecological vision" still put faith in "some deeper persistence of the world itself": there is in *All the Pretty Horses* the aforementioned "assurance of 'a world to come,'" and there is in *The Crossing* the "right and godmade sun" (Luce, "The Vanishing" 163), rising in spite of the recent false dawn of the nuclear test and thus concluding "the book on a note both horrifying and strangely hopeful," as Edwin T. Arnold puts it (64). In concluding her

chapter, moreover, Luce takes her cue from these hopeful notes of natural resilience. Discussing a number of environmental initiatives that were contemporaneous with the trilogy's publication and that appeared in the area of New Mexico where Billy Parham was born, she notes that, despite "his vision of the matrix of life," Billy "does not return to Hidalgo to see the cooperation of the ranchers with the environment to preserve them both," an initiative he "would happily have joined had he been born later" (190).

Clearly, as the term "ecological vision" suggests, Luce conceives of the border trilogy as a series of texts that may encourage readers to productively rethink their relationship with the environment. As this dissertation has shown a number of times already, this view is far from uncommon among McCarthy scholars. Yet another example would be Cameron MacKenzie's suggestion that readers think of the corrido, a Mexican folk tale that appears in *The Crossing*, as a form of Lacanian Real, the glimpse of which may have the potential to counteract the novel's "righteous nihilism" and thereby highlight "the possibility of another way to be in the world" (118–119), guided by an "ethical obligation," perhaps, as Trenton Hickman calls it, that would inspire people to revere the world that was as well as the world that will be (155). Similarly, while commenting on *Cities of the Plain*, Jaqueline Scoones maintains that even though this novel portrays the violent progress of Western civilization as an inevitable phenomenon (146), it suggests simultaneously that life "much older and stronger than humans may adapt and survive" (139) and that the "hands of humans" are also capable of attending to "the things of the world with care" (151). For Luce, MacKenzie, Hickman, and Scoones, then, these hints at environmental resilience and/or the human potential for good render McCarthy's novels ethically or politically progressive.

Picking up not on the trilogy's theme of resilience, but on its evocations of the transience of all things material, Joshua Ryan Jackson reaches a similar verdict. The idea here is that, by repeatedly portraying the ruins of the buildings that epitomize "the culture and economy of the South or West"—"a plantation mansion, a poor neighborhood, or a mission church" (109)—McCarthy hints at the certainty that, just like the historical moment when these structures were proudly erected, our moment, too, will soon be a thing of the past (110–11). More specifically, by calling attention to how the "Western exceptionalism" that fueled the ideology of Westward expansion is still at work, only today in "global capitalism," McCarthy's novels imply that the "culture and economics" of the contemporary West

will “inevitably drive itself to extinction” (111). The notion of transience, then, becomes an antidote to the Western world’s delusions of exceptionalism, partly because it lays bare the connections between these delusions and the atrocities of a recent past, and partly because it shows readers that they, too, are subject to the universal impermanence that eventually returns all living things to dust: a type of particulate matter with which *Cities of the Plain* is indeed obsessed.

To further substantiate Jackson’s thesis one could note here the epigraph to this chapter: “Somos ceniza. Este es la verdad final”/‘We are dust. That is the ultimate truth’ (Wittliff 91/71/5). Uttered by the Mexican anecdotalist in one of the early drafts of the epilogue, this biblical notion agrees not only with the fact that, in the same draft, Magdalena appears to die on Ash Wednesday: a day to celebrate the incontrovertible fact that, eventually, we shall all return to inanimate matter [269]). It also ties in with the description in the published version of how Socorro, the housekeeper at the farm where John Grady and Billy work, bears, in Catholic fashion, a “thumbprint” on her forehead “to remind her of her mortality. As if she had any thought other” (1008). In other words, it is clearly suggested here as well as in Jackson’s article that, just like the ever-changing ‘natural’ environment from which all matter is inseparable, people, too, are hard-pressed for time, passing swiftly, as they do, from ‘ashes to ashes,’ from ‘dust to dust.’ In this regard, they are in no way exceptional, but always already posthuman. For the critic so inclined, this insight *may* serve as a corrective to the kind of hubristic delusions that prompt humans to dominate rather than interact responsibly with the material world.

The Epilogue and the Affordances of the Optically Democratic Form

This is one of those critical possibilities that link McCarthy with contemporary schools of theory such as new materialism and posthumanism, both of which often refute illusions of human exceptionalism and both of which stress the interconnectedness of all types of matter and the ethic of responsibility this interconnectedness should instill in the human agent. Consider, for instance, with McCarthy’s frequent use of personification in mind, how new materialist Jane Bennett suggests that maybe “the risks associated with anthropomorphizing (superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism)” are worth taking, because, “oddly enough,” such writing “works against anthropocentrism,” so that “a chord is struck between

person and thing” and so that people are “no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment’” (120). For Bennett, as for McCarthy, in other words, literary devices such as anthropomorphism help undermine supposed ontological differences between human and environment, and at least for Bennett, this holds great promise. “The hope,” she writes, “is that” this erasure of difference “will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies” and that this awareness in turn “will enable wiser interventions into that ecology” (4). This seems to be precisely the type of intervention Luce, MacKenzie, Hickman, and Scoones take McCarthy’s aesthetic to encourage.⁶

McCarthy has long been noted for these kinds of posthumanist overtones, traced in this dissertation primarily to the novels’ metaphoricality, to their evocation of transience, and to their recurring excursions into deep time. In *Cities of the Plain*, witness the dreamt dreamer’s realization, suggesting that a human life is “little more than an instant” (1025), much like Frank Kermode speaks of it as a “spot of time in the middle” (Kermode 8).⁷ In most of the novels, these tendencies seem unchallenged by any kind of autoreferential commentary on the question as to what cultural work this kind of writing might be expected to perform. As will soon be clear, however, this is not the case with *Cities of the Plain*, which nudges the reader instead to think, with the novel, about this aesthetic as ethically productive and counterproductive at the same time. In so doing, the novel shows simultaneously how the perspectives of new materialism and posthumanism, too, are ethically double-edged. Much like ontologically flattened versions of Marx’s reminder that people do not make history simply “as they please” (Marx, *Eighteenth*), these perspectives divest humanity of any exceptionalist delusion and show us that “every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned” (Haraway 39). The same perspectives, however, may also be considered counterproductive, since, at their weakest moments, they risk diverting the reader’s attention from the specificity of certain human ills and the struggle in the social realm to address these ills practically. Jordana Rosenberg goes so far as to refer to posthumanism in general and object-oriented-ontology in particular as a “theoretical primitivism” (2), an ‘origin narrative’ that “excises the question of the present and thus of the political” (15). On this note, and drawing on Rosenberg, W. Oliver Baker suggests that, much like various new materialisms, McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* seems more interested in mapping the intersections between those who are dominated than in revealing the

contours of that which dominates (Baker). Although McCarthy's optical democracy indeed stands witness to colonial violence, Baker explains further, it simultaneously reconciles and forgets and thus facilitates the perpetuation of a neoliberal politics of settler colonialism that continues to subjugate minorities (Baker).

If transcoded from the literary to the theoretical, however, *Cities of the Plain* ultimately prompts the reader to think of critical concepts such as 'assemblages,' 'ecologies,' 'meshes,' and 'sympoises' as inevitably double-edged: in helping us tell other stories of other possible worlds, they afford "response-ability," as Donna Haraway has it (41), but in reminding us that some non-human agencies with which we are entangled "impinge on us as much as we impinge on them" (Bennett 115), they simultaneously afford a relativization of human agency and an embrace of political quietism. Admitting as much in no way equals a wholesale repudiation of the immense, complex, and diverse fields of new materialism and posthumanism, both of which have arguably made and continue to make lasting contributions to increased human self-understanding; the point here, rather, is to acknowledge that certain narratives born out of these fields have unintended affordances (risks as well as possibilities), some of which are strikingly similar to the potentially problematic evocations of human insignificance and transience that recur throughout McCarthy's corpus and that are implicitly commented upon in *Cities of the Plain's* epilogue. Especially pertinent here are the notions of deep time and deep space that are integral to many new materialist and posthumanist schools of thought and that certainly afford a dethronement of humanity from that illusory pinnacle of existence, but that also afford the relocation of political struggle from the social arena to the arena of particulate matter, as Rosenberg might perhaps have put it.⁸

Ethically sound though it may be, in other words, there is arguably a risk that McCarthy's 'ecological vision' might encourage an evasion of the historically specific violence his novels simultaneously allude to. Georg Guillemin touches on this indirectly when he argues that the border trilogy shows how stories may function therapeutically by letting their tellers seize control over their melancholia ("some site" 127), and so does Robert L. Jarrett, when he maintains that *Cities of the Plain* ultimately steers its readers "away from the traumas of history" (338).⁹ If pondered in conjunction with some of the dominant characteristics of the border trilogy, however, and the waning of optically democratic symbolism in particular, this is exactly the kind of risk the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*

seems to address. At the strikingly Dantean beginning of his anecdote about the dream within a dream, the Mexican tells Billy how, in the middle of his life, he “drew the path of” this life “upon a map and [...] studied it a long time” with the hope of discerning the “the pattern that it made upon the earth” (1013–14). If he could “identify the form” of this pattern, he explains further, he “would know better how to continue,” know what his “path must be” (1014). In other words, the storyteller suggests here that, with every map or every tale, every life given form, there are “different perspectives one could take” (1014). In this manner, every narrative affords different insights that, in turn, encourage different kinds of actions, or the lack thereof. These notions are soon elaborated upon further when the anecdotalist argues that a “picture seeks to seize and immobilize within its own configurations what it never owned” (1019). Here, then, in the evocation of the idea that art is always an appropriation of a living complexity it is condemned to paralyze, the risks of any artistic representation come into light. However, as the Mexican’s story evolves, things become increasingly complex, or “more knotted,” as a monologist in *The Crossing* puts it (466). This complexity results from the suggestions that the “proprietary claims of the dreamer on the dreamt have their limits” (1019), that “all stories” have their “beginnings in a question,” and that “those stories that speak to us with the greatest resonance have a way of turning on the teller and erasing him and his motives from all memory” (1022). In other words, although “the question of who is telling the story is very consiguiente” (1022), and although a story inevitably immobilizes what it represents, it remains in motion in the sense that, no matter the structural intent of its author, its risks and its possibilities may never be permanently locked down.

This ‘Janus-face’ of art appears in even higher relief when the anecdotalist gets to the point in his story where the man in his dream dreams that he accepts from a “troupe” of ancient “processioners” (1024) some unknown concoction that causes “him to forget” the “pain of his life” without understanding “the penalty for doing so” (1025). This penalty is double: on the one hand, the man’s amnesia abates his fears “to the point that he” becomes “accomplice in a blood ceremony that was then and is now an affront to God,” and on the other, he eventually forgets “this too” (1025) and wakes up “shivering with cold and fright. In the selfsame desolate pass” where he had fallen asleep: the “selfsame barren range of mountains. The selfsame world” (1028). In spite of his dream, then, he wakes up to a world whose problems remain just as he left them. Two

consequences are thus implied. First, the reader is to understand that when the dreamer imbibes the beverage, he finds for the first time since childhood an inner peace that allows “him to contemplate his surroundings, the rocks and the mountains, the stars which were belled above them against the eternal blackness of the world’s nativity” (1025)—“in a form his eye itself was shaped from,” as reads an earlier draft of this scene, thus connecting the passage as a whole even more unmistakably to the redemptive optical democracy previously defined in this chapter (Wittliff 91/76/2). The point of this optically democratic appreciation is, in the same draft, to “secure in the traveler’s heart his love for the world and his rededication to the belief in its beauty and even in its goodness” (Wittliff 91/76/2). The published novel, however, concedes that there is also an element of potentially destructive submission here, evocative of naturalistic determinism, and transpiring as the dreamer gives “himself up to the dark mercies” of “his captors” and walks with them “until his mind” is at ease and he knows that “his life” is “in other hands” (*CotP* 1025), that his actions are dictated by forces beyond his control. This serenity, then, and this relinquishment of agency, is what leads to his quietist complicity in the previously quoted “blood ceremony” (1025). If this is the first consequence of forgetting, then, of indulging in dreams or stories that merge human and environment, the second consequence seems to consist in the pain that emerges from the realization that, as pleasing as they might have been, these stories might also have been entirely inconsequential, at best, leaving the reader in that “selfsame world” s/he sought to escape in the first place (1028). In sum, the epilogue here calls attention to the possibilities of storytelling in general and optical democracy in particular, even as it stresses their risks. To read an optically democratic story comes across both as an opportunity to wake from an ideological slumber that blocks out the notion of our imbrication in the fragile “beauty” of the world, and, conversely, as a means of dreaming away the problems of a waking world invariably left unaltered by any moral or ethic conjured up in the literary text. Optical democracy, it seems to be implied, can go either way.

The autoreferential aspects of the epilogue, then, encourage the critic to avoid reading any narrative strain in the novel as unequivocally progressive. Another pertinent example here would be *Cities of the Plain*’s portrayal of John Grady’s attempt to rescue Magdalena, which prompts the reader to recognize how the longing that underpins this endeavor is an integral part of the patterns of oppression it supposedly tries to escape. Differently put, John Grady himself is *not*, as Christine Chollier wrongly

suggests, simply a “liberator,” and “the economy of prostitution” practiced by the pimp does *not* stand “in stark contrast with” the “form of capitalist exchange” that leads the protagonist to believe that capitalism is an arena where, as long as the money is right, all participants are equal and any deal may be fairly and peacefully settled (175).¹⁰ Rather, in *Cities of the Plain*, prostitution and capitalism are clearly interlaced.¹¹ This is made evident by the fact that even though the pimp’s treatment of Magdalena admittedly makes him an “odious character,” John Grady and his friends are indeed, as John Wegner submits, the kind of sex tourists who keep this man in business, prepared, as they are “to buy [cheap] Mexican flesh” and thus reap the rewards of the capitalist United States’ pre- and post-revolution involvement in the Mexican economy (Wegner 256)¹² On a related note, much of what John Grady does is aimed stubbornly at domestication and appropriation, either by force, as with the taming of horses, or by money, as in the case of Magdalena.¹³ At the beginning of the novel, for instance, he struggles hard to tame a headstrong horse, proudly asking his friends who try to warn him if they doubt his abilities: “You think I cant even catch him?” (760). Furthermore, in regards to Magdalena, he wants to buy her for 2000 dollars and isolate her in a small cabin he has been renovating throughout the novel. Magdalena’s hypothetical loneliness in this abode is something that seems to bother Billy more than it bothers John Grady (924). It is also highly relevant that, as the many references to Magdalena’s “unearthly beauty” suggest (Wittliff 91/69/6), Grady’s love for her seems largely sexual in nature, something that arguably makes the project of saving her far less “selfless” than James Dorson, and also Hillier, want it to be (Dorson, *Counternarrative* 252, Hillier, “Like some” 20).¹⁴ It is important to note how these personality traits are implicated in larger structures of appropriation, because it is precisely against this backdrop that one should read the trilogy’s preoccupation with violence, guilt, and innocence, and the question as to what kind of aesthetic best deals with these issues.

