CORMAC MCCARTHY AND THE ETHICS OF READING

by

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(Under the Direction of Carl Rapp)

ABSTRACT

To demonstrate his interest in the ethical dimension of fiction and reading, this study examines the narrative strategies of Cormac McCarthy in three of his novels: *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian*. Each novel dramatizes a dilemma related to the act of reading; accordingly, "the ethics of reading" is treated as an element of his fiction, not as a theoretical category. Instead of prescribing an approach to reading, this study focuses on how these novels raise ethical questions about the act of reading. As ethical criticism, it addresses the central concern of all ethical inquiry ("what is the good?") by exploring how his narrative form and storytelling methods complement the theme of accountability. Although the reader of these novels might grow *as a reader*, he is under no *moral* obligation to reflect on how he *should* read them. Scholars have shown an interest in the ethical and formalist dimensions of McCarthy's work for some time, but few have considered how he addresses ethical questions *through* his formal technique. Comprising a stylistic and thematic trilogy, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* demonstrate how story and narration intersect and interact in his fiction. Implications for scholarship and teaching are discussed in the final chapter.

INDEX WORDS: Ethics of reading, Ethical criticism, Narrative structure, Ethics of fiction, Cormac McCarthy

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B.A., University of Georgia, 1996

M.A., University of Georgia, 1998

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2008

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December 2008

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For Eric Bryan

chi ha finito nel miglior modo

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Carl Rapp, my director and tireless advocate: I am deeply thankful for your mind and for your interest in my work. You were my first college professor, and you remain my ultimate mentor. I look forward to more years of friendship and intellectual cooperation.

To Mom and Dad, my parents and tireless champions of my education: You are the foundation of my identity as a husband, father, and teacher. May your life be blessed now and in the hereafter.

To Rachel, my wife and tireless mother of two baby boys: You have the love of God inside of you, strong and patient and giving. Your prayers must have worked. I look forward to wine and cheer in front of the fire with you forever.

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INTRODUCTION

> But today we have reinspected that premise and rejected it by saying that if beauty is truth and since we cannot get along without truth, then beauty is a useless term and one to be dispensed with. Here is a location for our attack; we have discarded beauty; at its best it seems truth incompletely realized. Styles can no longer be described as beautiful. . . . it would not be stretching the point to describe all modern styles in their grand limits as ways through a staleness of beauty to tell the truth anew. (Williams 75)

In his 1927 essay about the "priestly style" of James Joyce, William Carlos Williams argued that we have much to gain from an artist who can break up words to "let the staleness out" of them. "Joyce is himself a priest" because his style looks "through the clothes" to "the naked soul" (77-78). To recognize the meaning of this style, as an "unabridged commentary on the human soul" (76), we must read with eyes that look for the truth told anew, setting aside old habits of equating beauty with truth, or truth with beauty. Perhaps *because* of Joyce, we would be remiss to describe any style now, especially an ugly one, without appreciating its unique linguistic behavior, not simply as a curious phenomenon but as a signifying force. To discard the concept of beauty, in this way, is to experience a style as language pressed

into a “truthful and accurate” representation of an artist’s way of understanding the world (77). A few years earlier, in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” T. S. Eliot grappled with this mimetic problem in a similar way: “Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (65). By the time Williams proclaimed the severed connection between “truth” and “beauty,” Eliot had already set the latter aside in his pursuit of a more precise and inclusive set of terms to measure the representational capacity of a style. But their statements point to the same consequence: the critical act of describing a work of literature mirrors the artist’s critical act of seeing the world; verbal patterns created by the vision of a writer comprise the reader’s world to see: the shape of a style.

Like his modernist forerunners, post-war American novelist Cormac McCarthy writes novels whose “styles can no longer be described as beautiful.” At the same time, he does not merely press his visions of the world into a linguistic mold. Eliot and Williams explored this mimetic potential in their poetry, but the aesthetic terrain beyond it was charted by the early 20th-century novel, where experimentation with narrative form subsumed experimentation with style. McCarthy published his first novel in 1965, but his fiction demonstrates the same two-fold interest that occupied novelists like Joyce and Hemingway: forging a more “truthful and accurate” use of words to befit a more “truthful and accurate” way of shaping a narrative. His grand orchestrations in novels such as *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* are not simply representational; rather, his styles demonstrate ways of looking at the world that make representation possible. This function complements what his stories often dramatize:

what it means to see and what is at stake in looking. Moreover, the conceptual line between story and storytelling is clearly drawn by his narrators. Using narrative tactics to interrupt an otherwise continuous stream of action, McCarthy often suspends the act of telling in order to call attention to his *method* of telling, to the *fact* of narration. Filled with distended passages of graphic detail, momentary asides to the reader, disguised metaphors of narration, and other self-conscious formulations, his narratives draw attention to a style that is both reflexive and rhetorical.

These suspensions, accompanied by unanticipated shifts in tone and register, disrupt the surrounding story and the illusion that storytellers traditionally try to maintain; as a result, we are invited to reflect on the *fact* that we are reading, on our *method* of reading, and on the *expectations* we bring to a text. In effect, McCarthy turns the act of reading into an occasion to think about what it means to read his work. The following example from *Blood Meridian* (1985) illustrates how quickly the narrator can shift our attention away from the sequence of events toward his own interest in a particular mode of seeing and interpreting:

> The leader of these jackal warriors was a small dark man in cast-off Mexican military attire and he carried a sword and he carried in a torn and gaudy baldric one of the Whitneyville Colts that had belonged to the scouts. He sat his horse before Glanton and assessed the position of the other riders and then asked in good spanish where were they bound. He'd no sooner spoken than Glanton's horse leaned its jaw forward and seized the man's horse by the ear. Blood flew. The horse screamed and reared and the Apache struggled to keep his seat and drew his sword and found himself staring into the black leminscate that was the paired bores of Glanton's doublerifle. Glanton slapped the muzzle of his horse twice hard and it tossed its head

> with one eye blinking and blood dripping from its mouth. The Apache wrenched his pony's head around and when Glanton spun to look at his men he found them frozen in deadlock with the savages, they and their arms wired into a construction taut and fragile as those puzzles wherein the placement of each piece is predicated upon every other and they in turn so that none can move for bringing down the structure entire. (228-29)

The style of this passage resists exact definition because it lacks uniformity. We might call it graphic, raw, or cinematic as the scene begins to take shape, but by the end, the register has been elevated to a higher plane of philosophical contemplation. The words "taut and fragile" indicate that the narrator is interpreting the conflict he has just depicted; however, they also describe his method of narration: a rapid succession of discrete actions that finally cohere in an unstable structure of clashing forces. In order to translate this immediate sensory effect into an idea that we can examine more carefully, the narrator suspends the forward progress of the story with an inscrutable riddle. The shift in style, then, marks a shift in the way we are expected to read, interpret, and respond to this passage. The narrator reminds us that we are secondary observers; in turn, we become aware of the primary observer, the one who has selected an image of warriors locked in a "taut and fragile" puzzle to capture the intractable ambiguity at the heart of warfare. Like history itself, it is a recursive cycle; at the same time, it is an irreversible stalemate. The only way to experience this ambiguity *as* an ambiguity is to attempt to unravel the riddle that the narrator has constructed. The story resumes with the following sentence, but we are likely to read this passage numerous times before moving ahead, not only because we are perplexed by the simile but also because we are riveted by the

authoritative tone that the narrator adopts. We are, in some sense, being taught how to read this scene the way its style requires it to be read.

The gravitational force of this passage, especially its final sentence, is strong enough to draw our attention away from the surrounding narrative, but it also requires us to change the way we are paying attention, even change the kind of attention we are paying. To see the philosophical significance beyond or behind the raw physical encounter of the warriors, we must look with a different set of eyes. Beginning with its opening line, "See the child" (3), *Blood Meridian* invites the reader to reflect on the relationship between vision and the act of reading: What kinds of seeing are integral to reading, and how does the act of reading permit us, even require us, to engage in ways of seeing that we are not always inclined to adopt? To ask these questions is to prepare to respond to the command "see the child," to hold oneself accountable by considering the implications of obeying; knowing what it means to see is a prerequisite for answering the call to see. At the same time, to ask these questions is in fact a way of responding to the call to see, to put oneself in the vulnerable position of an observer who has yet to see as well as he might and is not yet privy to the destabilizing and frightening images that might clarify and improve his vision. To be sure, "see the child" is an invitation to read and to understand, but it is also an invitation to reflect on what it means to read and the responsibilities taken on by one who intends to be a reader, particularly a reader of *Blood Meridian*. Whether anyone *should* accept this invitation might be the most crucial question to answer at the outset of this novel; it is a valid ethical question related to the *decision* to read. However, it is not a literary question related to the act of reading this particular novel, nor is it a question that can be answered with any degree of accuracy without actually accepting the invitation. And even if we do accept the invitation and take on the task of reading the novel

through, we are hard-pressed to confirm *why* McCarthy would have his narrator extend this invitation in the first place: is he preparing us for an experience in accountability, initiating us into a trial of self-examination, luring us onto a path of brutality and destruction or into an enigma that will leave us lost indefinitely? These extra-literary questions are compelling to the reader who wants to know the worth and benefit of the thing he is reading. However, the urgency to answer such questions has a tendency to blind us to questions that must be asked first. What is the nature of the extension itself? How exactly are we invited to look? At what exactly are we invited to look? How does the invitation relate to the narrative point of view? How does the invitation influence or direct our point of view? What is its rhetorical function, and how does it influence the way we read the novel?