Another central theme here as well as in McCarthy at large is the notion of irrevocable loss. As implied at the beginning of this chapter, the Mexico where Billy and John Grady drink and sleep with prostitutes is not the Mexico of *All the Pretty Horses* where all things material seem to interact faultlessly in “some deeper collusion for which” there is “not even a name” (269). When John Grady and Rawlins arrive early in the trilogy at the historically accurate “Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion,” it is clearly communicated that this is a place as pure and

paradisiacal as its name suggests, a place where, in “the lakes and in the streams,” there are “species of fish not known elsewhere on earth and birds and lizards and other forms of life as well all long relict here for the desert stretched away on every side” (99). Early in *Cities of the Plain*, by contrast, Mexico has finally been entirely immersed into the kind of trashy commerce most readers will recognize from Suttree’s Knoxville. This Mexico is far from ‘puro,’ but a place where the “gutters” run “with a grayish water and the lights of the bars and cafes and curioshops” bleed “slowly in the wet black street” (749). Here, then, it is evident that neither side of the border is “the same” anymore, and that, as Billy puts it, it “never will be” (753). “Maybe,” as he continues, “we’ve all got a little crazy. I guess if everybody went crazy together nobody would notice, what do you think?” (753). In the same scene, moreover, as if to illustrate this collective insanity and the main protagonist’s obvious complicity, John Grady momentarily notices a coyote that he intuitively wants to shoot, deterred only by Billy’s hesitance (which he articulates even more unequivocally in an earlier draft by pointing out that the animal “aint botherin you” [Wittliff 91/71/5]). Much like in the previously referenced dog hunt, John Grady is portrayed as a character who partakes in the erasure of the very wilderness whose disappearance both he and Billy repeatedly lament. Further, heralding the closing scene in *The Road*, where the narrator tells of a “thing which could not be put back” (307), the old and heartbroken Mr. Johnson maintains that life’s hardest lesson is that “when things are gone they’re gone. They aint coming back” (*CotP* 870). This notion is also pedagogically conveyed earlier in the novel when it is described how a stallion’s one eye has been “knocked” out by its previous owner and a breeder asks John Grady whether he thinks the perpetrator was able to “put it back” again (817).

These hints at irrevocability are emphasized further by the novel’s infrequent use of optically democratic symbolism: a style, then, which is not entirely phased out by the end of the trilogy, but that seems to appear almost exclusively in dreams or in connection with death. A pertinent example appears when, four pages from her murder, Magdalena is on her way to the café where she believes she will meet a man who will take her to John Grady and her new life across the border. Here, Magdalena walks “along the sandy desert road. The stars in flood above her. The lower edges of the firmament sawed out into the black shapes of the mountains and the lights of the cities burning on the plain like stars pooled in the lake” (966). As Magdalena approaches her demise, in other words, she plunges

harmoniously into an image that melts together sky, mountains, and city, all of which suggests that this kind of merging is now only possible in death, in a symbolism “of cosmic destruction,” as reads de Man’s previously quoted phrase (“The Double” 11). What is more, even when scenes such as these finally appear, they in no way come close to the kind of human-environment communion that seemed possible in the previous novels: in *Cities of the Plain*, the world clearly “dnt care,” as John Grady puts it, and until people return to inanimate matter, they will remain ontologically separate from it (964).

Conclusion: The Uses of Aesthetics

What is notable about *Cities of the Plain* is how it indulges initially in an aesthetic that carefully delineates the protagonists’ many acts of brutality, only to finally encourage the reader to assess the value of an aesthetic that, conversely, evades such brutality in search for an ethic the first aesthetic seemed unable to accommodate. Not until the dreams toward the end of the narrative is the protagonist able to rededicate himself, as is unequivocally stated in an earlier draft, “to the belief in” the world’s “beauty and even in its goodness” (Wittliff 91/76/2)—a sentiment evoking the brightly green and redemptive optical democracy largely abandoned by the end of the trilogy. What is implied by these autoreferential musings is not, as Vince Brewton has it, “that storytelling is a historically transcendent means of knowing” (141) or that “storytelling is perhaps our greatest achievement because it is there,” as Linda Townley Woodson suggests, that we may “hear the echoes of the rhythms of existence” (“Herejos” 208). Rather, if there is any achievement here, it is the novel’s insistence that the reader considers optical democracy in all its dialectical complexity: as a “*pharmakon*,” to speak with Derrida, that affords the forgetting of history as much as it affords responsible engagement with it (Derrida 99–100).

The storyteller in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain* maintains that the man in his dream “cannot exist without a history” and that “the ground of that history is not different from yours or mine for it is the predicate life of men that assures us of our own reality” (1020). Without the acknowledgement of this history, the storyteller seems to suggest, it will be difficult to “say from whence” literary figments like “the traveler and his adventures . . . came at all,” and thus, “one can come upon no footing where even to begin” reading them (1023). As another character puts it in *The*

Crossing: what “endows any thing with significance”—and, one might add, readability—“is solely the history in which it has participated” (*TC* 720). With regard to the dreamt man’s dream, moreover, the storyteller makes an important distinction between “[d]esaparecer” (to disappear) and “desvanecerse” (to vanish): “Lo que se desvanece,” he says, “es simplemente fuera de la vista. Pero desaparecido?” (*CotP* 1023). The implied answer to this question appears to be no. Just because something is lost from view, this does not necessarily mean that it does not exist. Key here is the notion that “men” do not “have the power to call forth what they will” (1030) and that everything they create is “composed of” history, of “what is past” (1031). “No other material is at hand,” and this material never really disappears (1031). By implication, this means that, even though one may easily choose not to see the history in which McCarthy’s stories participate, this history alone is what makes these stories significant. Therefore, even though optical democracy often conjures a vast, timeless, and ontologically flat realm where history seems to have been successfully abolished, one should remember that it is still here and now, in a historical context marked by ecological emergency, that readers make sense of this aesthetic. If this history is forgotten or ignored, so is much of McCarthy’s contemporary relevance.

The question arises here whether optical democracy conceals its own historical conditions effectively enough to reduce the reader’s chances of responding to them. In what seems to me one of McCarthy criticism’s most ambitious attempts at addressing this problem, David Holloway acknowledges that McCarthy’s “ecocritics of style” as well as ‘green activism’ in general affords not only subversion, but also a hollowing out of the very sense of political agency needed for a successful transcendence of late capitalist hegemony (*The Late* 173). “Unless,” Holloway writes, “it is harnessed to a concretely politicized mode of paralysis that can theorize its ambiguous political effects, the very notion that optical democracy may be a utopian aesthetic in which the material world is overcome might thus prove to be ideological in a renewed sense” (171). Much like the ecocritically minded critics referenced earlier in this chapter, however, Holloway insists that McCarthy’s novels might revive “more collective ways of thinking about how we live in relation to each other, as well as to the environment at large” (173). He reaches this conclusion by operationalizing Fredric Jameson’s notion that ideology may be divided into two terms, the ‘complex’ and the ‘neutral’ (although without mentioning the Greimasian model on which Jameson builds his reasoning). For Holloway, these

terms relate to each other as follows: whereas ideology's complex term conceals the contradictions inherent in late capitalist society, the more utopian neutral term first sheds light on these contradictions only to quickly thereafter transcend them (173). Approaching optical democracy from this perspective, then, allows the critic to think of McCarthy's as an aesthetic that first relativizes human destructivity in the age of the Capitalocene (due to the idiom's complex term) but then counters this paralyzing logic (due to its neutral term). Differently put, first, this aesthetic shows *in its form* how capitalism turns everything equally into commodities, and then, again by way of form, it piles one object of representation upon another and so gestures toward the "living presence" of a material world hidden behind the commodity logic of late capitalism (155)—and so, history is resurrected. This is an elegant critical exercise that should perhaps be recapitulated: first, by treating all material things as parts of an inventory, optical democracy mimics the logic of late capitalist commodification, and then, second, by matching in its form rather than in its content a natural world that still exists, after all, beyond the veils of ideology, the same aesthetic manages, finally, to showcase its potential to reassure the reader that another kind of relationship with this world is possible.

At work here, it seems, is Jameson's debt to Ernst Bloch's principle of hope, which, as Jameson himself puts it, "is most effective" as an "interpretive principle . . . when it reveals the operation of the Utopian impulse in unsuspected places, where it is *concealed or repressed*" (*Archaeologies* 3; my emphasis). In any case, the problem with Holloway's reading seems twofold. Not only does it rest primarily on the rather tenuous claim that McCarthy's aesthetic is able to formally match 'nature,' or to feign doing so, at least; it depends also on a provisional omission of the tendencies in McCarthy's writing that stubbornly direct the reader back from the realm of the posthuman to the self-sufficiency of a sociality that, narrowly human in character, shuns any ethical imperative aimed at the betterment of the world at large. On this note, Mary K. Holland argues convincingly about *The Road* that it "is impossible to read" this novel "and imagine any relationship other than parent-child having the strength and integrity to support the enormity of the burden placed upon it by the narrative" (138). What "other 'thing,' in the absence of most everything else," Holland continues, "could contain the worth and beauty of the world, and so assert the continued primacy of the real, against the relief of the dream?" (138). One pertinent example here would be the ending of the same novel, where the protagonist boy's proxy mother tells him that "the

breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from *man to man* through all of time” (306; my emphasis), and another would be the previously quoted ending of *Cities of the Plain*, where Billy’s weathered hand is “map *enough* for men to read” (1037; my emphasis). When Billy and John Grady talk earlier in this novel about the dreams they had as young boys and how these dreams have now changed, the reader is let in on the purpose of this kind of sociality: “When you’re a kid you have these notions about how things are going to be, Billy said. You get a little older and you pull back some on that. I think you wind up just tryin to *minimize the pain*” (821; my emphasis). This notion is revealing if one reads it in conjunction with other instances in the novel, like the passage where the sympathetic Mr. Johnson is listening to the radio and tells John Grady that all he hears is wars “and rumors of wars. I dont know why I listen to it. It’s a ugly habit and I wish I could get broke of it but I think I just get worse” (804). Instead of torturing oneself with disturbing news about the state of the world, this passage seems to imply, one should forget about history and be content with the love and warmth of one’s closest circle.

Admittedly, it could be argued that McCarthy’s self-critical warnings about literary escapism extend to this kind of contentment, too, and that these warnings thereby render also the portrayal of interpersonal love a potentially passivizing endeavour. In a final move, though, the anecdotalist in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain* argues that the dreams of which he tells never should and never can satisfy the hunger that triggers them: “These dreams,” as he puts it, “seek to meet a need they can never satisfy, and for that we must be grateful” (1033). We must be grateful, one should assume, because as long as the redemption found in dreams and stories does not completely satisfy us, we will never abandon the problems of the waking world. From this perspective, neither optical democracy nor McCarthy’s musings on human sociality have the power to alienate people permanently from the hardships that beset their existence. Clearly, this couched comment on the futility of literary endeavours serves to abate the concern implicitly expressed in the novel that optically democratic symbolism risks soothing the reader to the extent that s/he becomes complicit in acts that are “an affront to God,” or to any kind of conceivable Other (1025). What it does not do, however, is present a solution to the quandary as to what aesthetic best awakens this reader to the problems evoked in the border trilogy: animal abuse, trafficking, and nuclear technology, to name a few. In Holloway’s terms, but contrary to what he suggests, the last part of the trilogy never produces the kind of ideological ‘neutral term’

that would ‘cancel’ or ‘annul’ in “whatever figurative way” the contradictions it embodies (173). Rather, it calls attention to how the meaning of a text always hinges on its use, and to how this in turn should prompt the critic to ‘always historicize’ the uses available in a given historical moment. For the McCarthy critic, more specifically, this would mean suspending the belief that, due to some inherent soundness, optical democracy conduces automatically and invariably to an ethos of ecological responsibility. What is more, perhaps one may counter Holloway’s Jamesonian reasoning with a more recent contribution from the very same theorist. In the 2019 *Allegory and Ideology*, Jameson proposes the label “autoreferential” for literary texts that in some manner or other refer to themselves and that thereby contribute to—and perhaps even manage to manipulate—their own commodification (28). This would mean that even though these texts still circulate as products within a capitalist system, they have a say in their own labelling. From this point of view, McCarthy’s later texts appear to be fashioning themselves as products that are aware, at least to some extent, that their political uses are multiple.

¹ As James Dorson puts it, the “undercurrent of violent domination” in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* “is brought to the surface of the text in *Cities of the Plain*” (*Counternarrative* 224). See also David Holloway’s notion that McCarthy’s “ecocritics” (164) is “indeed a waning force in *Cities of the Plain*” (*The Late* 171).

² On this note, Rick Wallach has suggested that one of McCarthy’s earlier novel’s, the 1985 *Blood Meridian*, is “the wound” or “the disease which the healing process of the Border Trilogy is meant to ameliorate—not to cure, for it’s a wound that will heal with a scar certainly” (qtd. in Josyph 100).

³ On a related note, Josh Crain argues that scholars should avoid reducing literature in general and McCarthy in particular to a “definitive political position” (60), and in doing so, he resents the prevalence of precisely this tendency among Marxists, ecocritics, and gender theorists (61). J.A. Bernstein obviously agrees with Crain when he writes that McCarthy never presents a “moral program or an ecological agenda”: his, Bernstein submits, is “a world of evil and (perhaps) some redemption,” but it is never exclusively the one or the other (398–399). The problem with readings that ignore this ambivalence, Crain suggests, is that they “relegate the complexities of literature to the reductive messages of partisanship” (61). In contrast, then, wanting to emphasize the merits of McCarthy’s “storytelling over the political value of his work,” and believing that literature should be “appreciated as literature” (61), Crain concludes that “The Border Trilogy is not a call to arms for political action, but a meditation, an exercise in imagination” (76). I would argue, though, that “an exercise in imagination” can still have ideological implications and that a critical exploration of these implications may be perfectly capable of avoiding the temptation to reduce the literary text to a univocal political message.

⁴ McCarthy critic Robert C. Sickels and Marc Oxoby implicitly call attention to how this kind of accumulation affects wild animals when they write that the “fate of wolves will ultimately be that of all animals, which are increasingly forced to compete with humans for resources in green spaces that shrink exponentially” (356).

⁵ Arguing that McCarthy’s novels are marked by a “contrast between” their “two most prevalent literary styles,” Lydia Cooper describes these styles as a “stripped’ Hemingwayesque narrative in which basic Anglo-Saxon vocabulary dominates,” on the one hand,” and “a dense, syntactically compounded style peppered with archaic or arcane vocabulary,” on the other” (*Heroes* 10).

⁶ One should be careful to note here, however, not only that new materialism’s and posthumanism’s way of calling attention to the entanglement of the world’s agents is not entirely new—drawing, as it does, for example, on ideas such as Henri Bergson’s *élan vital*, in Bennett’s case—but also that there is no evidence at all suggesting that McCarthy would have been influenced by these recent theoretical trends: much more likely influences may be found among the naturalists, the transcendentalists, and the symbolists. The point, rather, is that these trends currently lend weight to scholars suggesting that McCarthy presents to his readers some unequivocally benign ‘ecological vision’ that reminds the reader that the world is a “democracy of objects,” in the words of object-oriented-ontologist Levi Bryant, where humans do not possess a privileged position and should therefore not act as if they do (Bryant).

⁷ For further discussion of how Kermode’s “sense of an ending” may help shed light on McCarthy’s, see Jay Ellis’s “Another Sense of Ending: The Keynote Address to the Knoxville Conference.” For further comments on McCarthy’s metaphors of deep time, see Wallach’s “Metaphors of Antiquity and Deep Time.”

⁸ Obviously, such an indictment rests on the assumption that this slippage blinds us, as Kimberly DeFazio has it, to the supposed fact that profit “is not derived from ‘nature’ but labor,” and that, “in order for nature to become a commodifiable resource, it must become transformed by human labor.” Viewed from this perspective, then, this is where any subversive eco-politics must take its beginnings.

⁹ To elaborate on this: first, Guillemin submits that the border trilogy “establishes a posthumanist approach in the sense that it thinks of the cosmos in terms of a non-anthropocentric materialism” (“some site” 109). Then, he suggests that, by calling attention to how ‘nature’ has become “an object of human appropriation,” this posthumanism “tacitly acknowledges” not only “the obsolescence of utopian pastoralism,” but the fact that ecopastoralism, too, is nothing but a “literary construct” that inevitably appropriates the object it textualizes (126). Guillemin concludes, though, that although the border trilogy displays an awareness that its ecopastoralist quest is no less contrived than its precursors, no less futile, and no less an escapism, it still hints at how stories may function so as to moderate a person’s “internal world of sorrow” (127). Obviously, this therapeutic element tends to be ignored by critics who have set themselves the task of extracting a progressive eco-ethic from McCarthy’s texts. This is problematic, because, as Jarrett has demonstrated, there are passages in *Cities of the Plain*, especially the epilogue, that relinquish any trace of realism and thus moves, illusorily at least, “out of history” and into “the imaginary or the visionary” (337). The dedication on the novel’s final page, Jarrett concludes, projects the trilogy “into *corrido*, bad dream, nursery rhyme, or the bedtime book, which all function primarily to lull us readers to sleep...” (338). Although this conclusion is compelling and certainly not ungrounded, however, it, too, lacks nuance, and the reason for this is Jarrett’s failure to take into consideration how the epilogue itself alerts its readers to the risks of any kind of storytelling, and especially the kind that is explicitly designed to calm the reader’s anxiety. It is precisely this quality of the

epilogue that counters not only Jarrett's claims, but also the undividedly positive accounts of optical democracy offered by some of the scholars referenced in this chapter.

¹⁰ Eager to construe the instances of pastoral longing so pervasive in the trilogy as politically productive, Dorson describes John Grady, Billy, and Boyd as "bona fide heroes": John Grady, as he tries to save Magdalena, Billy, as he attempts to save the wolf, and Boyd, "as he saves a Mexican girl from rape" (*Counternarrative* 252). Although Dorson is certainly aware that the American cowboy was at least partly culpable for the capitalist transformation of Mexico, he maintains that, modelled on the idealized movie and book version of the American 'vaquero,' "John Grady's stoicism is a model of perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds" (253). Dorson's critical object, then, is to lay bare how John Grady's quest is not merely "an ideological construct that leads to tragic failure," but also an instrument that "unshackles longing from the American promise" and thereby signposts us away from late capitalist inertia (228). As convincing as this thesis may seem, however, it ignores a bit too readily John Grady's acquisitive tendencies. To make the trilogy add up as a corrective to late capitalism, Dorson needs to stress Grady's good heart rather than his dubious motives or his complicity. Petra Mundik, too, seems to idealize John Grady when she claims that his final silencing of Eduardo serves as a refutation of the latter's nihilism and as an insistence on the "transcendent mystery of the sacred" (*A Bloody* 234). Whether this mystery "resides in the beauty of wolves and horses, the communion between all living creatures, or the love felt for another being," Mundik writes, "John Grady seems to understand that it is something worth dying for" (234).

¹¹ Or as Pierre Lagayette points out, "Eduardo practices a form of capitalism which, for all its perversions, is not fundamentally different from what the 'northern neighbor' has been doing for the past century" (84).

¹² On this note, Wegner points out that in "1902 a consortium of U.S. capitalists controlled 80 percent of Mexico's railroad stock" and that in "1925 American and British investors controlled 91.5 percent of all Mexican oil wealth" (251).

¹³ Wallis R. Sanborn provides a more general comment on this when he writes that "McCarthy emphasizes man's ceaseless desire to control the natural world, and will to capture, domesticate, attempt to kill, or kill those animals which he cannot control, such as birds, bats, wolves, and, humorously, certain bovines" (175). Commenting on John Grady in particular, Megan Riley McGilchrist writes that, like "a spoiled child, he wants *all* the pretty horses" (154).

¹⁴ In one of the early drafts, Magdalena, or Elvira, as she is called there, is described as "a young girl of perhaps sixteen or seventeen who is possessed of a fragile and unearthly beauty" (Wittliff 91/69/6).

7. “And the dreams so rich in color”: Style and Ideology in *The Road*

He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death. (McCarthy, *TR* 17)

[B]eauty offers her lures, has her consolations. (Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 125)

The Cormac McCarthy Society’s internet forum has a thread where anonymous users as well as prominent critics speculate wildly as to the potential cause of the cataclysm that has struck the fictional world of McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road*. The suggestions vary considerably, from “an erupting caldera” (Cantona) to “a nuclear event” (SooteSeason), and as these two examples illustrate, the debate ultimately comes down to, much like in most published criticism, whether or not the disaster was caused by humans. Contrary to what McCarthy himself as well as a number of critics have argued, an explanation would surely affect how the novel is read: as Steven Frye notes, nuclear wars and comets “have vastly different implications. A nuclear holocaust would be the result of human evil, and the meteor or asteroid the outcome of natural evil and the destructive capacity of the universe broadly construed” (16).¹ Nevertheless, the question contemplated in the web forum is arguably the wrong one to ask; wrong, because, obviously, there is no hidden cause buried deep in the text, waiting to reward the extraordinarily attentive reader.² To speak with *Blood Meridian*’s the judge, McCarthy’s own arbiter in matters such as these: “[n]ihil dicit,” the novel does not say (*BM* 264)—and this refusal to say reflects McCarthy’s career-long tendency to think of humanity as at once cosmically inconsequential and uniquely destructive. To provide an unequivocal explanation for the end of the world would thus have been quite an uncharacteristic move for this writer. As suggestive and well-researched as some of the suggestions in the forum may be, then, most of them shun the question that really matters; namely, what to make of the fact that there is no one correct answer. Notwithstanding the recurrence in McCarthy’s corpus of anthropogenic impact in general and nuclear technology in particular, *The Road* shows that McCarthy is ultimately

unwilling to suggest that humanity is the most severe threat currently facing the planet.³ Granted, the absence of such a verdict may make *The Road* seem both “post-historical and post-spatial” (69), as Rune Graulund puts it. This, however, does not mean that a literary critic’s reading of it has to be so too, especially not if s/he considers how the novel’s ambiguous politics ties in with the tension between the literary styles through which it is conveyed.

Not unlike *Cities of the Plain*—although this, of course, is a different novel in many other regards—*The Road* displays two literary styles that position themselves differently in relation to what the human imagination can and should do in times of crisis: free itself from the constraints of the quotidian, or home in attentively on the problems at hand. One of these styles is an aesthetically maximalist symbolism that comes across as an attempt to harness and render productive people’s hopes for a more harmonious world. The other style is a declarative mimesis that seems to reject these hopes as naïve and thereby potentially counterproductive. Exacerbating these tensions, moreover, the novel has one of its protagonists denounce as distractive his own symbolist dreams, even as it makes of this same protagonist a morally, ethically, and politically ambiguous isolationist who declares that the bunker he finds midway through the novel was certainly built by the “good guys”: preppers who have rolled up their “mattress pads . . . in army fashion” (146) and stocked “a box of .45 ACP cartridges and three boxes of .30–30 rifle shells” (151) (there is a genealogy here, stretching from the gun-toting anti-statism of *The Orchard Keeper*’s Uncle Ather to the father’s espousal of militarist doomsday prepping). The reader is thereby faced with the choice to either embrace the protagonist’s aesthetic assessment, or to dismiss it, and thus be delivered, through the style the protagonist discredits, from the novel’s bleak material reality. The option still exists, in other words, as it did for readers of McCarthy’s earlier fiction, to let a symbolist understanding of the world render moot any issue that seems in its nature political rather than ontological. Importantly, though, whereas novels like *The Orchard Keeper* and *Suttree* seemed more consistently to release such issues into a deep temporal and deep spatial realm where they ultimately lost all their significance, *The Road* invites the reader to consider, at the intersection of style and ideology, the merits as well as the drawbacks of an aesthetic that potentially has such implications.

Even though, in its last instance, the discussion in this chapter will be concerned primarily with style and ideology, it will necessarily involve

a number of related topics as well. For example, since *The Road*'s interest in style ties in explicitly with its portrayal of one of its protagonists, the chapter will look closely at the dynamic between this character and his young son. Unlike his isolationist father, the son warms to the notion of a sociality that stretches beyond the most immediate familial circle, and, again unlike his father, he seems far more optimistic about the future survival of humanity. The chapter will also touch on *The Road*'s seeming lack of historicity—plainly demonstrated by its refusal to reveal the cause of the apocalypse—and how this lack, too, might be considered part and parcel of the elements of McCarthy's style that tend to relativize the significance of contemporary politics. In this connection, moreover, I will propose that the critic considers the benefits as well as the pitfalls of reading McCarthy's novel allegorically, against the grain of its own symbolism. The point of such a move would be to show that, if employed as a critical methodology, allegory may help disclose that *The Road*'s lack of historicity is only superficial, and that it is perfectly possible to relay its aesthetic back to the historical situation from which it springs. For the sake of nuance, however, I will pit Paul de Man's enthusiasm for allegory's critical potential against György Lukács's skepticism of the very same mode of writing, only to then use Theodor Adorno as a corrective of Lukács. For reasons of clarity, though, I will begin with an account of plot and setting and the ways in which these may be considered political.

Capitalist Ruins

Pushing south through a world made uninhabitable, father and son in McCarthy's latest novel appear as existentialist heroes: unlike Camus's Sisyphus, they may not be smiling, as a rule, but they press on (34), trudge on (98), plod on (188), and they "[d]on't lose heart" (188).⁴ For perseverance, they depend on their ability to consume. A shopping cart successfully filled with canned goods equals survival; an abandoned but already ransacked supermarket could mean death. One should note here the absurdity of transporting a shopping cart through a waste-land littered with debris. Its wheels are clearly not designed for such surfaces and a handy figure like the father could surely have come up with something better: a sturdy baby stroller would have worked, and so would a dump cart. The shopping cart, however, serves in the text not primarily as an aid to the characters but as an emblem of consumerism—and thus, it points to the

possibility of reading the text as a whole as an allegory for life under capitalism.⁵

Hope, for McCarthy's protagonists, lies in inventorying desolate houses "like skeptical housebuyers" and in earnestly kicking through the trash "in the aisles of a foodmarket" or a "grocery store" (220, 84, 229). In a manner suggestive of wear and tear capitalism, moreover, they throw away their empty tins into the woods (72, 176), presumably since there seems to be no posterity to look forward to anyway. Other references to a mundane late capitalist existence include the couple's participation in a parody of the proverbial rat race, "[t]reading," as they do, "the dead world under like rats on a wheel" (292). Outside of this, there is nothing: the protagonists are kept alive by items produced within a now fallen capitalist system—a brave old world—whose ruins appear as "a vast funhouse against the distant murk" (23). With Jean Baudrillard, one can recognize here the allegorical contours of a society where alternative lifestyles are impossible, where ideology determines people's consumption habits only to instill simultaneously the fantasy that they are free to choose, but where, in reality, "no one is free to live on raw roots and fresh water," because "the minimum of imposed consumption, is the standard package" (Baudrillard 81): "Beneath this level," as Baudrillard explains, "you are an outcast" (81). In *The Road*, the man and the boy's food options are narrowed down to that which is industrially preserved, the "richness of a vanished world" (McCarthy 147), and the illusion of choice is emphasized by billboards displaying "advertisements for goods that no longer" exist (135), by the fact that "homecanned" goods generally cannot be trusted (21), and by an ash-covered soil seemingly incapable of yielding anything edible (the single exception being a few mushrooms found on one occasion [40]). Here, then, if construed as a critique of consumer capitalism, the novel seems to suggest that a life outside of this capitalism would not just mean social non-existence, but no existence at all (41). The novel will eventually make it clear, however, as will this chapter, that although this is indeed true for the father, it is not necessarily so for the son, who was born after capitalism as such had already ceased to exist and who therefore has never been interpellated as one of its subjects.⁶

It is certainly possible to read *The Road's* depiction of capitalist ruin as a suggestion that, if capitalism ends, so, inevitably, does the world at large.⁷ From this perspective, the "littered aisles" (21), the "trashstrewn" parking lots (21), the coins "everywhere in the ash" (22), and the "shopping carts, all badly rusted" (22), would imply not that

capitalism is a particularly flawed system, but that it is naïve to think that something better could ever replace it. On this note, and writing on *The Road*, Carl F. Miller draws on Fredric Jameson to argue that since capitalism offers the “only legitimate mechanism of totalization and collectivity” (50), its very existence is a precondition for socialism—an insight, he notes, that tempers the “oft-repeated utopian calls for capitalism’s dissolution” (49). In McCarthy’s novel, Miller suggests, this manifests itself in a scenario where “a world devoid of capitalism just as quickly becomes a world devoid of any human collective” (59). This reading, though, stems from a slight misconception of one of Marx’s axioms, proposing as it does not that socialism cannot exist *without* capitalism, but that it cannot exist *before* it: workers “ought to understand,” as Marx puts it, “that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders *the material conditions* and the *social forms* necessary for an economical [sic] reconstruction of society” (“Value” 29). In Hegelian fashion, then, capitalism bears within itself the seed of its own unmaking.

At the face of it, such an unmaking seems in *The Road* already to have happened. Yet, the novel draws heavily on language usually employed to describe consumer capitalism, seemingly to summon the image of an overwhelmingly brutal society; or better, perhaps, a world where there no longer is any society, to paraphrase Margaret Thatcher. In McCarthy’s post-apocalypse, all human relations are severely affected by the collective hunt for goods: “bloodcults” consume one another slowly (15), and the world is soon to be largely populated by “men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” and crawl around in the ruins of cities, carrying “anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell” (192). Since McCarthy’s fictional world is devoid of any market where things may be bought or sold, however, the figures of the shopper and the consumer allude here, much like the shopping cart, to a consumerism to be found not in the world of *The Road*, but in the world in which the novel was written.

The way in which these allusions do not only lament the ills of capitalism but hint at its potential undoing is thrown into relief when the father salvages a Coca Cola-can from a vending machine that lies tilted over among coins in the ash:

What is it, Papa?
It’s a treat. For you.
What is it?
Here. Sit down. (22)

The boy takes a sip, expresses his liking for the drink, and then offers it to his father:

You have some, Papa.
I want you to drink it.
You have some. (23)

Here, the father introduces his son to a “sacred ritual,” as Lydia Cooper puts it (“Eating” 557), in which the can of soda is no longer simply a product of human labor but a fetishized object whose origins are mysteriously veiled. Obviously, this is true of commodity fetishism in general, but in the passage above, the object literally descends from a world its consumer does not have access to. Hence, it becomes “a very queer thing,” as Marx writes, “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (*Capital* 47). Again, it would be possible to argue here that since *The Road*’s post-apocalypse lacks capitalist exchange and the infrastructure that supports it, commodity fetishism is an impossibility. As Brian Donnelly points out, however, the drink, the father, and the reader are all products “of the pre-apocalyptic world” (72); a fact that renders Marx’s concept perfectly valid, at least if one recognizes how the father’s ritualizing of the consumption of soda appears to be an attempt to pass on this relationship with commodities to his son, who was born after the apocalypse, and who, unlike the father, and unlike most readers, has not been exposed to capitalism’s alienating forces: the separation of people, the shattering of the collective, which is the very reason commodity fetishism works in the first place (Marx, *Capital* 49).

The boy’s response to his father’s ritual, then, is not to be glossed over. Granted, neither he nor his father seem to treat the can as the result of human labor; yet, what comes into view here as well is the latent potential of commodities such as the can of coke to bring people together—a capacity that is part of Marx’s notion that, thanks to the networks it creates, capitalism will ultimately facilitate its own undoing. The commodity, in other words, is not inherently bad: it is the way people relate to it that is problematic. These relations, however, can be manipulated, and perhaps the boy’s insistence on sharing the drink with his father constitutes a promise, small though it may be, of such an intervention. Significantly, on this note, the boy eventually seems to turn less and less materialistic: even “a year ago,” the father muses at one point, “the boy might sometimes pick up something and carry it with him for a while but he didnt do that any more” (213), which suggests that maybe he is up to the task, described

by Jordan J. Dominy, “to resist”—with the family that saves him at the novel’s closing—“the drive to appropriate and own, which would reinforce the consumerist paradigm and culminate with” a situation where “all has been consumed and there is nothing left” (154).⁸ To substantiate my suggestion that scenes such as this one may be read as allegories of consumer capitalism, and to explore the potential implications of such a reading, I move now to an account of two diametrically opposed conceptions of allegory; namely, de Man’s and Lukács’s.