These questions point to the most fundamental response to the menacing imperative that opens *Blood Meridian*: to trace its various manifestations and discern what part they play in the telling. As an attempt at such a response, this study explores how McCarthy's narrative techniques call attention to the dilemmas of accountability and judgment inherent in the act of reading and how various scenarios of abnegation and allegiance dramatize what is at stake in those dilemmas for the reader of his fiction. *Blood Meridian* demonstrates a high degree of reflexivity, and this self-conscious mode of storytelling asks for an equal degree of reflection from us. The violent surface of the story is *almost* all there is to observe: a kid who leaves his broken home in Tennessee, joins a team of mercenary scalphunters, comes under the ruthless authority of Judge Holden, violates the covenant of war, and dies years later in the lap of the monstrous judge for his mutiny. However, it is a violent surface of baroque complexity. Its details of brutality and barbarism give it a rich texture that demands that we stand close and trace the intricate lines; at the same time, this way of looking (and the demand for it) is what

the attentive reader quickly realizes to be so menacing from the outset. In an interview about his book *How to Read and Why*, in which he discusses *Blood Meridian* for a few pages, Harold Bloom confessed,

> the first two times that I read it, I could not read it. And I admit this to my students and I admit that in this book. I broke down—I don't know what—after 15 or 20 pages the first time and after 70 or 80 pages the second, because the sheer carnage of it, though it is intensely stylized, is nevertheless overwhelming. It's—it's—it's shocking. It's—it's horrifying. And it takes a very strong stomach, but if you break through it, if you—if you read your way into the cosmos of the book, then you are rewarded.

To begin *Blood Meridian* again is perhaps the fate of any reader who would rather hear the invitation once more, standing outside the text, as it were, than take on the responsibility of looking with more and more interest at the possibility of accepting it. The style itself, on this level, can be experienced as a form of violence, an assault on sensibility that constitutes what might be for some a literary rite of passage. The chapter devoted to this novel is, therefore, called "The Reader as Pilgrim: The 'Terrible Covenant' of *Blood Meridian*." The idea of *pilgrim* is an analogical concept for *reader* (by extension, *pilgrimage* is an analogue for the *act of reading*); from this point of view, the relationship between reader and narrator mirrors the relationship between the kid and the judge, in whom coexists the rhetoric of the minister and the bloodlust of the executioner. Although the two relationships turn out to be drastically different from each other, the focal point around which each one develops is the invitation to accountability.

Clearing a path to this reading of *Blood Meridian* are two earlier novels that set the stage for and rehearse his most compelling performance: *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*. As stylistic antecedents of *Blood Meridian* and the first two installments in what might be called McCarthy's first trilogy, these works give birth to the narrative methods and ethical themes that reach maturity in his 1985 masterpiece. From this perspective, *Blood Meridian* is not the unprecedented departure it is sometimes taken to be, but a capstone, the fulfillment of earlier promise. The events that unfold in each novel and the narrative styles used to dramatize those events are analogues for the act of reading and the various ethical dilemmas brought to light through that act. This principle unifies the three novels. However, the reflexive quality in *Blood Meridian* becomes more accessible, and more significant, when experienced as the ultimate stage of a developing idea. Working toward the pilgrim's dilemma of accountability in *Blood Meridian*, this study explores, first, how the disjunctive narration of pursuit in *Outer Dark* mimics the escapist dimension of reading and, second, how the voyeuristic perspective in *Child of God* permits the reader to identify with a protagonist against whom he also feels the impulse to testify.

The chapter devoted to the first stage is called "The Reader as Fugitive: The Art of Pursuit in *Outer Dark*." The protagonist, a man named Culla Holme, is exiled by his own shame to an anonymous wilderness. He crosses paths with society haphazardly, spending most of his time running from the law and a sense of impending judgment for his unnatural crimes: he conceives a child with his sister and leaves it to die in the woods. Using a dual narrative from the outset, McCarthy establishes a surreal connection between the literal birth of the child, whom Culla refuses to name, and the figural birth of a wandering triune of ruthless vigilantes who hold him accountable for that refusal. They are born into a shadow

narrative, so to speak, a series of stylistically distinct vignettes that follow and eventually intersect the main narrative. As these vignettes begin to refer to characters that Culla has met and places he has been, they become a structural counterpart to the relentless pursuit of the triune that inhabits them. By shifting to the shadowy vignettes of the triune, the novel draws our focus from the story proper and creates a sensation of pursuit in our minds that resembles the panic that Culla experiences. Inevitably, then, the central theme of accountability extends beyond the story to the way the story is told and, by further extension, to the way the story is read. The reader is invited to experience the sensation of pursuit as a way of identifying with Culla's predicament, but this narrative technique also raises ethical questions about reader accountability that point to deeper possible connections with his refusal to claim his own. To some extent, *Outer Dark* allegorizes the themes of guilt and judgment, but it also dramatizes a more concrete engagement with the feeling of guilt and the fear of judgment, from which we are inclined to distance ourselves. The allegorical quality of *Outer Dark*, consequently, both creates an opportunity for and brings into question an escapist approach to reading. The ethical dilemmas at stake in the act of reading this novel are the driving force of its narrative simulation of pursuit, just as the murderous triune is the driving force in Culla's actual flight from judgment.

McCarthy's investigation of narrative accountability is more intimate and private, in some ways more unnerving, in the second stage of rehearsal for *Blood Meridian*. The chapter called "The Reader as Witness: The Art of Testimony in *Child of God*" explores a narrative technique that turns the act of reading into an act of looking. Unlike the allegorical flavor in *Outer Dark* that tempts the reader to maintain some distance, the proximal detail of *Child of God*, though it is delivered primarily in the neutral tone of a detached fieldworker, negates

the possibility of distance. The protagonist Lester Ballard, an obsessive necrophile, seeks the comfort of closeness, though initially from a safe distance. Beside him, as it were, the reader watches two lovers having sex in the back of a car; the narrator so limits our field of vision to Lester's gaze that we have little other choice (next to closing the book). But this perspective also encourages our participation, almost asking us to bridge the distance *for* Lester. When he later finds the couple dead in that embrace, Lester crosses the boundary between vision and engagement, and the reader is left to watch him, in the company now only of the narrator. As the novel proceeds, the experience of intimacy for Lester never exceeds the vicarious thrill of his imagination (despite coitus with dead women), much as our ability to account for Lester as a character never seems to transcend the voyeuristic consumption of his deviant behavior. Failure to account for him, ironically, tempts many readers to judge him. But the narrator does not allow these readers a safe retreat; on the second page, he calls them to account: "A child of God much like yourself perhaps" (4). Much later, the narrator interrupts the story to sermonize:

> He could not swim, but how would you drown him? His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to work here. See him. You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. (156)

To look intensely upon Lester is not to see *all* that he exposes. Accordingly, the imperative "see him" warns against hasty judgment. But it also encourages honest testimony, not *against* Lester but with an eye on "ourselves" as reflected in him. By suspending the story, then, the narrator suggests that the act of reading is not merely an occasion to look but an opportunity

to reflect on what it means to witness, particularly when the object in sight fascinates and revolts the viewer simultaneously. Up through the final image of Lester on the slab, cut open and taken apart, the visual narrative of *Child of God* undercuts any attempt (even its own) to account for him. The ethical dilemma that emerges, by extension, is the role of accountability in the reader caught between the urge to be a voyeur and the call to be a witness.

The scope of this study is limited to these three novels because they trace a particular trend of storytelling that McCarthy uses to explore dilemmas in the act of reading. But *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* are also linked by a strong thematic connection that reinforces their narrative interest in accountability: each follows the path of a transgressive character who eventually meets with a gruesome sentence. Their double treatment of justice and responsibility cuts to a central element of human experience, but it also demonstrates the extent to which the language of fiction can crystallize abstractions of moral philosophy. As the drama of the story unfolds before the reader, the drama in the telling unfolds *within* the reader. This dual phenomenon points to a highly ethical dimension in McCarthy's work that depends on the moral depravity of the characters who inhabit these works. Their behavior is excessively and frighteningly deviant by most moral standards; the shock of it captivates the senses. At the same time, that deviant behavior is not the central focus of any of these novels. McCarthy redirects our vision to the very fact that we are riveted and invites us to consider the implications. The question about how we might account for the behavior of these protagonists extends to how we might account for our own behavior as readers. Though his narrators seem conscious of the ethical dilemma dramatized in the story they are telling, their narration suggests that the reader is not simply a member of the audience under the spell of a

cathartic performance. Rather, the shape of the narrative and the style of the telling ask the reader to reflect on the difference between catharsis and genuine transformation.

The call for reader participation is a meta-fictional commonplace of late twentieth-century American fiction, but McCarthy cuts against the grain of narrative playfulness that characterizes much post-modern writing. His fiction is as serious as his claim that contention is an indispensable element of existence:

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

For McCarthy, harmony is a dangerous idea because it violates the natural law of human will and deadens the experience of being alive. Discord vitalizes humanity because it keeps the stakes high. Demonstrating his stern confidence in the rhetorical power of the novel, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* embody this philosophy of contention; they *narrate* conflict. Although they are all coherent works of art, each gathers strength from what seem to be incongruous aims. Each one is a gruesome display of human brutality, but we are offered a vantage point from which to contemplate that brutality. If the characters have an internal life of conscience or faith, or even emotional suffering or despair, we usually cannot see it beneath the crude or indecent surface of their external behavior or appearance; at the same time, we are invited to understand and contemplate that surface as if we were trying to make sense of ourselves. Nowhere else in his oeuvre does McCarthy hold in such stark opposition the trust of his reader and the integrity of his composition. His first and fourth novels, *The*

Orchard Keeper and *Suttree*, also explore the relationship between acts of reading and ethical conflict, but these two novels have an ethical center toward which the reader is more willing to gravitate. Although their protagonists are still misfits to some extent, they are far better socially adjusted and morally grounded than Culla, Lester, and the kid. Interestingly, they turn west at the end of their narratives, but the world ahead of them is not the barbarous west of Judge Holden and his band of scalphunters. Instead, these two novels prepare the way for the Border Trilogy, a saga set in a more familiar and more concrete time and place than the strange and historically remote settings of *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian*. Grim departures in his own career, then, these works show McCarthy at the height of his ability to descend into the depths of human degradation and still come out with a story that exhibits an ethical consciousness and inspires thought about the ethics of reading.

Terms like *ethical consciousness* and *the ethics of reading* might seem too ambiguous to underpin the study of any writer, let alone a writer as rhetorically complex as McCarthy. But defined more precisely, they point to his uncommon stature in recent American fiction. The construction *the ethics of reading* is well known among practitioners of ethical criticism, but a scholar willing to use this phrase, or any form of the term *ethics* for that matter, risks being pigeonholed, if not simply misunderstood. This study uses the phrase not only for the sake of conversation with other critics but also to test its usefulness in responding to three stylistically related novels by Cormac McCarthy. In *The Ethics of Reading*, J. Hillis Miller asserts that "the ethical moment" in reading "is not a matter of response to a thematic content asserting this or that idea about morality. It is a much more fundamental 'I must' responding to the language of literature in itself" (9-10). If novels are appropriate for "an investigation of the ethics of reading, . . . it is not because stories contain the thematic dramatization of

ethical situations, choices, and judgments" (3). At the same time, this ethical moment is no less binding for its detachment from the moral content of a story:

> it is a response to something, responsible to it, responsive to it, respectful of it. . . . I *must* do this. I cannot do otherwise. If the response is not one of necessity, grounded in some "must," if it is a freedom to do what one likes, for example to make a literary text mean what one likes, then it is not ethical. (4)

Because this way of reading frees the work to impose its language, and therefore its nature, on us, we gain the freedom to discover what the text really has to offer, ethically speaking. In a subsequent essay, "Is There an Ethics of Reading?" Miller extended this argument to show how the ethical moment in reading leads to ethical action in the world:

> the proper ethical decision that a teacher of literature should make . . . is to teach the irrelevance of the thematic assertions of even the most apparently morally concerned literature for the making of moral decisions, since the moral decision and judgments within the work are only an allegory of the way language works. . . . I have made an ethical judgment and passed on an ethical command: do not make the thematic dramatizations within a work of literature the basis of ethical judgments and actions in the real world. (98-99)

In the end, Miller offers no exact idea of what superior reading looks like because the work being read ultimately contains within its language "the latent and gathered force" of the law to which a particular text is subject (*Ethics of Reading* 120), but his argument does suggest that the reader who conflates "the ethics of reading" with measuring the *moral* value of literature flagrantly disobeys that law.

Partly in disagreement with the notion that "the ethics of reading" has little to do with thematic content, Wayne Booth argues in *The Company We Keep* that "critics have rightly begun to place more responsibility on readers, but in doing so they have, perhaps naturally, exaggerated that move, developing an 'ethics of reading' that often underplays the radically contrasting ethical powers of individual narratives" (9). Only Miller is offered as an example of this exaggeration, but Booth failed to see that Miller's ethic of reading actually allows the critic to appreciate the ethical dimension of various narratives because the literary function of the work, its "linguistic necessity" (3), is not chained to moral standards that are external to the work. According to Booth, responsible reading must happen before we can appraise the ethical value of particular fictions, but he asserted that the way we read can never be justified by "linguistic necessity":

> For any individual reader, the only story that will have ethical power is the one that is heard or read *as* it is heard or read—and that may have little connection either with the author's original intention or with the inherent powers of the story-as-told. The ethics of reading that results when we take this fact of life seriously will itself have a double edge: the ethical reader will behave responsibly toward the text and its author, but that reader will also take responsibility for the ethical quality of his or her "reading," once that new "text" is made public. (10)

The friendship analogy that Booth develops to investigate the ethics of fiction points to a level of responsibility beyond Miller's ethical moment in the act of reading; as readers, we must be held accountable to a way of reading that holds storytellers accountable to standards of friendship. In other words, the worth of the story being told, in much less circular fashion, is subject to a higher law that the reader brings to the text.

Despite this complex distinction between Miller and Booth, Adam Newton points out an important similarity between them in his book *Narrative Ethics*:

> While Miller subscribes to an ethic of unreadability, a linguistic imperative from which readers cannot exempt themselves, and Booth constructs a theory of textual ethos in terms of ratios of friendship, . . . they can be legitimately described as two kinds of ethical critics, principally invested . . . in the distinctive quality of ethical/critical judgment, of its rightness as textual commentary. (10)

From his point of view, they have both promoted, if not a clear standard of good reading, a method for discovering a standard for responsible literary scholarship based on a relationship they see between narrative *and* ethics. Newton replaces this idea with a more complex notion of "narrative *as* ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process." According to this definition, the experience of narrative is an ethical confrontation in itself, an occasion not "to evaluate or even solve a text's problems" but to face them in "their concrete, formal, narrative particularity" (11). His resistance to ethical judgment *as* textual commentary is understandable, but Newton placed himself outside the bounds of ethical criticism only by restricting them. In fact, we might say that Newton *has* engaged in ethical criticism, not because he *is* concerned with the "rightness" of his own textual commentary, but because ethical thinking does not necessitate judgment, however well it equips us for that activity. For instance, we can do "ethics" by raising questions that might help us see why "good" reading is so difficult to define in the first place. Without any intention of arriving at the ultimate "should," we can explore the extent to which the act of reading is subject to responsibilities that we readily acknowledge in other areas of life where self-assessment is

quite valuable. Moreover, similar to the approach that Newton took, this open-ended sense of ethical inquiry leaves room to examine how a particular narrative structure or storytelling method helps raise questions of accountability in the act of reading fiction.

McCarthy does address various ethical dilemmas that relate to the act of reading, but this study treats "the ethics of reading" as a theme in his fiction, not as a theoretical category. Doing so steers this study away from any prescriptive approach to reading his work but also locks the focus on the novels themselves, how they give rise to ethical questions about the act of reading, and the standards for good reading that McCarthy asks us to contemplate as we engage his stories. Although the direction of this study presupposes that the reader of these novels undergoes some level of ethical and moral growth *as a reader*, the *moral* influence of reflexive narration, except insofar as reading itself might be understood as moral behavior, is not the topic under discussion. Nor does this study propose a *moral* obligation of the reader to reflect on how he or she *should* treat these novels. Nevertheless, this study falls within the purview of ethical criticism because it explicitly addresses questions that inevitably call up the central concern of all ethical inquiry: "what is the good?" For McCarthy, the good has something to do with contention and bloodshed; there is no good life apart from the tension of discord. All of his novels carry the weight of this ethical system. But *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* reinforce these concerns with narrators that pull to the dark center of his philosophy the very act of reading. In exploring how narrative form and storytelling methods complement the theme of accountability, this study is primarily formalist in nature. It analyzes plot orchestration, shifting perspective, and various rhetorical strategies, all of which help account for the menacing narrative contours of these three novels. Scholars have shown an interest in the ethical and formalist dimensions of McCarthy's work for quite some

time, but few have explored the extent to which he addresses ethical questions *through* his formal technique.[1] Furthermore, the idea that *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* form a stylistic and thematic trilogy of sorts offers new emphasis on this literary phenomenon in his work. The close readings of these novels demonstrate how story and narration interact in McCarthy's fiction but also how the pivotal *Blood Meridian* is more accurately understood when seen as the finale to his career as a southern writer than the overture to his career as a western one.