Allegory

One could argue that mediation, allegory, substitution, and metaphoricity are central ideas not only in McCarthy’s authorship, as evidenced by his scientific publications, but in capitalist society at large, as evidenced by the phenomena of money and exchange.⁹ At any rate, this chapter proposes that although the world McCarthy’s two protagonists inhabit is presented in realistic detail as a time and place where human history has come to an end, the novel also has allegorical aspects that tie this world tightly to our own. By invoking the notion of allegory, I wish to refer not to the overt didacticism of, say, Edmund Spenser or John Bunyan, but, rather, to a de Manian mode of reading that recognizes the temporal limitations of humans and thus refuses, as I explain in chapter one, to accept the symbolist notion that literary texts are able to transcend the historical situations that give rise to them. Fredric Jameson calls this *allegoresis*: “the reading of a text *as though* it were an allegory” (*Allegory* 25). McCarthy repeatedly resorts to the kind of imaginary transcendence defined by de Man: his optically democratic symbolism tends to explore, as previous chapters have shown, “the possibility” for the human subject of an “identification” with the non-human (de Man, *Blindness* 207). This attempt, however, is potentially destabilized, especially in *The Road*, by allegorical elements that renounce “nostalgia and the desire to coincide” and that thus prevent “the self from an illusory identification with the non-self” (de Man, *Blindness* 207), a non-self translating in McCarthy’s case to a vast ecological totality that sometimes appears harmoniously seamless and sometimes violently entropic. These allegorical aspects counter symbolism’s feigned timelessness by directing the reader’s attention instead to *The Road*’s historical specificity and its status, for the reader so inclined, as an allegory of late capitalism’s illusion of choice, limited sociality, and environmental unsustainability.

An allegorical reading of McCarthy's novel is encouraged already on the first page, where, in one of the father's dreams, the protagonists resemble "pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast" (1; my emphasis). Later, the likening of the boy to an actor—"an old world thespian" (8)—also warrants such a reading, as this simile invokes the notion of one thing (the actor) standing in for another (whatever the actor pretends to be).¹⁰ The novel itself, in other words, quite literally establishes the premise that the words on the page may generate allegorical overtones. An example of such an overtone emerges when the boy relates a dream he has had of a toy penguin: "I had this penguin," he tells his father, "that you wound up and it would waddle and flap its flippers. And we were in that house that we used to live in and it came around the corner but nobody had wound it up and it was really scary" (37). "The winder wasnt turning," he adds a few lines later (37). First of all, this dream dovetails with a scene from *Blood Meridian* where an old slaver tells the protagonist that "when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And an evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it" (20)—or no need to wind it up. Second, the boy's dream is suggestive also of Marx's likening of "[m]odern bourgeois society" and its "gigantic means of production and of exchange" to a "sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells" (*Manifesto*).¹¹

In a theorization of allegory that differs substantially from de Man's, György Lukács discusses this concept in conjunction with modernism and suggests that, as opposed to realism, where "each descriptive detail is both *individual* and *typical*," allegorical modernism treats detail in a manner that "replaces concrete typicality with abstract particularity" ("The Ideology" 207). This treatment, Lukács maintains, alters "the substance of the world" so that it becomes "transferable and arbitrary" (207).¹² The "essence of allegory," for Lukács, is not immanence, which would call attention to the materiality of things as they appear in the world, but transcendence, which hints instead at that which lies beyond material existence (205): "Transcendence implies here," as Lukács puts it, "the negation of any meaning immanent in the world or the life of man" (205). In short, one could say that, when de Man reads a text as allegory, he redeems this text's historicity by pointing to how the human self that produced it is temporally specific rather than coincidental with the feigned eternity of the totalizing symbol (de Man, *Blindness* 207), and

when Lukács, conversely, reads a text as allegory, he witnesses how this text disregards objective reality in a manner that renders its historicity abstract and politically inefficacious (Lukács, “The Ideology” 205). For de Man, allegory’s acknowledgement that a text is always *different from that which it represents*, that it invariably *stands for something that it itself is not*, shows that this text does *not* transcend its historical situation, that it is *not* indistinguishable from some mystically ahistorical totality. For Lukács, though, such a logic of difference, substitution, and transferability severs the text from objective reality. For him, there is a “link,” as he puts it, “between allegory and the annihilation of history” (206).

On this historical note, one cannot ignore the stark biographical differences between de Man and Lukács. The essay from de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* that is referenced above was originally published in 1969, and Lukács’s “The Ideology of Modernism” five years earlier. Lukács’s political record prior to these publications involves committing to Communism in 1917 (Lunn 96–97), being a “major figure in the Hungarian Party since 1919” (107), and, subsequently, after a 28-year break from politics (108), playing a key role in Hungary’s anti-Soviet Revolution of 1956 (Marković 20). De Man, by contrast, notoriously spent the early 1940s writing for Nazi-collaborating Belgian media, although without ever explicitly espousing Nazism as such (Barish 136). This political vagueness is worth noting. Commenting in 2019 on de Man’s theorizing, Jameson writes that “the result is somehow always the same, never opening onto a variety of distinct historical situations in which the process is adapted” (*Allegory* 32–33). This critique is understandable: even though, as I hope to have shown, de Man lends himself readily to Marxist use, his ideas might in themselves be considered historically imprecise enough to be politically *laissez faire*; and it is difficult not to draw parallels between this hypothetical lack of ideological direction and de Man’s activities during the war. Lukács, on the other hand, always demands of his literary object a representation of the kind of “distinct historical situation” that brings human agency to the fore. If this is achieved, it does not really matter if the author is a conservative: Lukács’s famous celebration of Sir Walter Scott in *The Historical Novel* (1955) springs mainly from the possibility that, the conservatism of this writer notwithstanding, one can still establish in his works “Engel’s ‘triumph of realism’” (*The Historical* 54). What Lukács means is that although Scott was indeed an aristocrat, his realist approach calls attention to the “social reasons” to why his upper class characters fail “to fulfill their historic missions” (55). In other words, since

Scott is interested in the activities of humans, his writing helps lay bare how these activities are always what drive historical development.

From a Lukácsian perspective, then, one obvious risk with allegorical narration is that the narrative as a whole becomes politically vague, since the meaning one may or may not want to read into it is never sufficiently anchored in the world of ‘man.’ Therefore, it may be futile to demand politically and didactically unequivocal lessons from novels such as *The Road*, like Derek J. Thiess does when he writes that “we learn nothing by reading it” (548). “As McCarthy leaves the origin of” the apocalypse “ambiguous,” Thiess explains, “there is simply no importance placed on any one possible answer. And in this great indifference—to science, to destruction, and to anything but metaphysics—lies the danger for all of us” (548–49). More specifically, Thiess argues that McCarthy effaces the cause-and-effect logic of “contemporary understandings of science” and that he indulges instead in a relativism symptomatic of the “overemphasis on complex systems” at the Santa Fe Institute (533), the multidisciplinary research center where he keeps office, and where “researchers endeavor to understand and unify the underlying, shared patterns in complex physical, biological, social, cultural, technological, and even possible astrobiological worlds” (“About”).¹³ From a strictly political standpoint, Thiess’s reasoning makes perfect sense. From a literary critical perspective, however, it is potentially problematic in how it denigrates literature that does not come across as didactically sound. Yet, since McCarthy’s novel is clearly rich in politically charged content, Thiess’s complaint is worth taking seriously, as is Paul Sheehan’s similar criticism that the indeterminacy of *The Road*’s cataclysm “transforms the book from a warning . . . into an outcome, where effects are of greater import than causes” (91). There is arguably a Lukácsian logic at work in these arguments, recognizable in how they render suspicious literature that does not clearly enough show how the actions of people help make history. For this reason, I will allow Lukács some more space.

Lukács suggests that the works of Franz Kafka, one of his primary modernist examples, substitutes objective reality with an “angst-ridden vision of the world” (“The Ideology” 194). In this vision, Lukács explains, “the realistic detail is the expression of a ghostly unreality, of a nightmare world, whose function is to evoke angst” (194). There are, of course, vast differences between Kafka’s absurd worlds and McCarthy’s literary universe. Still, the suggestion above helps explain an important similarity: the fact that both authors employ realistic detail in a manner that bestows

on their fictional worlds an “allegorical transferability” that, in turn, blocks the didactically crucial “fusion of the particular and the general”—the highlighting and mapping of societal phenomena that, when recognized, may appear typical and thereby politically addressable (209). In *The Road*, this “attenuation of actuality” (194) amounts, as a number of critics point out, to a veiling of the potential causes of the post-cataclysmic wasteland and a de-historicization of the clichéd societal features the novel hints at: the economically hostile humankind, represented by cannibalism,¹⁴ and the illusion of choice, represented by the lack of any edibles that are not industrially preserved. Consequently, these problems can be construed either as consequences of a relentless capitalism or as products of this system’s fall. Thus, for the Lukácsian critic, the allegorical nature of McCarthy’s writing might render the politics of *The Road* all too nebulous.

Lukács’s critique of modernism, however, and his espousal of realism, have been frequently challenged, not least by his contemporaries. For example, doubting “both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of tendentious, agitative, or deliberately consciousness-raising art” (Zuidervaart), Theodor Adorno suggests that,

[i]f material reality is called the world of exchange value, and culture no matter what refuses to accept the domination of that world, then it is true that such refusal is illusory as long as the existent exists. Since, however, free and honest exchange is a lie, to deny it is at the same time to speak for the truth: in the face of the lie of the commodity world, even the lie that denounces it becomes a corrective. (*Minima* 44)¹⁵

Here, Adorno advocates an art that defies a problematic reality by going beyond it, by refusing to acknowledge its inevitability.¹⁶ Obviously, this is a way of looking at what art can and should do that differs substantially from Lukács’s ideas. From an Adornian point of view, *The Road* could be regarded as progressive in how it accommodates ideological tensions instead of portraying a supposed objective reality in a politically constructive manner. This line of reasoning, of course, has been further developed by later thinkers, such as Jameson, who argues that realism is inseparable from certain developmental stages of capitalism, as it builds on the “standardizing of the wage/commodity relation as a shared ‘common sense’ experience of the world” (qtd. in Holloway, *The Late* 41). To alter a conventional view of time and history, then, like *The Road* does when it

refuses to show its readers how the pre-cataclysmic past and the post-cataclysmic present fit together, might be considered one potential method of calling attention to how the reification of late capitalism makes history seem hopelessly immutable. As I will show, however, McCarthy's novel ultimately poses the question as to whether a mode of writing that shuns notions like causality and historicity was ever valid as a means of political resistance.

Father and Son

Since this aesthetic quandary is voiced, as I will argue, through the two protagonists, the critic's appraisal of the father and the son may have a vast impact on how s/he reads the novel as a whole. Here, scholars differ widely: for instance, it has been argued about the father that he makes morally sound choices (Guo 4), that he is in possession of a "moral stamina" (Hillier, "Each" 678) and "an instinctive rectitude" (Cooper, *Heroes* 158); that he performs "deeds that remain beautiful" (Wilhelm 141) and constructs "an ethical roadmap for the future" (142), and that he is "a sympathetic, likeable middle-aged man" (Kunsa 59). On the other side of the critical divide, it has been suggested that the father is representative of "an American upper middle class consciousness conditioned by the same material order that produced the catastrophic event" (Jergenson 121), that he is implicated "in the destructive uses of the ecosystems he mourns" (Cooper, "Eating" 551), and that he simply "is not a good guy" (Mullen 4). Commenting on the ambiguous politics of the novel, Julian Murphet provides a more nuanced view of the same character: "The Man's 'foreign policy,'" he writes, "wards off the very thought of community thanks to a ubiquitous state of exception; but neither is this policy to be dismissed as unreasonable given the savagery into which the species as a whole has now degenerated" (120). Indeed, it is important not to dismiss the father entirely. Sometimes, his suspicions of potential disaster are even proven correct, like when a "tableau of the slain and the devoured" prompts him and his son to hide from a group of "marchers" that soon "appear four abreast" (95). What is more, "as flawed as he emerges," as Jędrzej Tazbir puts it, "we must take full notice of the exceptionality of the moral standard the father is set against" (127): the son, who, as most scholars seem to agree, is more or less ethically impeccable.¹⁷

Nevertheless, it is notable how much the father's isolationist ethos differs from the espousal of hospitality so prominent in other McCarthy

novels; like in *The Crossing*, where, in the Mexican ejido, there “could be no thought of people being left behind,” because who “would permit such a thing?” (528). This solidarity may be compared to when the man and the boy meet an aged stranger and the father says that “I dont think he should have anything,” which the son, of course, thinks that he should (175). The novel never settles for the reader the question if the father’s attitude separates the couple from benevolent travelers: the stranger, Ely, claims at first that he has managed to survive because people “give you things” (181); a claim that seems to undermine the father’s view of the world, but that is recanted a page later, when Ely admits that “[t]here’s not any people. I just made that up” (182). At any rate, the ethical differences between the man and the boy are emphasized when they part ways with Ely and the man says that when “we’re out of food you’ll have more time to think about it” (185) and the boy responds that “I wont remember it the way you do” (186). One could add here that even the father himself acknowledges at one point that the “good guys” are indeed hiding from “each other” (196).

The tensions between the father and the son, and the tensions within the father, are reflected in the stories he tells his son. As John Cant notes, McCarthy’s texts in general urge the reader to recognize that humanity is dependent on storytelling (*The Myth* 7), that people’s realities are created not so much on the basis of historical facticity, but on the narratives they produce and reproduce: “man,” as Cant puts it, creates “his history and his identity by telling his stories to others” (7). More specifically, Cant highlights how, in McCarthy, the myth of American exceptionalism is exposed as just that: a myth offering guidance and solace to any lost and fearful American willing to listen (7, 17). Surprisingly, however, Cant fails to mention how this phenomenon pervades the relation between the protagonist dyad, how the novel seems to establish a contrast between the father as an old, fading ideological creation, and the son who—born into a new world—is able to recognize that his father’s stories are ideological rather than factual. At the beginning of the novel, the father tries to share these stories, “stories of courage and justice as he” remembers them (42), and initially, the boy listens avidly (6). Soon, though, the father realizes that he is unable to reproduce those narratives that once helped form him: he cannot get them right (55). Consequently, he sometimes tries to make up new ones, to “construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (78), but before long, he stops this, because these stories are “not true either,” and the telling makes “him feel bad”

(55).¹⁸ This crisis is explicitly portrayed a few times in the novel, like when the father finds a verdigrised coin on the road and the imagery and the implied hesitation illustrate the conflict this find provokes in him:

He took out his knife and chiseled at it with care. The lettering was in spanish. He started to call the boy where he trudged ahead and then he looked about the gray country and the gray sky and he dropped the coin and hurried on to catch up. (217–18)

It is significant, of course, that what the father immediately recognizes as a chance to confirm himself and his stories is offered by an old piece of currency. Almost immediately, however, he loses his enthusiasm, as though suddenly realizing he is about to tell lies again. The boy is ahead of him, on his way, perhaps, toward a new beginning that, for the father, appears to be nothing but “gray country and... gray sky” (218). Prior to this, the father has also “found a double handful of gold krugerrands” (151): the bullion coins, first issued in 1967, that were supposed to help South Africans take advantage of the price rise and legally avoid capital gains tax (OED). The father kneads these remnants of apartheid South Africa “in his hand” before he scoops them back “into the jar” in which he found them and puts “the jar back on the shelf” (151). The stories remain untold, and simultaneously, the father grows weaker: “Every day is a lie... But you are dying. That is not a lie” (254), as he himself admits, faced with a post-cataclysmic world where all ideological state apparatuses are gone, where there is no church and no “godspoke men” (32), no education system, seemingly no family (in the traditional sense), and no visible culture that could have encouraged him. Without this ideological foundation, the father loses faith: things he once “believed to be true” fall into oblivion and prove to be “[m]ore fragile than he would have thought” (93), like the soggy volumes he finds on a bookshelf in a basement: “Everything damp. Rotting” (138).¹⁹

Furthermore, the father gradually starts noticing that the boy has fantasies of his own, about how “things will be in the south” and about “[o]ther children” (55). It even seems, at times, as if the father-son-dynamic has been reversed, as if the son has shouldered the role of custodian: “You did good Papa,” he says at one point (131), and when they come “upon themselves in a mirror and” the man nearly raises “the pistol,” the boy calms him, assuring him that “[i]t’s us, Papa, . . . It’s us” (139). Occasionally, moreover, the boy seems to be in charge of their route, studying the map so that he has “the names of towns and rivers by heart and”

measuring “their progress daily” (229). Naturally, this reversal lends weight to the boy’s ethical stances, another example of which emerges when the couple has caught a looter red-handed and the father asks his son what he wants to do and the boy answers: “[j]ust help him, Papa. Just help him,” whereupon the father declares that this man is “going to die anyway” (277). From the father’s deterministic perspective, he and the boy are incapable of altering the state of things, and therefore, they should refrain from interfering in other people’s business. Like so many other times in the novel, though, the boy challenges this world-view, this time by calling attention to the consequences of his father’s decision to hunt down the looter and then abandon him naked, stripped of clothes and all other possessions: “I wasn’t going to kill him,” the father says, to which the boy replies: “But we did kill him” (278). Eventually, events such as these cause the son to reject his father’s stories wholesale:

Do you want me to tell you a story? [father]

No. [son]

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true.