In preparation for these readings, the next chapter is a theoretical examination of ethical thinking about reading, emphasizing some of the central figures currently in dialogue about this issue. From Plato and Aristotle all the way to J. Hillis Miller, Wayne Booth, James Phelan, and a host of other contemporary critics, the field of ethical criticism has survived. Because it has so often taken the form of petty disagreement based on personal values and private agendas, ethical criticism as a theoretical approach to the study of literature or a legitimate way of reading has either come under attack or, worse, been dismissed as naïve and narrow-minded. However, almost every school of thought that is fashionable in the literary academy today is underpinned by a strong ethical agenda that, in most cases, hails itself as the best and most responsible way to read. Using three works of fiction by Cormac McCarthy, this study attempts to show how ethical criticism can be a central component in literary scholarship without being the divisive or restrictive approach it has been understood to be. Its reputation as private valuation, censorship, and moralizing is rightly disdained, but the truer forms of ethical criticism should not be dismissed by association. The first chapter, "Definitions and Problems: An Introduction to the Ethics of Reading," sets the stage for this attempt, in part, by suggesting that the novels of Cormac McCarthy contain within them the

rhetorical force to initiate ethical discussions about reading. They harbor evidence, both in the scenarios that constitute his fictional worlds and in the narrative discourse that gives form to our experience of those worlds, that McCarthy is interested in the ethical dimension of the act of reading. Consequently, we need not bring a pre-defined notion of "responsible reading" or "good reading" to the novels in order to explore their ethical value to us. Instead, we need to be open to the questions that McCarthy himself wants us to ask, to the extent that we can glean from the text, *as we read*, what those questions might be, in order to measure the significance of his work from an ethical perspective. In other words, the ethical value of these three novels lies not in their potential to subvert or uphold values that we already hold but in their potential to help us think about how the act of reading fiction is an opportunity to reflect on our confidence in those values, where that confidence comes from, and what that confidence reveals about our allegiance to one thing or another.

In the preface to David Holloway's *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, Rick Wallach announces the start of a "new and more mature phase" of McCarthy criticism. Early on, critics used "justification by stylistic analysis" to explain "why Cormac McCarthy is so good" (xi). But Holloway has redirected our attention to "why Cormac McCarthy's work *matters*" (xii). According to Wallach, Holloway has demonstrated how the novels "are not transcendent monads but somehow characteristic of their historical moment of production"; at the same time, they "emphasize the persistence of basic human emotions and collective humane impulses against soul-deadening commodification" (xiii). His assumption is that works of art are significant when they not only expose forces in the world that threaten the dignity of the human race but also uphold that dignity in the act of that exposure. But why this notion *matters* any more or less than other notions of interest to other critics is a mystery;

to insist that one notion above all others *matters* without addressing the ethical question of value is to beg the entire question of *maturity*. For Wallach, maturity means to realize that description of style no longer suffices and that "stylistic analysis" does little more than validate enjoyment. In contrast, the present study attempts to show that stylistic analysis of narrative technique can yield questions that cut to the very heart of literary study itself. The approach of this study excludes no other, but it does insist on the text as the very thing that must be read before it *can* matter to anyone. And the undeniable fact about reading a work is that one must do it again and again to discover what might have been hiding or what might have been missed. In most cases, what goes unseen is the act of reading itself, how that act matters to the author as well as to the reader, because we would rather not do what that line of inquiry generally requires us to do: look within. But McCarthy's invitation to do so is the rhetorical effect of his narrative style, to which we must attend again and again in order to see, not what matters above all or what already matters to us, but what might matter to us were we the readers that McCarthy needs us to be. This transformative process is quite often not an enjoyable process, but it is one that produces maturity in the reader and, by extension, perhaps maturity in the critic.

The conclusion of this study will address the critical and pedagogical value of reading fiction that has an ethical dimension working behind and within its thematic and aesthetic dimensions. If a novel can draw attention to its own narrative mechanisms and in turn ask the reader to reflect on the accountability issues at the heart of reading, then we can entertain a pedagogical value in fiction quite different from the moral instruction it is sometimes said to impart. *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* explore transgression and judgment on a level that rivals the most harrowing stories of the Old Testament; accordingly, Edwin

Arnold has upheld each of these novels as a species of parable ("Naming"). They transmit moral lessons by directly confronting the reality of human sin, for instance. But their pedagogical value has more to do with how they can help students and scholars alike shake or revise ingrown habits of reading, shift their angles of looking, hold them accountable to the way they read fiction and what reading a story entails. His novels work to this end because their narratives do not continuously obscure the stories they tell. Though interrupted and suspended at different times, the stories seem on some level immune to, rather than dependent on, the styles that render them. At the same time, McCarthy's techniques are glaringly communicated by the narrative they shape, nearly constructing another level of drama, often at the cost of the primary story. The narrators periodically invite the reader to be an active witness to his own presence in the text. In these moments, the story recedes, leaving the reader alone with the teller to contemplate how the story is being told and how the story is being read. This other drama unfolds in the mind of the reader who would reflect on the act of reading. Again, this study does not prescribe a new or preferable way to read, but only suggests that ways of reading are myriad and therefore an interesting focus of ethical inquiry, especially when a writer of fiction initiates that inquiry as part of his artistic design. To the extent that readers can only progress by reflecting on how they are presently reading, teachers of literature and their students can gain, *as readers*, from the reflexive style of McCarthy's work. The final chapter of this study will explore this implication.

Notes

[1] See Arnold ("Naming"), Vereen Bell, John Grammer, Robert Jarrett, John Lang, Christopher Metress, Timothy Parrish and Elizabeth Spiller, and William Schafer.

CHAPTER 2

DEFINITIONS AND PROBLEMS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ETHICS OF READING

> As for ways of reading, there are thirty thousand different ways. And then this crowd and crush of scholars and opinions, and learned opinions and unlearned opinions about how the particular passage is to be understood . . . . . is it not true that all this seems to be rather complicated! "God's Word" is the mirror—in reading it or hearing it, I am supposed to see myself in the mirror—but look, this business of the mirror is so confusing that I very likely never come to see myself reflected—at least not if I go at it this way. (Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination* 25-26)

In this confessional excerpt, Søren Kierkegaard points to one of many cognitive obstacles that stand in the way of embracing what he understands to be an essential Christian responsibility: to read "God's Word" is to look in the mirror in order to see oneself reflected in it. This act of obedience turns out to be much more difficult, because of what it reveals to the reader, than working through the myriad philosophical complications on which that act often seems to depend. Far from demoting intellectual concerns in favor of spiritual or interpretive impressionism, Kierkegaard suggests, rather, that the attempt to verify the

validity of biblical sources, achieve complete certainty about the meaning of the text, and work through every obscure riddle that asserts itself, what he calls “scholarly preliminaries” (27), is a crafty way to avoid looking in the mirror by looking *at* the mirror. In short, he asserts that there is a distinction between reading carefully, with the rigor of scholastic reservation, and reading faithfully, with the submission of one who discovers that he has been called upon to fulfill some urgent wish of one whom he wants more than anything to please. To clarify this distinction, Kierkegarrd offers an elaborate metaphor: “Imagine a lover who has received a letter from his beloved—I assume that God’s Word is just as precious to you as this letter is to the lover. I assume that you read and think you ought to read God’s Word in the same way the lover reads this letter” (26). Deciphering the contents of this letter is crucial, but not as crucial as acting upon those parts of the letter that are immediately clear to the lover. If he delayed obedience to some wish of his beloved that he managed to grasp straightaway until he had entertained all the reasons he might have misunderstood the exact implications of that wish or until he had catalogued every other wish that might subsequently become clear to him, he would likely find himself indefinitely paralyzed by the fear of acting prematurely and so never act at all. According to Kierkegaard, if the lover is unwilling to act on a wish that he immediately understands, then he is not reading the letter from his beloved. Instead of seeing himself reflected in the mirror in front of him, he becomes lost in the endless quandary of describing the mirror, crowded and crushed by his own reservations.

This distinction between reading as a scholar and reading as a lover, accompanied by the analogy between “God’s Word” and a letter from the beloved, rests on the fundamental belief that the act of reading is an act not of philosophical engagement with cognitive doubt but of passionate submission to a moral imperative. Yet, as insistently as Kierkegaard makes

his appeal to those who would learn "*What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word*," he both acknowledges and sympathizes with a crisis of confidence in his own readers. He makes the assumption that his audience reads and thinks they "ought to read" the text of their faith as a lover reads. But based on this assumption, he raises questions that will help them see more clearly (a) *why* they ought to read in this way and (b) the spiritual implications that make such an inquiry worthwhile. Furthermore, his own text, written with the same urgency that he admires in the lover reading the letter from his beloved, becomes yet another mirror in which he invites his reader, and himself, to look. In these ways, Kierkegaard has managed to compose a work that is ethically charged, not forcefully prescriptive. Instead of sermonizing from the safe height of a pulpit, he becomes a member of his own audience, holding himself accountable to the same demands placed on his reader by the questions he poses. His critique of reading, therefore, is truly rhetorical in nature; he persuades by example rather than by decree, enacting for his audience, through an adopted persona of one who is bound by a desire to obey an urgent calling, the process of discovering the value of such obedience. The true Christian, he would say, is obligated to cultivate a mindset of obedience in relation to "God's Word," but he focuses more on the process of cultivation, the intricate conflicts that frustrate one who would learn to look at the refection *in* the mirror instead of *at* the mirror itself, than on the sheer fact that submission is necessary and righteous. In other words, the definition of "true Christian," in relation to reading scripture, is simple and clear, but the means through which one might read, and so live and act, according to that definition are complex and beset with emotional difficulty.