They don’t have to be true. They are stories.

Yes. But in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people. (286)

And:

You always tell happy stories. [son]

You don’t have any happy ones? [father]

They are more like real life.

But my stories are not.

Your stories are not. No. (287)

In other words, the son starts recognizing how the father’s self-congratulatory stories disagree ideologically with the rugged individualism that really informs most of his decisions.

In the father, McCarthy conjures with granular and action-oriented detail an earnest and self-reliant handyman who instinctively fills up the bathtub with drinking water as soon as the cataclysm is a fact (54) and who repairs his worn shopping cart with ease: “He pulled the bolt and bored out the collet with a hand drill and resleeved it with a section of pipe he’d cut to length with a hacksaw. Then he bolted it all back together and

stood the cart upright and wheeled it around the floor. It ran fairly true” (16).²⁰ Articulated by president Hoover during his election campaign in 1928, the myth of the ‘rugged’ and self-made individualist is the epitome of an ideology that distracts a person from the fact that s/he is not alone, that others are stuck in the very same trials and difficulties caused, for instance, by inequitable socio-economic structures, and that there is potential advantage to be found in this shared predicament.²¹ In *The Road*, the father seems corrupted by something reminiscent of this republican ideal to the extent that he is unable to recognize the potential goodness surrounding him: he mistrusts everyone (“Well, I don’t think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road” [160]) and, therefore, he always expects danger (“Do you always expect it? Papa? I do. But sometimes I might forget to be on the lookout” [161]). In a whim of self-reflexiveness, when he wakes sobbing in the middle of the night, he believes that his desperation stems from ideas about beauty or goodness, “[t]hings that he’d no longer any way to think about at all” (137). The son on the other hand, seems able to recognize the promises of community he and his father occasionally encounter, and as the story unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that the father “must die,” as Donovan Gwinner, Patrick Damien O’Connor, and Anthony Mullen all put it (O’Connor 14, Mullen 4, Gwinner 153), “for the boy to find what the father is seemingly unprepared to find: good guys” (Gwinner 153). Toward the end of *The Road*, and the end of the father’s life, the son seems finally to have recognized this: “You’re not the one who has to worry about everything” (277), the father says, to which the boy replies that “[y]es, I am...I am the one” (277). In a way, this fits neatly into McCarthy’s corpus as a whole, where the father as origin often appears as a notion that misguides whoever entertains it and that therefore needs to be let go.²²

The kind of isolationism the father exhibits has been described as a modernist trait by Lukács, who writes that, in modernism, ‘man’ is “by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter relationships with other human beings” (“The Ideology” 189). This characteristic, Lukács explains, must not be confused with the individual solitariness sometimes to be found in realist literature, in which this state is always merely a phase (189). In modernist literature, by contrast, solitariness is a “universal *condition humaine*” (190). Traces of this modernist pathology are indeed present in McCarthy’s novel, especially in the following exchange, where

[s]omeone had come out from the woods in the night and continued down the melted roadway.

Who is it? said the boy.
I don't know. Who is anybody? (50)

Here, the father's response borders on the ridiculous: "Who is anybody" is a clichéd line from the alienated. Nonetheless, since the father is more of a focalizer than the boy, his perspective determines how other people are portrayed, like when he encounters "the first human being other than the boy he had spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word" (79).²³ This bleak description of a fellow traveler is not necessarily diegetically accurate, though, since only the distorted perspective of the father is allowed to 'read' the appearance of this long-awaited brother. In other words, it is far from certain that the people father and son encounter on the road are really as "mad" as critic Matthew Ryan suggest that they are (4). Towards the end of the novel, when the boy meets his new companions, only a short, pragmatic cross-hearing is required for relative trust to be established (McCarthy 301–05).²⁴ This trust arguably overthrows the ideology Lukács calls modernist: 'man' is not alone, and the world is not unalterable.²⁵ Yet, the father's myopic politics are not that easily overcome, related, as they are, to the novel's refusal to provide the reader with any explicit links between the pre-apocalyptic past and the post-apocalyptic present.

A Loss of Historicity

In connection with his critique of modernism, Lukács suggests that by "separating time from the outer world of objective reality" and thus neglecting the explanatory potential of history, modernist literature often degenerates into an "escape into nothingness" ("The Ideology" 197, 204). David Holloway finds recurring examples of such a tendency throughout McCarthy's whole oeuvre, where, as he puts it, time often seems "spatial rather than temporal," and where, he adds, the world repeatedly appears "separated from both past and future" (*The Late* 63, 65). In effect, Holloway argues, the categories of time and history seem unable in McCarthy's novels to contribute to an understanding of the contemporary world.²⁶ Importantly, however, Holloway labels McCarthy's writing "late" modernist. His, then, would be a kind of writing that tries to reinvent the critical distance of traditional modernism, but also a "writing that seizes upon the postmodern so as to use it against itself and negate it dialectically

from within” (4). In keeping with this reasoning, Holloway maintains that McCarthy ultimately manages to contradict his own lack of historicity: in *All the Pretty Horses*, for instance, “the Dueña” looks at her scars as substitutes for the “totality of a ‘real’ past, disavowing what she calls a ‘sense of the connectedness of things’” (69), only to contradict this disavowal in an elaborate speech in which she implicitly acknowledges the importance of the rich layers of historical processes to be found entangled with the lives of past generations. Quoting Lukács, Holloway suggests that this speech gives “poetic life to those historical, social and human forces which, in the course of a long evolution, have made . . . present day life what it is” (70). Arguing, finally, that the Dueña’s way of contradicting herself is part of McCarthy’s dialectics and self-reflexiveness, Holloway suggests that the novels’ waning of historicity serves as an inquiry into the politics of contemporary aesthetics: by employing such means as the Dueña’s speech, McCarthy treats the problem. In other words, according to Holloway, the seeming lack of historicity in McCarthy’s novels functions as a comment on the historylessness of contemporary society and the art it produces.

This thesis, however, only seems partially accurate if applied to *The Road*, in which the dialectic of historicity is far more complex. To begin with, *The Road* does not offer any explicit speeches or utterances challenging the idea of history as something lost and possibly even insignificant; and, as has already been established, the reader is not informed of the exact nature of the catastrophe so central in the novel: there are minor hints suggesting an atom bomb that would have caused the clocks to stop, in biblical fashion, “at 1:17,” a “long shear of light” and “a series of low concussions,” but these implications are too vague to be explanatory (54).²⁷ In keeping with this vagueness, the father’s reflections on the pre-cataclysmic past are also markedly diffuse: “[t]here is no past. What would you like?” he thinks (probably, or exclaims—this is unclear) when unable to answer the boy’s questions about his old life (55). “How does the never to be differ from what never was?” he asks himself on another occasion, thus implicitly defining the present as “separated from both past and future,” as Holloway would have had it (McCarthy 32, Holloway, *The Late* 63). For the father, there is no “list of things to be done,” and the “day [is] providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later” (McCarthy 56). Obviously, these musings preclude the possibility for cultivating a consciousness that may learn from the past and aim for the future.

In spite of this historylessness, however, the father does remember, but usually in a manner that evades the destructive economic system and the corrupted sociality the novel simultaneously hints at. A pastoral paradise is, at first glance, what remains of the world the reader still inhabits. At one point, when waking on a beach at an hour too “black to see,” the father remembers (233)

waking once on such a night to the clatter of crabs in the pan where he'd left steakbones from the night before. Faint deep coals of the driftwood fire pulsing in the onshore wind. Lying under such a myriad of stars. The sea's black horizon. He rose and walked out and stood barefoot in the sand and watched the pale surf appear all down the shore and roll and crash and darken again. When he went back to the fire he knelt and smoothed her hair as she slept and he said if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different. (234)

Clearly, this is an idyll of many components: the pulse of the fire, the incalculable number of stars, the feeding crustaceans, and the ceaseless motion of the sea; all contributing, along with the love for the wife, to a sense of cohesion, comparable, perhaps, to the feelings elicited when the man used to pore “over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world” (194).²⁸ Here, though, the father would be right to suggest that “[t]here is no past” (55), because taken out of context, this memory is “an idealized version” of a bygone world, in O'Connor's words (8), or “a fantasy of pristine wilderness,” in Cooper's (“Eating” 558). Even the father seems vaguely aware of his own idealizations: at one point, he thinks of memories recalled as damaging their origins, “[a]s in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not” (139). Perhaps this is precisely what is happening when the father recalls being a little boy walking along a shore with his uncle, who is “puffing at his pipe” while studying “treestumps” (12). They both have their “[t]rousers rolled up but still they g[e]t wet” (12). This day, the father regards as the day to “shape the days upon” (12). As opposed to the memories from the beach, though, this scene actually contains elements that are not necessarily idyllic. Note the “dead perch” that are “lolling belly up in the clear water,” for whatever reason, and the treestumps that, most definitely, exist for reasons anthropogenic, but that clearly do

not stop the man from labelling this moment as perfect, from damaging its origins (12).²⁹

The father's self-reflexivity, however, urges him to be wary of his own dreams and memories, since, these, as Graulund puts it, "are a dangerous distraction from the one thing that truly matters: the present survival of his boy from one day to the other" (66). "When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again," the man tells his son, "then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you" (McCarthy 202). Waking from another dream of his wife, he cautions himself:

He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death. He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. (17).

These "dreams so rich in color" (20), as he calls them, are problematic because they are "encroaching upon" a "waking world" that needs his full attention (299). "How else would death call you?," he ponders, sensitive to the discrepancy between "softly colored worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun" (292) and a reality where all of this turns "to ash instantly. Like certain ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day" (20). Furthermore, standing in the room where he slept as a child he remembers dreaming "the dreams of a child imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be" (26): never anything that would ever coincide with reality. If there is a corrective to be found to *The Road's* lack of historicity, it is twofold: first, for the de Manian critic, as discussed earlier, it may be found in how the novel's allegorical allusions to consumer capitalism brings it out of the sphere of aesthetics and into the sphere of history, and second, it may be found in the father's recognition of the incongruity between dream and reality and in his realization that his dreams consistently distort the past.

Style

The father's musings on his dreams tie in with the different styles between which McCarthy's later writing oscillates.³⁰ The memories of the beach aptly exemplify the optically democratic symbolism that vividly records harmonious networks of human as well as non-human agents, whereas numerous descriptions of the terrain through which the protagonists travel exemplify the more toned-down declarative mimesis discussed in my previous chapter: "The country went from pine to liveoak and pine. Magnolias. Trees as dead as any. He picked up one of the heavy leaves and crushed it in his hand to powder and let the powder sift through his fingers" (209); "no sign of life anywhere" (216); the "wind coming off the water smelled faintly of iodine. That was all. There was no sea smell to it" (236).³¹ The novel's juxtaposition of these two styles, then, may be made to ask the question, with Lukács and Adorno, how the human imagination can be harnessed to help bring about political change. With or without McCarthy's permission, in other words, this juxtaposition may be used as a framework to discuss whether an aesthetic that depicts closely the hardships posed by late capitalism is politically superior, from a Marxist standpoint, to an aesthetic that seeks to escape the reification of this capitalism in order to demonstrate that another world is possible. What makes this question complicated is that, although the rejection of the brightly colored dreams and the optically democratic aesthetic is quite unequivocal, the representation of the father, the speaker of this rejection, is not: clearly, McCarthy depicts this character as at once a loving father and a dubious isolationist.

The Road's ending is highly significant here, considering how, unlike "the 'ashen scabland' (McCarthy 13) the father and son slog across throughout the novel," the "closing scene is one of flourishing life, flora and fauna mingling in biotic splendor" (Brandt 64). The style in which the ending is cast, in other words, has more in common with the father's dreams than with the hard-boiled style that characterizes the main bulk of the novel. Perhaps, along with the boy's seemingly unlikely luck in finding a new family, this is the reason why the ending has stirred such critical debate. Also, the contrast in the final paragraph between the past tense, the optically democratic form, and metaphysically charged words such as "mystery," certainly makes for some ambiguity, even though the paragraph begins by proclaiming poignantly that "[o]nce," as opposed to now,

there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (306–07)

It should take some effort, though, to find redemption in these lines, considering how unequivocally they state that the natural wonders they summon cannot “be put back.” Far from all of critics are discouraged by this irrevocability, though: Gabriella Blasi writes that “the concluding image provides hope that a non-anthropocentric vision of nature’s language remains possible” (100), Louis Palmer suggests that the “final image is an icon of hope, a recognition of what we have not yet lost, but still may” (“Full Circle” 66), Daniel Luttrull finds it “strangely uplifting” (24), and Rasmus R. Simonsen simply redeems the paragraph by changing its tense from past to present: “Even if the ‘brook trout [have gone from] the streams in the mountains,’” he argues, “the world may still ‘hum[] of mystery’” (95). Others, however, are more pessimistic: Jordan J. Dominy writes that the “sylvan panorama that closes the novel . . . does not portend environmental regeneration or the reestablishment of human civilization” (65), Kenneth Brandt notes how “the natural world, utterly blotted out, obviously can no longer function as a redemptive field” (64), and Simon Schleusener submits that nothing in the novel “gives reason to hope for any positive change at large” (2).³² Evidently, then, *The Road*’s final passage is no less able to accommodate the type of reading that takes the father’s warnings about optical democracy seriously than the kind that does not.