Using a secular metaphor to investigate a sacred obligation, Kierkegaard invites his audience to see that looking *in* the mirror is an intimate encounter between the reader and

himself precisely because it is an intimate encounter between the reader and someone he loves deeply. In this way, his discussion of reading a sacred text has the specific rhetorical purpose of demonstrating that Christian obedience is less a doctrinal requirement handed down by a tyrant than a spiritual hunger to participate in the promise of a covenantal bond. Consequently, Kierkegaard's treatment of this sacred link between reading and obedience is also a helpful model for thinking about the ethics of reading in the more secular domain of imaginative literature.[1] J. Hillis Miller, in his book *The Ethics of Reading*, claims that there is an important distinction, albeit different from Kierkegaard's, between reading and reading when the text in question is a species of narrative, such as the novel:

> The social, political, and historical "backgrounds" or "contexts" of a given work may indeed be studied in detail and specified with exactitude, though the amount of hard empirical research necessary to do this is often underestimated by literary critics who say they want to study the historical and political dimensions of literature. The vagueness and ungrounded speculation, the unexamined *a prioris*, begin just at that place where the relation between the "background" or "context" and the literary text as such, the words on the page, is asserted. The social, historical, or political conditions are said to be the "cause" or the "determining context" of the work, or the work is said to "mirror" its background, or the work is said to be "penetrated" or "permeated" by the social and class assumptions of its author or his milieu, or the work is said to express the "ideology" of its author's class and historical moment and by way of that ideology to express obliquely the "real historical and social conditions" of that time, place, and class. . . . Moreover, even when the exact form of the relation of the text to its context has been identified, the work of

> interpretation has only begun. The difficult business of actually reading the work and showing how the adduced historical context inheres in the fine grain of its language still remains to be done. Until it is done nothing has been done beyond making a vague claim that the context "explains" the text. Nothing is more urgently needed these days in humanistic study than the incorporation of the rhetorical study of literature into the study of the historical, social, and ideological dimensions of literature. (6-7)

In directing the critic's attention back to language as the primary threshold of interpretation, Miller acknowledges that the shift in criticism to external ways of discovering meaning is confirmation that "reading itself is extraordinarily hard work. It does not occur all that often. Clearheaded reflection on what really happens in an act of reading is even more difficult and rare" (3-4). He appears to sympathize with the feeling that "it is so hard, too hard, to keep one's attention on the text" (5); however, this difficulty is a crucial guard against making "the study of literature a somewhat dreary business" of finding in literature "what is already known by the interpreter and what can more clearly be known and seen elsewhere" (8). In opposition to this hermeneutical dead end, Miller wants to shift our critical focus to

> the question of the ethical moment in writing or narrating novels, acting as a character within them, reading novels, writing about them. In what I call "the ethical moment" there is a claim made on the author writing the work, on the narrator telling the story within the fiction of the novel, on the characters within the story at decisive moments of their lives, and on the reader, teacher, or critic responding to the work. This ethical "I must" cannot . . . be accounted for by the social and historical forces that impinge upon it. . . . That moment is not a matter of response to a thematic content asserting

> this or that morality. It is a much more fundamental "I must" responding to the language of literature itself. (8-10)

Miller's ethical moment does not perfectly align with Kierkegaard's idea of looking in the mirror of the text to see oneself reflected, but his argument does suggest that the act of reading is a charade if it is not first and foremost an act of obedience. To read a novel is not merely to look at it *as* a mirror or to contemplate all the forces at work in or expressed by its production but to submit to its claim on the reader, an ethical moment that

> faces in two directions. On the one hand it is a response to something, responsible to it, responsive to it, respectful of it. In any ethical moment, there is an imperative. . . . I *must* do this. I cannot do otherwise. If the response is not one of necessity, grounded in some "must," if it is a freedom to do what one likes, for example to make a literary text mean what one likes, then it is not ethical, as when we say, "That isn't ethical." On the other hand, the ethical moment in reading leads to an act. It enters into the social, institutional, political realms, for example in what the teacher says to the class or in what the critic writes. (4)

Miller is careful to say that, in the world of fiction, this imperative does not take on the form of a direct moral command that we might feel obligated to obey in response to a religious narrative, but his encouragement to read a novel according to its intrinsic rhetorical nature is a step in the direction of assuming an ethical responsibility, one that requires the reader, at the very least, to acknowledge the demands placed on him by the language itself.[2]

Both Miller and Kierkegaard are engaged in the ethics of reading because they are primarily concerned with how we should read, what it means to interpret responsibly, the kinds of choices that govern how we read, and the kinds of actions that emerge from the

reading process. They also share an approach to this inquiry; both are inclined to indentify and promote a particular way of reading that they believe will optimize reception of the text under consideration. In other words, they are engaged in the philosophical task of *normative* ethics. As opposed to *descriptive* ethics, which attempts to demonstrate what others believe good reading is, or *applied* ethics, which explores how we put certain standards into practice, normative ethics tries to determine what the standards should be. Furthermore, both works are good examples of normative investigation not because their conclusions resemble each other to some extent but precisely because they have unique characteristics. Both call for some level of obedience to claims made on them by the act of reading, but the nature of this obedience depends on the specific rhetorical situations created by the texts they have chosen to read. In Kierkegaard's discussion, the text is a sacred document of divine authorship, so reading is tantamount to discovering what must be done to please his beloved. In Miller's discussion, the texts in question more properly belong to the production and study of narrative literature, so reading is first a way of responding to language that has been carefully orchestrated by an author to render a vision of the world through artistic effects and then a way of understanding how our reception of that vision influences our behavior as teachers or critics. They might agree on more levels than are apparent on first impression, but they need not agree at all for their conclusions to carry equal weight in ethical discussion. Accurate assessment of their conclusions perpetuates the philosophical inquiry that they themselves perpetuated when they took issue with their respective audiences. Indeed, both engaged in descriptive ethics before they could begin their normative explorations of good reading. In turn, we can read their assessments, identify the implications of their arguments, and use their process as a model for further inquiry, even if we use different texts as the basis of our

discussion. The normative investigation of the ethics of reading must be ongoing as long as the texts we choose to read place us in different rhetorical situations. As Miller argues at the end of *The Ethics of Reading*,

> I still stand before the law of the ethics of readings, subject to it, compelled by it, persuaded of its existence and sovereignty by what happens to me when I read. What happens is the experience of an "I must" that is always the same but always different, unique, idiomatic. I remain eager to obey the law of reading but without direct access to it. (127)

This "I must" remains the central concern of the ongoing normative process in which both Miller and Kierkegaard encourage their readers, and themselves, to engage as they continue to read what they read.

The ethics of reading, then, is not a method of inquiry that can take place outside of or prior to the act of reading a particular text; in essence, the act of reading, if it is to have an ethical dimension to it all, must be characterized by an openness to the specific claims of a text on the reader as he reads. For Kierkegaard, this claim resides in the moral content of the text being read; once that content is understood, the reader must, in effect, put down the text and do what the beloved wishes him to do. For Miller, this claim resides in the language of the text itself; he defends the urgent need to revitalize the rhetorical study of literature by setting aside the hermeneutic trends that are currently fashionable in the academy. Although both authors are attempting to justify a standard that their audiences more than likely do not accept and their assumptions about the source of authority that calls the reader to obedience are to be understood as givens, they do not specifically define the unique form of obedience to which the reader will be compelled to subject himself. The unique rhetorical exchange that

gives rise to that calling, rather, will depend on the nature of the text itself and the situation of the reader at the time he engages with that text. Discovering the law of reading a particular text is indeed the ultimate goal of a normative investigation, but the process of discovering that law is intricate and layered. When reading a novel, for instance, we must decipher the meaning of words, make sense of the narrative strategies used by the author to tell the story, attend to the conflicts that beset the characters and the choices they make, and acknowledge the extent to which we are invited to participate in the drama that unfolds. But is the claim on the reader of a novel always and exclusively to respond to "the language of literature itself" or to the fictional story being told? Might the experience of a narrative point to further claims made by the author that arise from such an experience? Are the standards of ethical reading held by the author of a text worth considering? Miller's ethical moment is an urgent call to set aside concerns that are external to the language of a text, similar to the way Kierkegaard warns against mistaking "scholarly preliminaries" for true reading. However, focusing on our obligation to make sense of language first suggests that the act of reading is little more than a rigorous method for arriving at an accurate description of "the mirror," as Kierkegaard puts it. Is there a way of looking at the act of reading a novel that leaves open the possibility that we can, if we are willing, see ourselves reflected, as in a mirror? How might the rhetorical complexity of a narrative permit such reflection and, in turn, reflection on that reflection? This Kierkegaardian mirror, the reflective mirror of the text as read, is not to be confused with the classical notion of mimetic representation. The extent to which a narrative reflects the phenomenal world has always played a crucial role in the ethical assessment of literary art,[3] but the value debates surrounding the concept of mimesis often assume that the audience is a passive recipient of dramatic presentation, emotionally and morally impressionable rather

than ethically equipped to evaluate its own competence to engage in a rhetorical exchange. Moreover, this reflective mirror need not be understood as the *moral* accountability tool that Kierkegaard clearly considers it to be when he says that "God's Word" is the mirror. In the realm of the novel, this mirror would more accurately be said to reflect the involvement of the reader *as* a reader of fiction and so permit him to assess his motivations in the act of reading, his role as witness to a dramatized vision of the world and the strategies used to illuminate that vision, and, most importantly, his willingness to respond to various questions raised by *the author himself* about the act of reading the unique narrative he has produced. The work of reading, then, though made possible first by a return to seeing the text itself as the primary object of study, would ultimately move beyond engagement with the text, its implied author, its narrator, and the fictional world it creates. In effect, this mirror would allow the reader to contemplate the kind of reader he needs to be to optimize reception of the work. On this post-interpretive level, the act of reading would gain ethical significance because the reader would be engaged with the object of his attention in such a way that he could inquire about the rhetorical fitness of his interpretive choices.

The basic assumption behind the proposal outlined above is that the claim made on the reader by the text he is reading lies somewhere between the language of that text and the rhetorical designs of the author. *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy are suitable novels with which to test this idea because they are intricate linguistic performances and rhetorically complex narratives that contain within them evidence that the author is interested in questions related to the ethics of reading. Before he can identify these questions and realize that they are posed directly to him, the reader must first engage in the difficult work of reading language that is at once extremely opaque and highly graphic. He

must, furthermore, encounter characters and situations that task his moral sensibilities. At every turn, these novels tempt the reader to condemn the author for assaulting his senses and violating the norms of human decency. Indeed, the narrators in these novels, in one way or another, constantly draw the reader into an experience that he is more than likely inclined to find repugnant. Our resistance to the bloody rampage of the three killers in *Outer Dark*, the necrophilia of Lester Ballard in *Child of God*, and the brutality of the scalphunters in *Blood Meridian* seems the primary goal of the narrator, but that resistance is also the starting place for a higher order of involvement in the narrative. At the same time that the narrator exposes our sensibilities to traumatic images and morally questionable behavior, he invites us to think about *why* we are offended and how we might respond to this offense in a way that teaches us how the act of reading is a way of confronting something equally reprehensible in ourselves. From this point of view, the ethics of reading is not merely a detached philosophical method for determining what the standards of good reading might be but a personal and experiential process of discovering what is at stake in surrendering ourselves to a narrative that is, above all, an assault on our moral arrogance. Immersed in McCarthy's novels, we are torn between the desire to turn away or distance ourselves from human depravity and the desire to answer the call of an author who, for all of his willingness to disgust, encourages self-reflective reading.

To engage in the ethics of reading as a *method* of reading is to engage in the reflective act of asking and investigating questions that the narrative itself poses to us. This task, when properly understood as a normative process, is an *ongoing* examination of the standards we might already have come to accept or be used to applying to texts we read, accompanied by openness to the standards held by others and to standards yet to be formulated. In the study of

literature, these various standards are held by critics and authors alike. And in more specific relation to the act of reading novels, these standards are tied not only to the unique rhetorical methods applied in various acts of storytelling but also to how those methods are experienced and evaluated by various kinds of readers.[4] Only by suspending confidence in our established standards of good (or at least the invocation of those standards) can we discover, as we read a particular narrative, and entertain the myriad critical assessments of that narrative, the kind of reading that submits to the demands of an author's rhetorical strategy and chosen subject matter, no matter how threatening to our sense of decency or security. The first place we might look to gather information about the various definitions of good reading is in the field of ethical criticism itself; the theoretical assertions and literary interpretations of other critics offer a vast harvest of ideas with which to conduct the task of descriptive ethics.[5] But the more challenging and rewarding place to look is in the narrative we happen to be reading. As part of the act of reading itself, descriptive ethics can more directly inform our attempt to mold our way of reading to the expectations of the author whose work we are trying to experience. Either way, an integral part of investigating the central question of normative ethics with respect to reading (*how* should we read?) is the empirical task of observing what critics and authors actually believe good reading is. Asking the central question of *descriptive* ethics (*what* do we believe good reading is?) can help us maintain the kind of openness that makes normative ethics possible in the first place. To the extent that normative ethics entails debate among competing standards of goodness, we cannot engage in this debate, either with each other or with ourselves, without first making sense of the various positions in question from a value-free perspective. Both Kierkegaard and Miller make arguments and reach conclusions that depend on an accurate assessment of viewpoints held by their respective

audiences. In turn, their standards of good reading, once understood empirically by subsequent participants in the discussion, become alternative points of view that can be freely embraced, challenged, or modified.

Extending our attention beyond Miller and Kierkegaard, we will also discover various approaches to the ethical dimension of literary study that are not specifically concerned with the act of reading per se. In fact, some critics are hesitant to place too much emphasis on the act of reading itself because they fear that doing so avoids a more fundamental concern: what we as readers should expect from the authors we deem worthy of reading. In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne Booth explores the idea that readers should evaluate novels, and the authors who write them, based on the standards of friendship. He is careful to explain that he is not equating good novels and authors with good friends, or worse, virtuous people; rather, he suggests that we look at stories as friendship offerings:

> We reject these offers, of course, whether made by people or by fictions, unless we think we will get *something* worth having. Except when we are off-guard, we accept the companionship only of those who persuade us that their offerings are the genuine "goods." We thus practice, willy-nilly, an ethical criticism regardless of our theories: we choose our friends and their gifts, and thus who *we* will be, for the duration. . . . All the art, then, in this kind of metaphorical criticism, will lie in our power to discriminate among the values of moments of friendship that we ourselves have in a sense created. We judge ourselves as we judge the offer. (177-78)

The implication is that the quality of offerings depends in part on what we deem beneficial to us at the moment, in the situation we find ourselves when we happen to pick up a novel to read. Furthermore, ultimate judgment about whether a particular narrative offers us the kind

of friendship we want cannot occur until we have exposed ourselves to the inherent qualities of that narrative: "we never know until after long acquaintance whether or not an implied author can really distinguish true friendship from false" (177). In the epilogue to his book, which he titles "The Ethics of Reading," Booth reiterates that his theory is innately open and pluralistic because the definitions of benefit and harm depend on the particular ethos of a reader:

> we must both open ourselves to "others" that look initially dangerous or worthless, and yet prepare ourselves to cast them off whenever, after keeping company with them, we conclude that they are potentially harmful. Which of these opposing practices will serve us best at a given moment will depend on who "we" are and what the "moment" is. The only fully general advice inherent in all this is that by taking thought about *who* and *where we are*, and about *when it is*, we may improve our chances of finding and dwelling with those others who are in fact our true friends. (488-89)

Openness, from this point of view, is somewhat risky because we might not discover the harm being done to us until we are in fact injured, especially if we have misjudged our own immunity to this or that treatment dished out by a narrative. However, the risk seems to be a necessary one if we hope to discover value in the books we choose to read.

Booth's choice to title the conclusion of his book "The Ethics of Reading" seems to acknowledge a connection he wants to make between his own theory and critics who "have rightly begun to place more responsibility on readers." At the beginning of the book, he is suspicious of the phrase "ethics of reading" because it indicates an exaggeration that "often

underplays the radically contrasting ethical powers of individual narratives" (9). After citing Miller as the prime example of this move, Booth makes a shortsighted distinction:

> It may well be true that to learn to read in some one superior way has an ethical value in itself, regardless of what we read. When that general claim becomes our whole interest, however, we lose all the variety of ethical effect that will be our chief interest here. Still, with that qualification, I would join those who care as much about the ethics of reading as about the ethical value of "works in themselves," whatever we take such problematic creatures to be. (9-10)

The extensive argument that he subsequently develops is one more "superior way" to read, regardless of the particular narrative in question. Openness to friendship offerings is the one indispensable interpretive move that he would have all readers attempt in order to glean the value of a reading experience. In effect, he seems to underplay the versatility of Miller's theory of reading: that it does allow us to discover and appreciate the ethical dimensions of the "works in themselves." His disagreement with Miller should not be that he proposes an ethics of reading or that his approach obscures the differences between narratives but that he looks for value in a narrative experience according to a different measure of benefit. By oversimplifying Miller's theory, Booth essentially robs himself and his readers of the chance to engage in genuine debate about what we should value and how we should read: "I can only hope that when readers disagree with my judgments, they will find that in their way of disagreeing they exemplify the validity and importance of ethical criticism and of hard thought about how to do it well" (xi). Underplaying the complexity of Miller's proposal in *The Company We Keep* seems to violate this basic principle of ethical criticism.[6] As the title of his epilogue nearly confirms, Booth seems to close off the potential for disagreement by

dismissing one generic approach to reading in favor of his own. To be sure, his friendship metaphor is compelling not only because it promotes a way of reading that seeks edification through genuine interaction with the ethos of an "other" but also because it is an honest expression of his own values with which subsequent critics can take issue. Elsewhere, in an essay titled "Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple," Booth models the highest form of critical honesty with stark statements that invite disagreement from his colleagues. For instance, addressing the reality of authorial intention, he argues that "if there is an author inflicting choices upon me, I have not only the right but a responsibility to think about whether those choices are ethically good or bad" (22). In his discussion of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, Booth asks us to measure the ethical fitness of a critic who praises the "*literary* merit" of this novel

> without mentioning the brilliance with which he places Kate's essential admirable qualities into moral decline. Criticism that ignores the ethical center of this aesthetic achievement is simply naïve. And ethical criticism that merely describes the conflicts, without permitting any statement of agreement or disagreement, is cowardly. (27)

Both of these claims are highly controversial because they hold his audience to standards that they might consider either erroneous or imposing. Nevertheless, by exposing his own values in a clear and confrontational way, Booth expresses his faith in dialogue that naturally arises from disagreement.