By the time *The Road* was written, as Andrew Hoberek points out, it is as though McCarthy has largely abandoned, in favor of a Hemingwayesque “minimalism,” the Faulknerian “maximalism” that pervades so much of his earlier writing but that only appears as brief exceptions in the later novels (492). Clearly favoring this waning style, Hoberek finds promise in how its “brief moments of Faulknerian effusion” are supposedly able to free themselves “from material reality,” even as they engage with history (493). It is far from obvious, though, how a style that detaches itself “from material reality” can be more engaged with history than a style that does not, and as I have pointed out elsewhere, these things may go either

way: a style never means until it is read, and surely, it always reads in more ways than one. Andrew McMurry illustrates this critical truism perfectly when he writes about *The Road*'s purported traits of hope that, "when all choice is removed, all action foreclosed, then by all means let hope fill the vacuum. Until then, let us be about the tasks at hand" (74).³³ For McMurry, then, it seems, the aesthetic imagination lauded by Hoberek is as counter-productive as it is counter-factual, and in this way, he deviates from the rather strong trend in McCarthy criticism to be far more sensitive to the promises of optically democratic symbolism than to its risks.³⁴

Yonatan Englender and Elena Gomel implicitly address one of these risks when they note how the son's objection that his father's stories are untrue amounts to a "demand . . . to go beyond the metaphor and face reality" (135).³⁵ This observation arguably comes close to one of the novel's central cruxes, aesthetically and politically speaking: its dialectical movement between a symbolist escapism and a style that, conversely, does not distance itself as clearly from the historical. On the one hand, the novel seems to indict dreams—and, implicitly, literary styles—that are 'rich in color' and thereby false; on the other hand, however, these warnings are issued by the father, whose perspective the novel to some extent undermines.³⁶ Thus, at least two options arise. Critics can either read the father's warnings with the grain and conclude that symbolist escapes from the extant order are symptoms of an impending catastrophe of some sort, or they can read these warnings against the grain and conclude that the father is ideologically conditioned to the degree that, unlike the boy, he is unable to recognize the utopian potential of the human imagination.³⁷ The first reading suggests that the novel prompts the reader to dismiss the supposedly hopeful ending and its language as contrived, whereas the second reading suggests instead that the novel encourages the reader to embrace the ending as a potentially productive break with the isolationist logic represented by the father. The question here, then, is whether, like some critics, the reader sympathizes completely with this character's struggle and accepts his isolationism as well as his notions that a vivid imagination might be distracting, or if s/he, like other critics, chooses to pay more attention to how the novel renders suspicious the father and his hostility toward others. Ultimately, this question boils down to what style has most to offer: a declarative mimesis (the Hemingwayesque) or an optically democratic symbolism (related to the Faulknerian). The ending does not provide an answer. Surely, it is able to accommodate readers of a utopian inclination, readers who invest in the struggle of father and son

and note how these characters differ from the “creedless shells of men” they desperately seek to avoid (28). However, one may also choose to read the denouement in the light of McCarthy’s previously quoted comment from the interview in *The New York Times*, suggesting that visions of social harmony are “really dangerous” (qtd. in Hawkins 437). To indulge in this kind of utopian dream, creed, or aesthetic, then, might well, from this perspective, be to indulge in danger.

Another important aspect in relation to the novel’s utopian potential is the son, who, indeed, comes across as a moral paragon, but whose merits are also easy to overestimate. Granted, it is the son’s ability to connect with strangers that opens up the fictional universe to a possible future. However, it is far from certain that he has the capability to make good on the promises that some critics seem to invest in him. Pertinent here is Adeline Johns-Putra, who argues first that *The Road* requires a “relentless anthropocentrism for its logic” (531), but who then adds that both the boy and the man who saves him in the end seem to espouse “an alternative ethics,” “more enlarged than the father’s” (534). It remains unclear, though, in what way the boy would be less *anthropocentric* than the father, considering how, as even Johns-Putra’s appears to agree, his supposedly enlarged ethic requires no more than “reaching out to others—to other children and, indeed, other *humans*” (534–35; my emphasis). My position here is that I agree with Johns-Putra more than she agrees with herself: resorting to anthropocentrism is a common closure in McCarthy at large, and it is not unequivocally remedied by the boy and his new family either. Notably, the boy’s adoptive mother tells him, in the novel’s penultimate paragraph, that “the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from *man to man* through all of time” (306; my emphasis). What is more, to uncritically accept the boy as a flawless figure of hope might be to accept a bit too readily McCarthy’s sentimental conjuring of this character as a literary version of his own son, John Francis McCarthy, the novel’s dedicatee, who was born when the author was well into his late 60s, and who might function, like his fictional counterpart, as a facile means to defer responsibility to future generations. This, as Johns-Putra aptly puts it, would amount to “a too ready—or even too lazy—belief that caring for our children is a proxy for caring for the environment” (534). What seems to be happening here, moreover, is that even though McCarthy has arguably started to doubt, like the father, the merits of the hopeful aspects of the optically democratic form, he still implicates, in the end, his own boys, the fictional as well as the actual, in a denouement that depends

on this very form for its realization. Then again, the fish in the concluding paragraph only “*smelled* of moss in your hand” (307; my emphasis)—a grammatical fact that invites the reader to construe, with the novel’s father(s), the end as a distraction, predicated on a futile embrace of a past that may never be recovered.

Conclusion

What seems necessary at this point of my analysis is a way of looking at art as a phenomenon that is never inherently subversive, that never *means* anything in and of itself, but the *use* of which determines its meaning, to return once more to Wittgenstein’s well-known aphorism (20).³⁸ The way art means, moreover, will inevitably vary with time and context, which is why it is crucial, as Walter Benjamin argues, to recognize how history shapes “the way in which human perception is organized” (“Work of Art” 104), and how notions like “eternal value and mystery” (101), tend to lead to an “*aestheticizing of politics*” (122), to a veiling or a naturalizing of political ideas through artistic form. Famously, Benjamin urges the critic to respond to such harmful fallacies “*by politicizing art*” (122), by demonstrating, as one could construe this advice, that, since art can always be made to do different kinds of ideological work, it is never merely beautiful, but always already political. One way of heeding this call is to pay attention to the plurality of ways in which a literary text, for instance, can be made to resonate with almost any given agenda.

As the reference to Benjamin implies, this tendency of literary texts to ‘mean differently’ depending on time, context, and reader, is not necessarily a uniquely postmodern phenomenon, exclusively manifested by how ‘subversive’ art tends to be co-opted by capitalism, but more likely a quality the written word has always had. Still, a central question for ideology critics today is whether either art or critique can ever be said to occupy a culturally or economically autonomous position outside of ideology. A negative answer to this question would imply that the critic conceives of ideology as something almost mystically overwhelming; a sentiment triggered, perhaps, by the notion that the object—and the logic of exchange and substitution—now completely dominates the human subject and any kind of resistance s/he might be able to muster. However, with the caveat that leftist dissidence often ends up being absorbed by a capitalism whose proponents declare that they have learned from the criticism levelled against them and that the system has now been reformed

into a more sustainable version of itself, a slightly more positive answer could suggest instead that co-option is an indeterminate struggle, that capitalism co-opts, but is also co-opted, and that art functions much like a Rorschach test, to varying degrees accommodating the views of its audience. One may consider, for instance, how a relatively recent and enormously successful film such as *The Hunger Games* not only reverses traditional gender roles, but how its very premise—the suffering of the many under the oppression of the few—is strikingly Marxist in character (if crudely so). To argue that this hi-jacking of the Hollywood machinery has no effect on its predominantly young audience would be as naïve as to exaggerate its effects, to fail to note that despite its being written by “a maxed-out donor to the 2012 Obama campaign” (“The Strange-Bedfellow Politics”), it seems to pander just as well to an alt-right aversion to big government (“The Hunger Games’ Review”). Much like the novels discussed in this dissertation, then, it is potentially political in an uncontrollable number of ways. Or to let McCarthy chime in: it is “a chimeric tap-estry, read what you will” (Wittliff 91/35/7).

Nonetheless, despite the fact that literary texts tend to accommodate simultaneously a multitude of meanings, especially, perhaps, when written or read allegorically, McCarthy’s critics often seem set on explicating from this multitude only those meanings that appear politically progressive. Against the background of this critical slant, one should be careful to note also the ideological work potentially performed by McCarthy’s unwillingness to ever resolve the questions if humanity in general is a uniquely destructive species and if capitalism in particular is to blame for *The Road’s* ostensibly worldwide cataclysm. Without discounting completely the critical notion that novels such as McCarthy’s may indeed trigger in their audiences the kind of hope that might enthrall them to work collectively toward a future where the accumulation of capital does not eventually destroy the planet’s biosphere, it is imperative that the critic is responsive also to the flipside of this hope, and to the flipside of the portrayal of humanity as a biologically determined and relatively insignificant force in the world. Hope may defer action, even when it takes the form of an innocent boy, and especially when it is coupled with the notion that it matters little, in the long run, whether or not people believe that they have any lasting effects on the global ecology as a whole. There is, in this logic, a quietism that, latent though it may be, is readily available to readers suspicious of any political initiative that questions the tenability of unfettered growth or that threatens to otherwise interfere in people’s everyday lives.

If the violent 19th century “degenerates” in *Blood Meridian* are a “heliotropic plague” (83), reified and unstoppable, it follows by implication that perhaps so are the moneyed 21st century consumers who fly across the globe for a few days of all-inclusive bliss and whose lifestyles in general depend on cheap Third World labor and borders that are open for capital but closed for the impecunious. Regardless of whether this is McCarthy’s intention, his later novels invite the reader to consider how a symbolist aesthetic might be said to reinforce such a passivizing idea.

¹ McCarthy says in *The Wall Street Journal* that the cause of the cataclysm “is not really important” (Jurgensen), and John Armstrong (138), Hannah Stark (73), and Naomi Morgenstern (36) evidently agree. Laura Gruber Godfrey, though, sides in some sense with Steven Frye when she suggests that, if we think of the cataclysm as ‘natural,’ “then the narrative fails to fit into [Leo] Marx’s description of man’s mechanical intrusion into the pastoral, and is instead evidence of McCarthy’s faithfulness to literary naturalism” (173).

² Oliver James Brearey points out that not even the father, one of the protagonists, seems to know what has happened (338). Thus, as Dana Phillips puts it, “sifting the text of *The Road* in this realist fashion—fact-checking it—is probably imprudent, since the book is a work of fiction not bound by strictures of verisimilitude” (“He ought” 177). Kevin Kearney agrees and writes that this “point seems to be missed by critics who, in a search to present the novel as either an environmentally didactic text . . . or as a deterrent against nuclear proliferation, tend to ‘fill in the blanks,’ so to speak, in order to provide symbolic resolution” (164). In this sense, then, the novel serves as a projection surface for its critics. Rune Graulund puts it similarly: “Depending on what one comes looking for,” he writes, “*The Road* can convincingly sustain readings that suggest we invest our hopes either in nature, in humanity or in God” (76). This vagueness is something critics have dealt with in vastly different ways: Bill Hardwig writes that “McCarthy keeps the exact cause of the event ambiguous, as he is more interested in the science fiction theme of a new world in the future than he is about the scientific and historical explanation of the causes that initiate the change” (42); Daniel T. Kline, too, chooses to think of the indeterminacy as a conscious strategy on McCarthy’s part “so as to not allow easy moralizing about ecological disaster or nuclear proliferation” (333); Inger-Anne Søfting, on the other hand, writes that, if “we read [*The Road*] as a present-day novel about ecological collapse, it could perhaps be said to lose a potentially didactic dimension by not conveying any information about the events and the situation leading up to the disaster” (“Between” 707–08); Robert Pirro, similarly, thinks that this makes the novel “politically opaque” (2), and so does Özden Sözüalan, who argues that McCarthy’s “logic of narrative” ultimately “strives to elude the inconsistencies and contradictions implicit” in the “ideological frame” of the text (xiv); Richard Gray, on the other hand, suggests that the indeterminacy is conditioned by history, more specifically by the trauma of 9/11 (“Cormac” 264), and Kristjan Mavri suggests something similar when he notes that the “ideological underpinnings for” the “recent surge in popularity” of apocalyptic narratives “are plain to see—the aftermath of September 11, the war in Iraq, global warming, and the impending ecological disaster” (1) (Chris Walsh adds “economic globalization and trans-nationalism” to this list [48]). Focusing on climate-change, moreover, Adeline Johns-Putra argues that,

although this phenomenon never figures in McCarthy's novel as a potential cause of the cataclysm, the anxieties of today's privileged classes render the novel a cli-fi text (520).

Genre aside, I agree that it makes sense to read *The Road* in conjunction with these anxieties and the facts on which they are predicated. On this note, Elena dell'Agnese submits that, no matter the cause of McCarthy's cataclysm, all post-apocalyptic stories may be read as warnings "about the precarious nature of the presence of humanity on the planet, above all in the social forms we are used to" (332). John Cant chimes in on this when he writes that "McCarthy's work has always been a 'matter of life and death,'" and that his "importance grows as our culture faces this, the eternal question, in more urgent ways as each year passes" ("Editor's" 5). Jan Nordby Gretlund, further, adds that we "react to" *The Road* "because in our present political or environmental state" we are no longer strangers to the notion of "our final erasure" (46). David Holloway, finally, writes that "*The Road's* grounding in apocalyptic trauma, in the ruins of an American civilisation buried in ash, made the novel's many poetic resonances with 9/11 and the war on terror explicit and unavoidable" (9/11 110). Graulund, though, disagrees and argues that, since we never learn what caused the cataclysm, a political/ideological reading of the novel has little to offer (69). I would argue, however, that the novel's *refusal to say* is in itself ideologically significant. For this reason, I find Yonatan Englender and Elena Gomel's labelling of *The Road's* cataclysm as a sublime event somewhat problematic. They write that, "even if the idea of a sublime event is theoretically understood, how can it be expressed through language? How can language express what it is [sic] beyond human comprehension, as is most specifically expressed in the hermeneutical sublime?" (133). "Approaching the apocalyptic, then," they conclude, "entails a strategy of contiguity—approaching the sublime without expressing it directly, for it cannot be expressed." (133). At first, this sounds as though it should agree well with the Machereyan idea that a literary text revolves around that which it cannot say; ultimately, however, Englender and Gomel's article conjures an absence in the text that is predicated on the limits of human perception rather than on ideological constraints.

³ Several of McCarthy's previous novels contain references to the atomic bomb, which, as Cant reminds us, renders the idea that humans should be the cause of their own demise far from "unreasonable" (*The Myth* 268). Maggie Bortz agrees and suggests that, perhaps, the cataclysm was caused by "an all-out nuclear war" (McCarthy 39). Maybe, then, one could even read, like Eric Pudney, one of the father's musings—no "fall but preceded by a decline" (14)—as a reference to a potential scenario where a "decline of a moral nature" eventually results in global catastrophe (Pudney 296). At any rate, as Frye submits, the cataclysmic world is certainly something McCarthy's previous novels have set the stage for (164).

⁴ Matthew Fledderjohann (47), Alan Noble (106), Michael Keren (52), Stephan Almendinger (124), and Stefan Skrimshire (5) have all helpfully discussed *The Road* in terms of existentialist philosophy.

⁵ Inger-Anne Søvting, too, notes that the "shopping cart is one of the few things that remain of modern American consumer society and it is wholly unsuitable for its present purpose" ("Between" 706). Casey Jergenson suggests that the cart functions as a symbol of homelessness and stresses that, in *The Road's* blasted landscapes, the notion of a lasting home seems obsolete (124). Linda Woodson reads the cart as a symbol for consumerism and materialism ("Mapping" 89), and so does Susan Kollin, who also acknowledges the connection with homelessness ("Barren" 161, 168).

⁶ The list of other critics who have read *The Road* as an evaluation of capitalism includes Jergenson, who claims that the novel suggests "structural and ideological homologues between" cannibalism "and the processes of capitalist production and consumption" (118). On

a related note, Jane Elliot suggests that “the novel foregrounds the propositions that constitute the neoliberal model of agency” (94). Lydia Cooper, similarly, argues that the novel critiques “the entrenched economic, racial, and gendered power structures that continue to haunt the US” (“Eating” 548). Richard Rankin Russell, further, writes that *The Road* might be said to criticize consumption and its “ravenous ‘philosophy,’ whose perverse endpoint results in the cannibalism rife in the novel” (227). Marie Liénard-Yeterian agrees and states that the novel explores “how our globalized order—which promotes greed and unprecedented exploitation, surveillance and personal data gathering—has turned human beings into consuming or consumed entities” (146). Anthony Mullen, too, comments on how, in the novel, the monuments of capitalism seem to outlast “the natural world” (1). Finally, and contrary to the critics above, Krista Karyn Hiser argues that, through its “lavish attention on everyday material objects,” *The Road* actually eulogizes “the consumer world and draw[s] attention to current consumption habits” (155).

⁷ Commenting on *The Road* both as novel and film, and referencing Fredric Jameson, Mark Fisher offers precisely this interpretation: that McCarthy’s text is “a symptom of the inability to imagine alternatives to capitalism’s entropic, eternal present” (15–16). Cf. Jameson’s oft-quoted notion “that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (“Future”).