At the same time, disagreeing with Booth's friendship metaphor, or his other claims, on principle alone will not extend the debate in a new or productive direction. Instead, we should describe reading experiences for which his ideas cannot fully account. The notions of friendship, ethical choice, and critical cowardice certainly raise universal questions that we

can ask if are interested in the ethical dimension of narrative, but his particular application of each one is not necessarily an appropriate model for assessing every narrative in existence. The moral depravity of Culla Holme in *Outer Dark* and Lester Ballard in *Child of God* and the relentlessly graphic brutality that is depicted in *Blood Meridian* pose a challenge to the reader who would (a) seek edification from his engagement, (b) apply his own standards of judgment to the experience created for him, or (c) articulate moral certainties that condemn the characters without also implicating himself. Based on this discomfiting challenge, what sort of friendship might these novels be said to offer? What sorts of choices are inflicted on us by the author that we are in a position to evaluate on our own terms? How are we meant to respond to the disturbing behavior of the characters in these novels? These questions point to a central dilemma of reading that each novel dramatizes, in one way or another, through its subject matter and narrative point of view. However, the standards of good reading proposed by Booth, focused as he is on the content of the work, the rhetorical delivery of that content by the implied author, and our obligation to respond with ethical discretion, obscure another level of ethical significance that McCarthy invests in his work. All three novels are narrated in such a way that we are asked to think about how we *are* reading, and even how we *should be* reading. In each novel, McCarthy creates a narrator who directs our reading eye so that we are made disciples to a particular way of perceiving and responding that, more than likely, conflicts with our instinctive and immediate reaction. Instead of using who we are and where we stand at the time of reading as a basis for measuring how we might benefit from engaging his narratives, McCarthy invites us to consider how those factors could actually blind us to their value. Indeed, reading *Outer Dark, Child of God,* and *Blood Meridian* is an opportunity to be transformed into the kind of reader who can take stock of his identity and his position

as potential liabilities in or impediments to the pursuit of enrichment. If they cause us to misinterpret what McCarthy has to offer as unfriendly, then we might prematurely cast his work aside as "potentially harmful," as Booth says. The narrator in each novel makes little effort to encourage us to stay with him, if we are not already willing; instead, he meets us, whoever and wherever we are, and lays out the narrative landscape that we can expect to traverse if we dare to do so. At the same time, he provides guidelines for reading that permit us to set aside, or at least suspend, our innate expectations in favor of discovering who we *need to be* and where we *need to stand* in order to see how his offering could benefit us.

When Booth writes, "if there is an author inflicting choices upon me, I have not only the right but a responsibility to think about whether those choices are ethically good or bad," he produces an interesting, however unintentional, ambiguity. In what way might an author inflict a choice on us? Is Booth referring to a compositional choice made by the author of a novel that shapes the experience we have when we read his finished work? Or does Booth mean that a narrative could be designed to present us with a set of alternatives that we are subsequently expected to choose between as part of our reading experience? He more than likely means the former because he goes on to suggest that we should assess the ethical status of the choice. However, the second meaning carries more compelling implications for a critic interested in the ethics of reading. To be inflicted with a choice (i.e., a set of options made available to us by the author of the work we are reading) is to be asked to bear the weight of having to choose between one thing and another, not merely between attitudes toward a character, situation, or technique presented in the narrative but between ways of seeing or ways of responding. Read according to Booth's more probable meaning, an inflicted choice would be one that we *must* accept as the author's ultimate preference, by virtue of the fact

that we are reading his finished work. If we happen to deem this choice "ethically bad," then we reserve the right, based on our personal definitions of "friendly offering," to reject it, hold the author accountable, and set his book down. But what if we encounter a narrative that does in fact inflict us with choices to make that, once made, help determine how beneficial that narrative might be to us? McCarthy achieves this effect by having his narrator hold a mirror up that reflects our reading faces back to us. As we read, we are permitted to reflect on the way we have chosen to read and to consider alternative ways of reading that could equip us both to interpret and to judge more accurately. To be sure, this narrative strategy is a choice he has made as a writer, but if our initial and final response to *that* choice is to appraise its ethical validity, without acknowledging that he is also calling us to think about alternative ways we might choose to read his narrative, then we will have judged prematurely. More importantly, we will have denied ourselves an opportunity to test our capacity to develop as readers and so discover benefits that we would otherwise have remained unprepared to enjoy. The narrators in *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* involve us in the stories that unfold so that we are free to reconsider the merit of our expectations rather than insist on their fulfillment. We are, in effect, invited to surrender those expectations in the presence of a narrative that offers an alternative to them. This option adds weight to the burden we already carry as readers who are charged with evaluating the narrative choices made by the author himself, but our reward promises to be that much greater, and more ethically profitable. And we prepare ourselves to experience a richer friendship with an author who might otherwise, if we remained ethically inert, never seem to us anything more than a dangerous and sadistic literary sociopath.

McCarthy's rhetorically complex narratives demonstrate that he knows his audience; he anticipates that the brutal surfaces created by his graphic language are likely to rub our sensibilities raw and leave us feeling not only ethically assaulted but also defiled. He makes no concessions on this point; rather, his narrators go to great lengths to make sure that we confront characters and scenarios that test the limits of literary decency. We are inclined to flee the scene when we most need to stand still, look away when we most need to witness, or seek the safety of the moral high ground when we most need to reflect on our complicity. To compensate for the suspicion and fear with which readers are commonly inclined to respond to his novels, McCarthy inserts mechanisms of choice into his narratives that invite us to use that suspicion and fear as means of involvement rather than as justifications for retreat. In order to let those mechanisms work on us, we must suspend the kind of judgment that Booth believes will liberate readers from the cowardice of "ethical criticism that merely describes the conflicts." Far from being cowardly, our willingness, first, to acknowledge that McCarthy offers us the choice to replace expectation with self-reflection and, second, to confront those choices as integral elements of our reading experience requires us to step out of our comfort zones and put our identities at hazard. This sacrificial movement toward accountability in the act of reading requires a higher act of judgment and an extreme act of bravery. To set aside our ethical dependencies and adopt, even temporarily, a mindset that is more conducive to discovering value in situations where value seems least likely to exist, is to subject our deepest ethical certainties to scrutiny. But we cannot accurately assess the rhetorical intentions of an author, nor judge the value of the story he has to tell, if we depend on the ethical norms we have already established to define the way we read and what we seek in a narrative experience. Our more important task is to identify and describe the various ways in

which McCarthy reveals and exercises his ethical interest in our capacity to read his work on terms that perhaps conflict with our own. Instead of testing whether his novels complement our definitions of responsible reading, we can listen for questions that steer our gaze toward the reflective mirrors that his narrators hold up for us. When we read novels like *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian*, we are free to ignore this mirror and exercise judgment preemptively, but we are also invited to submit to a trial of rhetorical discipleship. The latter option is certainly the more challenging, and to the extent that we are required to entertain an ethics of reading that might invalidate our own, it is *more ethical* because in the act of reading, we will be focused not only on the object of our attention but also on the way we have chosen to pay attention in the first place.

The ethical significance of our encounter with these three novels, then, similar to any encounter that subjects our values to self-scrutiny, is the infliction of choice. On one level, we are invited, as readers, to identify with characters who remain, by generous standards, unappealing from start to finish (with the exception, perhaps, of the kid in *Blood Meridian*, who appears to undergo an ethical epiphany in the closing chapters of the novel). At the same time, we are asked to adopt ways of reading that the narrator of each novel knows will make our experience more lucid and, therefore, more ethically productive. The importance of this choice is not only that we can assess our intentions and motivations as readers of these novels but also that we can contemplate the implications of being offered such a choice in the first place. Against a dark backdrop of ethically problematic characters and scenarios, McCarthy creates a rhetorical situation in each novel that brings questions of responsibility in the act of reading into sharp relief. Each narrative strategy becomes an analogue for a way of reading, challenging us simultaneously to reflect on the kind of reader we are when we begin the

novel and to accept the role fashioned for us by the narrator. Consequently, we are permitted to see how his abrasive storytelling techniques are designed to replace dull habits of reading and looking with a more mature and more daring role. In order to understand the theoretical implications of the way McCarthy uses his narrators to this end, we can turn to the ethical theory of narrative proposed by James Phelan. Focusing on "the links among technique (the signals offered by the text) and the reader's cognitive understanding, emotional response, and ethical positioning," Phelan argues that the "act of reading entails ethical engagement and response" ("Sethe's Choice" 95).[7] He defines *position* as "a concept that combines *acting from* and *being placed* in an ethical location" and then suggests four ethical situations that help define a reader's position while engaged in a narrative:

> that of the characters within the story world
>
> that of the narrator in relation to the telling and to the audience; unreliable narration, for example, constitutes a different ethical position from reliable narration; different kinds of focalization also position the audience differently
>
> that of the implied author in relation to the authorial audience; the implied author's choices to adopt one narrative strategy rather than another will affect the audience's ethical response to the characters; each choice will also convey the author's attitudes toward the audience
>
> that of the flesh and blood reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations that the narrative invites one to occupy. (95-96)

Based on this set of principles, Phelan rests firmly on the assumption that "the default ethical relation between implied author and authorial audience in narrative is one of reciprocity":

> Authors give, among other things, guidance through ethical complexity and expect to receive in return the audiences' interest and attention. . . . The default assumption, of course, need not always be in place, but deviating from it necessarily entails certain risks. Audiences that place their own interests (ideologies, politics, ethics) at the center of their reading risk turning reading into a repetitious activity that misses the ways in which authors can extend their vision of human possibility and experience. Authors who do not provide guidance or who take aggressive stances toward their audiences risk alienating those audiences to the point of losing them. Implied authors who stop short of conveying their own ethical judgment of an action that is central to the narrative are doing something extraordinarily unusual—and extraordinarily risky. The narrative may fall apart because the center will not hold, or the narrative will become an inscrutable black hole, which absorbs every element of the work into its inscrutability. (97)

Whether the "default assumption" is in place when we read *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* is the central question that reverberates in this theoretical chamber.[8] Are these novels inscrutable black holes because their narrators routinely assault the reader with bleak visions and abstain from clear ethical guidance that would lead us through? Are the kinds of choices inflicted on us by the narrator sufficient to keep us grounded in the belief that we are moving toward the light of understanding on the other side of darkness?