⁸ Jergenson argues that commodity fetishism—“the erasure of the traces of the labor process,” as he puts it—is a useful concept in relation to the novel as a whole (122), and Schleusener, too, acknowledges the value of this concept, but adds that the Coke scene also raises “the question of whether our behavior as consumers might change were we to think that each Coke we get to drink could be our last one” (6). This arguably agrees well with what I suggest about the political valence of the boy’s insistence on sharing the drink with his father. Drawing on Heidegger and Bill Brown, Raymond Malewitz helpfully reflects on what the challenge involved in this insistence could be about; namely, reimagining “the creative relations between humans and all objects that populate our worlds” (“Regeneration” 539).

⁹ The “central idea of language,” McCarthy writes in an article in *Nautilus*, is “that one thing can be another thing” (“Kekulé”). This formulation goes some way in clarifying the gradual transformation of McCarthy’s view of language; ironically, however, the formulation appears problematic, at least from a Marxist perspective, in how it fails to note precisely how transformation—that is, work—is always what changes world into word.

¹⁰ Other critics who read *The Road* as allegory include Gabriella Blasi, Richard Cronshaw, Naomi Morgenstern, Julian Murphet, Arin Keeble, and John Vanderheide.

¹¹ This quotation from Marx is also comparable with a passage in *Blood Meridian* where the scalphunters wreak havoc in the city of Chihuahua and the narrator states that the governor who hosts them is “like the sorcerer’s apprentice who could indeed provoke the imp to do his will but could in no way make him cease again” (180). As for the boy’s dream of the penguin, Erik J. Wielerberg provides a different yet related reading, writing that the “penguin just keeps going, inexplicably, pointlessly”—an image, he adds, that “perfectly captures the dreaded possibility that the ‘survivors’ of the catastrophe are trapped in a meaningless existence, that [e]very day is a lie” (238). What is the point of it all?” (12).

¹² As I concede early in this dissertation, McCarthy is no clear-cut modernist, but nor is he, aesthetically speaking, distinctly a post-modernist. The point I make in my introduction, and the point I wish to briefly recapitulate here, is that McCarthy’s novels embody numerable styles from numerable eras—a fact that prompts the critic to use literary theories wherever they seem to fit, whatever literary era or genre they primarily deal with.

¹³ Mark Seltzer makes a similar case when he writes, in an article partly focused on *The Road*, that the “real irony is that the ubiquitization of systems, networks, and dynamic immersion is rendered anodyne by its ubiquity: a syndrome one is tempted to call anodynamics” (2). Both Thiess and Seltzer touch on the same paradigm, albeit in different ways; neither of them, however, make the connection, like I have done in previous chapters, between McCarthy’s fascination with these kinds of theories and his novels’ metaphoricity. Thiess, instead, writes that “McCarthy seeks to highlight the relationship of the father and son, in light of whatever destruction nature (or humans, it is unclear) has caused” and that this “emphasis on relationships, or systems—or ‘networks’ as it has become fashionable to call them—is also a sign of a certain relativism, a resistance to normative, deterministic science as cause and effect” (533). What Thiess wants to express here is probably that a focus on networks tends to diminish the significance of human agency. The reasoning is confusing, however, for at least two reasons: first, it unconvincingly equals the novel’s focus on a father-son dyad with a focus on networks, and second, it fails to acknowledge how, in McCarthy’s works, a combination of such different foci as interpersonal love, on the one hand, and larger *interspecial* networks, on the other, make for a dialectic that is arguably never resolved, but that seems to be the object of self-reflexivity in the later novels.

¹⁴ For further comments on how *The Road* pursues the link between capitalism and cannibalism, see Jordan J. Dominy, who notes that Karl Marx, too, discusses this link (157).

¹⁵ Holloway quotes this passage as well (*The Late* 178).

¹⁶ James Dorson touches on something similar when he comments on “McCarthy’s genre work” and maintains that “the imaginative power of genre fiction is becoming the best way to make sense of a world that no longer strictly corresponds to received notions about what constitutes reality” (“Genre” 8). “The turn to genre, then,” he continues, “is less a turn away from reality to the imaginary than a turn toward the real through the imagination” (8). In other words, when realism is unable to successfully capture and oppose the absurdities of reality, genre fiction might prove to be better suited for the task. Suggesting, similarly, that *The Road* is a work of science fiction, Englender and Gomel state that this genre is particularly suited for such an undertaking. “In science fiction,” they argue, “the distancing effect is created by the gap between empirical reality and the fictional world of the text” (140). What is arguably missing here, though, is a discussion of the potential pitfalls of science fiction. Yet, toward the end of their article, when commenting on *The Road*’s last paragraph, Englender and Gomel throw into relief—inadvertently, it seems—the risk that their own approach to this particular genre may lend itself to political quietism: although the paragraph’s metaphoricity is “open to countless interpretations,” they note, “the science fiction framework of the narrative that preceded this passage invites us to abstain from analysis” (141).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Kristijan Mavri (6), Nigel Clark (173), Thomas Jordan (238), Chris Danta (16), Randall S. Wilhelm (136), Laura Wright (513), Lydia Cooper (“Eating” 564), Patrick Damien O’Connor (8), and Eric Pudney (302).

¹⁸ Cooper offers a different reading when she argues that the father as storyteller actually manages to instill his own ideals in the boy (*Heroes* 140)—a conclusion that obviously agrees well with her expressed belief in the redemptive powers of storytelling (139).

¹⁹ Although she does not discuss this in terms of ideology, Johns-Putra makes a similar claim about how the father’s stories cease to make sense once the world of which they tell is gone (55).

²⁰ Matthew Ryan, too, sees traits of a rugged individualist in the father, and adds that the details mentioned above render this character suggestive of a practical, methodical and mythical “*homo economicus*” (5), starring, perhaps, as Geoff Hamilton suggests, in a “narrative of rugged self-reliance in extremis” (55). Gwinner, too, comments on the father’s

capabilities, writing that the “overall impression he leaves on the reader is that he is equal to just about every task or problem other than curing his unnamed terminal sickness” (139–140). Convincingly, Malewitz traces this ideological construction to Frederick Jackson Turner, whom he quotes as follows:

[T]o the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (37) (Turner qtd. in Malewitz, “Regeneration” 539).

Keeble also makes the connection to the frontier: without considering the possibility that the novel can be seen to undermine the father’s ideology, she writes that the “man is characterized by the classical frontier masculinity of cowboys, trail-blazing pilgrims, and even adventurers” (183). For Keeble, then, *The Road* problematically reinforces “this retrograde vision of frontier masculinity at a time of crisis (appealing to a sensibility that saw President Bush and democratic candidate, John Kerry, deliver a variety of staged outdoors and hunting performances on the campaign trail in 2004)” (184).

²¹ In one of Hoover’s speeches, individual initiative and enterprise are praised, while European doctrines of “paternalism and state socialism” are condemned (Hoover). Hoover, himself a self-made millionaire, claimed to believe that America had become the land of opportunity even to those “born without inheritance” thanks to a “freedom of initiative and enterprise” (Hoover).

²² This arguably ties in also with how McCarthy seems to be returning in *The Road* to the Tennessee where he grew up and eventually set his first novels. For more on this, see Pudney (46).

²³ As a number of critics have noted, the novel repeatedly conflates the father’s perspective with that of the narrative voice, primarily through free indirect discourse. See, for instance, Russel M. Hillier (“Each” 671), Anthony Warde (337), Cooper (*Heroes* 136–138), Lee Clark Mitchell (“Make It” 204), and Arielle Zibrak (107).

²⁴ Critics have commented profusely on this scene. Michael Titlestad, for instance, acknowledges the possibility that the family has been following the father and the son for a while and chosen not to approach them because of the father’s paranoia (97). Sean Hermanson concurs with this (282), and so does Wielerberg (11) and Nell Sullivan (97), although Sullivan does not explicitly spell out that the family defers their approach because of the father. Christopher Pizzino, astutely, writes that the father’s “utopian declaration that ‘Goodness’ will find the little boy’ is fulfilled only because others enact a kind of goodness the man has refused” (365).

²⁵ On this note, Paul D. Knox states that “McCarthy leaves the reader with one insight on how to survive: Survival requires finding a way to make sense of the world and of retaining the hope that community is possible. If we can do that, we might just be okay” (99).

²⁶ Béatrice Trotignon notes with Harold Bloom how *The Road*’s fragmented form contributes to this loss of historicity: “Various interpretations,” she writes, “have been made about the layout of *The Road*. Bloom’s *Guide* lists several effects: each paragraph appears as ‘a prose poem’; the blanks between the paragraphs make every moment of the present distinct ‘as

the only reality' as opposed to the future and the past that have no consistency. Only the present is 'set apart'..." ("Textual" 130).

²⁷ Carl James Grindley provides a thorough reading of the biblically charged "1:17" where he convincingly construes this as a reference to Revelation 1.17, "which introduces Christ's theophany to John the Divine: 'And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last'" (12).

²⁸ Isak Winkel Holm writes that the entities on the beach "echo each other in a complicated network of things and names" and that "everything is okay when the father experiences himself as a part of" this "dense web of relations" (243). James Corby also comments on this, writing that the contrast between the post-apocalypse and the past is emphasized by "the comfortable late-capitalist fullness of the man's former life, disclosed in flashback dreams and memories, warmly sepia-toned but now utterly, almost incomprehensibly, alien" (20).

²⁹ Recognizing the ambiguity of this scene, Laura Gruber Godfrey writes that she would not "categorize" it "as idyllic or even pastoral, since McCarthy makes the remembered landscape here more complex, perhaps reflective of the man's innately somber personality" (173).

³⁰ Steven Frye is correct in suggesting that McCarthy's late novels display "a preoccupation with style itself, in all its variety and diversity, as well as with the fluid possibilities of popular literary genre" (154).

³¹ Here, then, the prediction in *Whales and Men* that, eventually, the Earth will turn into a "blackened lump of slag" (Wittliff 91/97/01), seems finally to have been realized: the "ashes of the late world" carries "on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void" (McCarthy *TR* 10); the Earth is "bleak and shrouded" (193); the sparks from a campfire dim and die "in the eternal blackness" (101), and the man and the boy suffer in "the pitiless dark" (200). The question if these descriptions hint at an anthropogenically induced climate disaster, however, or if they, rather, invoke the notion of an indifferent cosmic entropy from which the Earth is obviously not exempt, is impossible to answer with any certitude. A number of critics, though, have discussed *The Road* in terms of entropy. See, for instance, Graulund (60), Matthew Mullins (90), Véronique Bragard (491), Kenneth Brandt (65), Donovan Gwinner (156), Kearney (162), O'Connor (3), and, in particular, Markus Wierschem (4).

³² Hermanson provides a good summary of critical positions when he writes that some "find these final lines suggestive of renewal, though only vaguely (Kunsa 67-8)," whereas others "contend that it does little to ameliorate the novel's pessimism (Edwards 55; Gretlund 49-50)" and whereas "some pass it over in silence (Ibarrola-Armendariz)" (1). I would like to add a few voices here: Pudney notes how the novel "is open to both hopeful and despairing interpretations" (308), Ben De Bruyn suggests that the final paragraph "is reassuring and unsettling at the same time" (776), and John Armstrong argues that "the novel's strength lies precisely in its plurality," where "hope and despair coexist" (141). Shelly L. Rambo, somewhat differently, argues that *The Road* is not about the existence or non-existence of redemption, but about an act of witnessing what remains (115) in a world where life and death are no longer distinguishable (106)—a critical position, one could argue, that, ironically, amounts to saying that there is no redemption. The point of thinking, like Rambo, of life as a "living on" (115)—as persevering instead of hoping for some redemption delivered from above—is obvious enough, but it is unclear what this has to offer if applied to McCarthy's way of dealing with human destructivity. "The question," Rambo suggests, "is not who will save the world but, instead, who will witness its shattering?" (115). Unfortunately, Rambo never addresses the potential political implications of this rephrasing of the question. Arguably, though, the implicit shift, in regard to humanity, from agent to witness, has quietist overtones.

³³ David James, too, notes how, in places, the euphony of McCarthy's style counteracts the novel's bleak content (482). Rather than thinking about this as mere evasion, however, James argues, in keeping with the critics who laud McCarthy's maximalism, that, by "staging consolation's own acknowledgement of incompleteness," McCarthy "disarticulate[s] it from mere distraction, appeasement, and soothing repair" (501). However, although I share James's notion that *The Road* calls attention to the complexities of solace, and although I agree that solace is not necessarily about "covering up the material causes of psychic devastation" (500), I must protest that it also *can* be about precisely these things. Another problematic aspect of this article, moreover, emerges when James expresses sympathy with "Best and Marcus's inkling that to intensify our 'attentiveness to the artwork' can spell 'a kind of freedom,' especially if that frees up a more capacious sense of how writers ethically and stylistically debate consolation—fenced off as solace often is in critical discourse, owing to the dubious pacifications it allegedly kindles" (500). One does not have to be card-carrying surface reader to do this, though, and more importantly, one definitely does not have to subscribe to James's implied straw figure notion of symptomatic critique as something that has no interest in "'willed, sustained proximity' to diction, tone, and other 'apprehensible' (rather than covert) features of language" (499).

³⁴ On this note: when commenting on *The Road*, Cannon Schmitt derides Lukács's article "Narrate or Describe?" for how it suggests that, since narration highlights human action in a way description generally does not, the former is superior to the latter (104). For Lukács, Schmitt maintains, "a novel must center on people. If it appears more invested in things or nonhuman nature, it errs" (108). Although a position such as Lukács's may seem absurd, however, it is useful in how it actually helps spell out a problem *The Road* locates in its own aesthetic: the risk that optically democratic description functions so as to negate the idea of humanity as a historical agent. Paul Patton touches on something similar when he discusses the Kantian sublimities (a Derridean version of the "hermeneutical sublime" in particular [136]), and thus involuntarily, it seems, provides a productive way of contemplating McCarthy's dialectic of human insignificance and human destructivity, in which optical democracy places humanity on par with all things material and in which, conversely, the same humanity is simultaneously rendered ontologically unique (135). This evocation of the uniquely human, Patton explains, boils down to "principles of reason" that save us "from the 'humiliation' that would result if we were shown to be mere commonplace inhabitants of the natural world, no different from the vulgar animals" (136). Daniel Luttrull, too, weighs in on this when he writes that the Promethean element of *The Road*—the 'carrying of the fire,' as the man and the boy put it (McCarthy 298)—evokes "something innately human that transcends environment, finding its origin somewhere within the human consciousness or soul" (24). Johns-Putra, moreover, argues that *The Road* mourns "human rather than nonhuman nature" (521), and similarly, Graulund submits that the human "'fire' (goodness) seems able to generate heat even when no fuel is present" (74). Admittedly, there are—as per usual in McCarthy—anthropocentric tendencies in *The Road*, but surely, the novel clearly laments, like so much of McCarthy's previous fiction, the loss of a pristine environment as well.

³⁵ Obviously, though, the father is aware of this need to focus on the hardships of the material world—and this, as Michael Keren puts it, is why he "wakens himself from the siren worlds coming to him in his dreams" (56–57), "bad dreams," as Jessica Datema puts it, that "lull one into a comfortable utopia that encourages sleep instead of facing the real" (138). Other critics who touch on the risks of storytelling in relation to *The Road* (albeit from a different perspective) include Francisco Collado-Rodríguez (64) and Michael Titlestad (99).

³⁶ I do not necessarily agree, then, when Stark suggests that the “anthropocentrism of *The Road*” unequivocally “privileges the perspective of a certain type of human who is male, apparently white, evokes Christian mythology, and was once middle class” (81).

³⁷ This ties in with what Julius Greve and James Dorson call “the slipperiness of McCarthy’s fiction,” which result, as they rightly note, from “how it bridges and combines contrasting styles and discourses” (“Introduction” 1).

³⁸ dell’Agnese makes the same point when she states that “the meaning and discursive capacity of a cultural product do not stem only from the text itself, but are negotiated in its site of consumption” (338). Phillip A. and Delys W. Snyder helpfully explain what is at stake here: “In some ways,” as they put it, “the question may not be so much whether McCarthy is a postmodern writer, but, instead, whether we can be ethical postmodern readers as we take up our responsibility to countersign McCarthy’s signature by simultaneously hearing and speaking his voice in an event of textual production—remembering that we hear and speak that voice primarily through his style” (31). Vanderheide, similarly, reads *The Road*’s self-reflexivity or “self-grasping” as “a repudiation of the aesthetic of the self-contained artwork, the thing that is complete in itself and is in need of no witness, no interpretation, no future, no fulfilment” (“Sighting” 119).

8. Coda

The book is not the extension of a meaning; it is generated from the incompatibility of several meanings, the strongest bond by which it is attached to reality, in a tense and ever-renewed confrontation. (Macherey 89)

The apolitical and ahistorical perspective of symbolism is of course no less 'true' than literatures or literary theories that stress the value of history or ideology as categories for understanding the world: a human being is at once a speck of dust in a supposedly endless universe and a historical being intricately entwined with events that can only be properly appreciated if their temporal specificity is taken into account. As this dissertation has tried to demonstrate, moreover, the symbolist conception of human-world relationships does not automatically lead to political quietism. When McCarthy's optically democratic aesthetic renders visible humanity's entanglement in a world enormous and unknown, it potentially instills in readers both a sense of humility and a sense of futility. The cultural effects of this aesthetic, then, are determined by how people make use of it—as a means of escaping the guilt caused by the recognition of anthropogenic impact, or as a means of imagining new forms of togetherness, unrestricted by species barriers. The way in which McCarthy's later novels self-consciously accommodate such different uses seems itself an affirmation of choice, and as such, an attempt at exorcising the ghost of determinism that figures so prominently in all of the author's works.

Like the general reader, the scholarly reader, too, has a choice regarding how to make use of McCarthy's novels. There is no such thing as an entirely objective reading: critics always sift and select and make literature do things that agree, one way or another, with their personal agendas. This is not to say at all that these critics manipulate their findings. Rather, it means that the literary text is multivocal and that one critic does not necessarily listen to the same voice as the other. The option is there for everyone, though, to at least try to acknowledge as many of these voices as possible, and to try to account, in a way the text itself does not, for "the contrast between them" (Macherey 56)—and for the ways in which this contrast attaches the text to history "in a tense and ever-renewed confrontation" (89). This historical attachment comes into light as soon as one

realizes that readers never read independently of their own contexts. An understanding of a text is always in some sense colored by the moment in which it appears. This historical influence may take the form of the tenets of a critical tradition, a political problem that the reader in some manner responds to, or the style of critical writing considered appropriate in a given period—all historical phenomena, and all potentially consequential in terms of what one makes of the text. Latent in literature, in other words, there is always a vast number of incompatible meanings, the historical nature of which is highlighted by how critics make sense of it in relation to the positions from which they speak. I have stressed the ideological nature of this interpretive process by suggesting that one may discern, in the conflicted reception of McCarthy's texts, the ways in which late capitalism needs to speak of its centered subjects both as agents, when this serves to perpetuate its hegemony, and as innocents, when this lets capitalism off the hook. The key to recognizing McCarthy's ideological significance, then, lies neither in the critical verdict that his texts consistently relativize human agency nor in the notion that these texts consistently stress the ability of humans to deliberately change the world for the better. The key rather lies in the recognition of how McCarthy's literary staging of late capitalism illuminates the *double nature* of the capitalist subject: its latent agency as well as its latent innocence. This ideological construction of humanity pervades contemporary society and thus provides part of the context in which critics currently respond to McCarthy's novels, pass judgment on their ethics, and reflect on the cosmic significance of human kind in general.

This dissertation has argued that McCarthy grows increasingly sensitive to the possible perspectives a reader may take on his aesthetic. Whereas the predominantly figurative style of the 1965 debut novel seems indicative of an attempt to close the gap between human and world, the 2006 *The Road* seems concerned, rather, with how such an attempt may divert the reader's attention from the problems of the "waking world" (TR 299). Neither novel, in other words, conceives of literature as inert; on the contrary, they both posit that language may be used to achieve effects in the world outside of the text (if one makes such a distinction at all). Even though *The Road* puts little store in humanity's capacity to save itself from extinction, it still implies that the choices made by an author matter—a notion underscored, of course, by McCarthy's decision to write the novel in the first place.

On this note, one should allow for the possibility that McCarthy's ontologically flat symbolism is predicated on the genuine hope that literature might be able to counter the ways in which the exploitative logic of our current economic system makes impossible a sustainable relationship between human and environment. As McCarthy sets out writing *The Orchard Keeper* in the late 1950s (Luce, *Reading* viii), the healthy natural landscapes he there celebrates have long been under siege: 100 miles south of Knoxville, for instance, in the Southern Appalachians, copper mining and the "production of sulfuric acid" have caused considerable deforestation and soil erosion (Mathews and Harden 7, 9). Notably, sulfuric acid was used in the manufacture of ammunition during the world wars, even though its environmental impact had been acknowledged locally as early as in 1905 (7). There are obvious similarities here to how, as discussed in chapter four, the damming of the Tennessee Valley helped produce energy for the production of nuclear weaponry from the 1940s and onward.

This connection between armed violence and ecological disaster may certainly seem reason enough for resignation, but the crisis in southeastern Tennessee led to more hopeful developments as well. Beginning formally in the 1930s and involving actors such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Civilian Conservation Corps (Mathews and Harden 14), both of which appear in McCarthy's fiction, efforts focused on the reclamation of affected areas started showing promising results in the 70s (1).¹ Read alongside McCarthy's novels, these phenomena—degradation followed by relatively successful regeneration—seem significant in how they suggest that, although humans come across as uniquely capable of disturbing natural balances, they may also be able to facilitate environmental resilience. If one keeps such contextual information in mind, it is surprising neither that *Suttree's* Knoxville depletes the ground on which it stands nor that said novel describes how the natural environment slowly starts reclaiming parts of the same city (McCarthy, *Suttree* 4, 438).

By the same token, it makes as much sense for a critic to conceive of McCarthy's texts either as a lamentation over humanity's destructivity or as a celebration of the planet's astounding ability to repair itself: there is ample textual evidence to support both readings. Crucially, though, these readings are always *responses*, not only to the literary text, but also to the historical context in which critics form their mode of thought. The debate on whether or not the ending of *The Road* should be considered hopeful makes little sense if one fails to acknowledge the specificity of the

context in which this debate takes place. The 2006 publication of McCarthy's latest novel coincides, for instance, with the release of Davis Guggenheim's adaptation of Al Gore's lecture on global warming and the impassioned reactions it elicited worldwide. This is the cultural setting in which critics find the closing paragraph of *The Road* to be either elevating (Luttrull 24), or, conversely, utterly devoid of hope (Schleusener 2).

As the mention of former Vice President Al Gore suggests, critical responses to McCarthy's ecological thought must be approached as symptoms of—and active participants in—a historical moment where faith in the future is highly politicized. When I write this, the US has recently seen the launch of the Green New Deal, a leftist environmental initiative that taps into FDR's depression era stimulation of the economy and seeks to reinvent the belief in politics as a force strong enough to manipulate the market (and the initiative itself obviously emerges as a response to the experience that things usually work the other way around). This faith in human agency in general and politics in particular is one possible outcome of hope—but it is not the only one. Hope may also pacify, and when it does, it readily plays into the ideologically conditioned notion that the environment will eventually recover from any type of mistreatment and that it therefore matters little whether or not people mobilize collectively around a green politics (cf. McMurry 74). To help drive home this point, one may note, with the Warwick Research Collective, “Adam Curtis's telling argument that the ideology of the ('resilient') self-harmonising ecosystem developed alongside the neoliberal ideology of deregulation of public resources and the rise of an extreme version of laissez-faire economics” (46). It is slightly beside the point, by the way, that from a disillusioned perspective, the Green New Deal could indeed be considered harmless in how it aims to reform rather than overthrow capitalism and in how it may therefore serve in the end to perpetuate the inequities it seeks to abolish. I invoke this example simply to show that the affordances of hope are multiple.

In chapter one, I argue, with Fredric Jameson and Pierre Macherey that when authors translate experience into literature, this process may be understood as *work*. I also argue that such a view of literature warrants close attention to form, to the particularity of the tools used to produce a given text and to the ways in which authors handle these tools. In chapter three, I tried to demonstrate how McCarthy appears, in his early fiction, to approach some of his tools—the metaphors, the similes, and the personifications—as symbols, as a means of merging human, text, and world,

only to later approach these tools as allegory, as devices that always place the world at one remove. This notion that language is invariably a standing-in for whatever it portrays is useful also for an understanding of literary critique. Even though critics are often theoretically eclectic, there are important differences between the tools employed by, say, a dogmatic Freudian and a devout surface reader; and here, an allegorical conception of language may help direct attention both to the specificity of any such method of reading *and* to the fact that all methods amount to a *reworking* of the literary text. The insight that critique, too, is a kind of work that always reshapes its object is especially important with regard to those cases where critics are under the impression that they approach literature without any biases and that they are thereby able to objectively describe the surface of the text. The allegorical perspective, by contrast, posits that even a critical method set on clean description adapts the object described into a new form. Guided by this assumption, I have suggested that the nature of this form is of much consequence when it is used to re-present literary texts concerned with the risks and possibilities of such ideologically charged phenomena as hope and resignation. One obvious danger that comes into light here is that a critical illusion of neutrality blocks from view the ideological aspects not only of the literary object, but also of the critical position from which this object is consumed. This, in turn, results potentially in the failure to appreciate the cultural work performed by literature as well as critique in the networks of information with which they both interact. All texts make statements, inadvertently or not, and such positioning is exactly what ties these texts to the social realm where people form ideas that then help form the world.

Observation, then, seems from this point of view only a first step. It is not very difficult to recognize how the 1985 *Blood Meridian* suggests that humanity is an inextricable part of an ecological totality from which it is simultaneously alienated. The critical challenge consists in exploring what McCarthy's literary treatment of this predicament *means* in a context where the relationship between human and environment is often found to be one of crisis. If, moreover, one accepts that meaning is determined by use, it seems crucial to consider how *Blood Meridian's* portrayal of humanity's alienation from the world may be taken either as an insightful comment on the unalterable state of human-world relations or, conversely, as a thoroughly ideological view of the world, caused by how the division of labor renders people incapable of forming non-commercial relations either to each other or to the environment.

McCarthy's symbolist erasure of the distinctions between human and environment has often been conceived of as ethically benevolent, as an aesthetic that may help people attain a more responsible way of being in the world. This is yet another illustration of how reading is an inescapably historical activity: the notion that McCarthy offers his readers a new and better ethic is arguably a reaction to the felt need for such an ethic in a particular historical moment. In chapter six, I proposed that this ecocritically optimistic conception of McCarthy's novels is currently supported in the academy by trends such as new materialism and posthumanism, both of which also seek to imagine more sustainable human-world relationships. If there is a weakness in readings of McCarthy that agree with these trends, it is their frequent inability to concede self-critically—and with respect to literature's political affordances—that, much like McCarthy's symbolism, and much like new materialism and posthumanism, their own optimistic view of McCarthy might be considered problematic in how it risks relativizing human agency.

Later in his career, most notably in the border trilogy, it seems as though McCarthy himself starts reflecting on the affordances of his own writing. In the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, this self-reflexivity takes on an explicitly allegorical form. The story told by the monologist in this section bears traces of *Inferno* as well as of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: like Dante, McCarthy's character finds himself in "the middle of the journey of" his "days" (Dante, cf. *CotP* 1013), and like Bunyan's narrator, he delivers his monologue "in the similitude of a dream" (Bunyan 39, cf. *CotP* 1014–34). This intertextuality signals neither McCarthy's wholesale repudiation of symbolism nor his complete shift to allegory, but it does suggest his appreciation of allegory's analytic potential. Indeed, considering how the ending of *Cities of the Plain* implicitly acknowledges that McCarthy's own symbolist aesthetic might result in the forgetting of history, one could suggest, with Charles Feidelson's discussion of Hawthorne, that allegory is "the break that" McCarthy applies "to his sensibility" (14–15). Despite his general preference for symbolism, which is arguably symptomatic of the still widespread tendency to think of "the creation of multiple"—rather than politically unambiguous—"meaning" as "*a sine qua non* for serious writing" (Ekelund 277), Feidelson maintains that allegory is "safe," since it preserves "the conventional distinction between thought and things" (15). This is a distinction that allows the author to reflect on the effect the one category might have on the other, on the ways in which literature in general might contribute to historical developments or on the ways in

which a symbolism that relativizes human agency risks playing into ideologies that thrive on any perspective that downplays humanity's ability to damage the environment.

...

In 1994, Carl Sagan gave the now famous lecture at Cornell University in which he displays Voyager 1's deep space image of planet Earth and refers to this planet as the "pale blue dot" (Sagan 7). The point of this phrasing, obviously, is for the audience to be struck by the absurd discrepancy between "our imagined self-importance" and the relatively infinitesimal size of the planet (7). However, whereas the highlighting of this discrepancy may certainly serve to highlight "our responsibility . . . to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot" (7), there is also the risk that some read Sagan against the grain and fasten instead on the expendability of the Earth and the utter insignificance of anything that there transpires. From such a perspective, the hypothetical loss of the pale blue dot might not seem much of a disaster after all.

In the same decade that Voyager 1 documented its departure from our solar system, McCarthy published the three novels in his border trilogy. It is in the last instalment of this trilogy that the man in the Mexican monologist's dream dreams that, upon contemplating "his surroundings" (*CotP* 1025), he is able to appreciate for the first time the world's beauty and intricate interconnectedness. It is also here, though, that this man delegates the responsibility for his own life to "his captors" (1025). If transcoded into literary theoretical language, the double consequences of the dreamt man's appreciation for the world's splendor could be taken to suggest that an aesthetic set on capturing this splendor might facilitate both an engagement with the natural world and a withdrawal from history. The same notion appears again in *The Road*, only now with further stress on the risks of dreams that give succor by neglecting historical problems and by indulging instead in environmental beauty: recall the "softly colored worlds" (292) that the father dismisses as "the call of languor and of death" (17). This acknowledgment of risk and possibility seems to stem in McCarthy from a growing interest in an allegorical view of literature. Given that literature is always a standing-in for something else, as this view would seem to suggest, it might easily screen from sight ecological crises or other problems in need of political attention. Still, the allegorical recognition that literary texts never simply reflect the objects they

represent simultaneously calls attention to how the perspectives wrought by authors as well as readers help influence the way people view the world. Regardless of whether one chooses to see it, literature is never, from this point of view, an entirely apolitical phenomenon.

¹ Whereas the TVA appears implicitly in *Suttree* (see chapter four in this dissertation), the CCC appears explicitly in *The Orchard Keeper* (212).

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Ideology and Symbolism in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy

Ever since the publication of his debut novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), Cormac McCarthy has explored the relationship between humanity and the environment. In his early novels, this exploration takes the form of a symbolist aesthetic that repeatedly employs metaphor, simile, and personification to merge humans with the rest of the world's matter. The ethical and political import of this aesthetic is, of course, open to dispute: critics have alternately celebrated McCarthy's environmental imagination as an opportunity for the reader to cultivate a more responsible way of being in the world, criticized it as a relativization of human agency, and retooled it into a political commentary designed to challenge late capitalist reification. Entering into dialogue with this conflicted critical discourse, and tracing the development of McCarthy's writing over five decades, Svensson's dissertation reveals an author whose later novels appear to acknowledge their own capacity to resonate with many ethical and political sentiments at once. Further, drawing in particular on the Marxist perspective of Pierre Macherey, the dissertation also makes the more general claim that a literary work never produces meaning on its own and that the role of the critic is never entirely apolitical.

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