We can safely entertain the possibility that McCarthy is extraordinarily unusual in his willingness to risk alienating his readers in order to help them reach a higher level of ethical thinking in relation to the act of reading. Indeed, he asks much more of us than interest in and attention to the stories he chooses to tell. Likewise, he offers us something more complex and

significant than ethical guidance. Reciprocity is the key, but that reciprocity takes on a form for which Phelan's theory cannot fully account. In order to meet McCarthy's expectations, we must look beyond how his "choices to adopt one narrative strategy rather than another will affect the audience's ethical response to the characters" to consider how those choices generate a wholly different level of decision making about the act of reading itself, about the formation of attitude toward his characters, and about the standards we expect an author to uphold in order to maintain our trust. McCarthy's method of storytelling is not simply risky; it embodies the very nature of risk by deliberately thwarting our expectations. We are placed at risk by the "set of values, beliefs, and locations" that his narratives invite us to occupy, and he places himself at risk by withholding guidance in favor of equipping us with a method of reading with which we might learn to guide ourselves. This approach, however, is precisely how McCarthy extends his "vision of human possibility and experience," not so much in terms of the world of his story as the act of reading itself. If we are not willing to incur the risk that comes with confronting the reading choices embedded in his narration, we will miss how invested McCarthy is in our well-being, blinded and perhaps alienated by the otherwise aggressive tone of his writing. The roles that we are asked to play in reading his novels are an inherent by-product of their ethical inscrutability. If we approach them with the expectation that we will be directed toward a restful resolution of conflict or a reassuring assessment of character based on the norms of human decency, then we will be disappointed. However, if we submit to an exhortation concerning our response as readers to the particular narrative before us, we might undergo a transformation that allows us to change direction as readers. Instead of arriving at the same place we begin, ready to judge that which is reprehensible to

us, we might experience a realignment of vision that prepares us to judge ourselves more accurately, both as readers and as human beings.

To say that McCarthy is ethically interesting or that his work is ethically valuable is not necessarily to embrace his vision of the world or approve of his narrative choices. But we must remain open enough to experience that vision and to examine the implications of those choices if we hope to reach a point where judgment is possible. To be sure, we have a unique opportunity in reading his novels to contemplate the ethics of reading, both as a philosophical interest and as an occupational responsibility. This method of inquiry is all the more useful in refining the way we read when the works we decide to investigate do not clearly uphold the beliefs and values that we bring to them or clearly indicate how we are meant to react when they seem to subvert those beliefs and values at every turn. Rather than telling us a story that we can affirm as an edifying revision of real life or situating us so that we can recognize the harmful or destructive elements that constitute his fictional world, he puts us in the middle of a complex exchange of telling and reading that dramatizes the choices that always come into play when determining where we should place our allegiance. In each of the novels discussed in the following chapters, the question of allegiance is the central problem facing the reader, and this problem arises, as it usually does in a narrative, not only from the characters and the choices they make but also from the carefully managed point of view through which we are permitted to watch the story unfold. With whom among the characters in these three novels are we meant to identify or sympathize? At which turn of the conflict are we invited to voice, if only to ourselves, feelings of approval or disapproval? Instead of offering clear answers that direct our allegiance one way or another, the narrator involves us more deeply in the situations that give rise to the questions in the first place, not so we can more readily find the

answers on our own, but so we acknowledge that allegiance is in fact a tricky business. Far from remaining reticent on the issue, the narrator chooses to show rather than tell, offering commentary on the action we are shown, when he does, only to clarify what is at stake in our decision.[9] Consequently, the question of allegiance extends to the implied author as well. To what extent are we permitted to trust that the implied author has our best interest at heart? Is the kind of reading in which we are asked to engage a threat to our health as readers, or does it promise to make us stronger in the face of adversity? We cannot adequately formulate, let alone find answers to, these questions without incurring the same level of risk that McCarthy incurs when he offers his work for public consumption. The risk for reader and author alike is indeed extraordinary, for on both sides of the narrative exchange looms the possibility of mistreatment.

The dilemma surrounding the choice of allegiance in each novel is dramatized for us through the rhetorical effect of a unique narrative strategy: the *fugitive effect* in *Outer Dark*, the *witness effect* in *Child of God*, and the *disciple effect* in *Blood Meridian*. The narrative situation in *Outer Dark* positions us to experience the panic of flight and the thrill of pursuit at the same time. Whether we are meant to identify with or condemn Culla as he flees from the guilt over his incest with his sister and abandonment of their child remains ambiguous, but once the three killers emerge from the outer dark and begin to exercise their retributive form of justice, our dilemma of allegiance takes on a substantially higher level of clarity and urgency. When they appear before him, they appear also before us, like the terrifying power of a divine authority; they cease to be an abstract representation of justice that looms over his flight, only threatening to become real. Their crossing over from the realm of the possible to the realm of the actual necessitates a shift in our level of involvement, and we come face to

face, as Culla does, with the true cost of his failure. Their ritual bloodletting of the child, in turn, clarifies the cost of allegiance, wherever we might have placed it. In *Child of God*, the narrator is much more present to us, more intimately involved in our reading experience, but we are nevertheless placed in an ambivalent position with regard to our feelings of sympathy with Lester Ballard. We are simultaneously invited to entertain feelings of compassion for an outcast and to enjoy the privileged attention of an unseen witness to depraved behavior. As we watch him descend further and further into sexual deviance and murder, to the point of collecting and violating the bodies of dead women, the narrator never lets us forget that we are, perhaps, not so different from Lester. We share a fundamental humanity with him, as far as he has traveled outside the parameters of human decency. At the same time, we are free to "see him" as an outsider, monstrous, unaccountable, subject to the judgment of a community who will not embrace his deviant nature. As witnesses, then, we are given a double-edged perspective, one that turns inward and one that turns outward. The dilemma of allegiance in *Child of God* is a product of our drive to understand that which threatens to undermine our moral confidence and our desire to deny or reject an element of human nature that Lester embodies. Whichever way we lean, the witness effect produced by the narrative point of view invites us to testify to our limitations under the weight of such pressures. In *Blood Meridian*, the narrator raises the stakes even higher; the act of reading this novel is a rite of passage, a trial that we must undergo to confront the history of warfare at the heart of our national identity. The violence depicted in the novel is at times so brutal and overwhelming that we are tempted to look away or retreat to the safety of our illusions, but McCarthy seems to anticipate this reaction, punctuating his narrative with the philosophical commentary of a highly mindful narrator so that we can contemplate, not merely be shocked by, the graphic

images we encounter. At the center of our initiation into a renewed historical consciousness is the hostility between the unnamed kid, whose journey across the war-torn terrain of the American frontier forges a new identity, and the enormous Judge Holden, whose eloquence on the nature and value of war is matched only by his barbaric capacity to victimize the meek and powerless. Because the kid retains a measure of clemency that counters the "taste for mindless violence" that broods in him (3), the judge considers him mutinous, incapable of remaining true to his commitment to the gang in which he volunteers to participate. As we follow the kid's development, which culminates in his realization and confession that he is, in fact, an American, the novel positions us to experience the same trial of accountability that the kid undergoes as a consequence of his divided loyalties. Our dilemma of allegiance, then, results from our involvement in a narrative that permits us to identify with the growth of the kid, only to see him destroyed in the immense lap of his nemesis. We are, indeed, not destroyed along with the kid, but left to contemplate the image of the judge dancing his immortal dance of power and conquest, the implication being that we will not survive, though we achieve a new awareness of our participation in, the game of war.

To the extent that these various narrative effects indicate an authorial interest in our rhetorical involvement, McCarthy's novels confirm that the ethics of reading, as a method of inquiry, must be guided by the formal principles at work in the text, not by the standards we bring to it. We cannot determine how we should read, or what we stand to gain from reading, a particular narrative until we have immersed ourselves in the experience of reading it. That is, until we fulfill our promise to undergo the experience that the author has fashioned for us, our assessment of his artistic and ethical achievement will be fraudulent. Furthermore, if we approach a work with a pre-defined notion of the kind of reading that we assume best equips

us to measure its value, we might forever remain blind to that value unless it happens to line up with our expectations. Accordingly, this study offers no prescriptive definition of "good reading" except to say that we must remain open to the rhetorical demands of the author in order to discover how we might benefit from his work. As an ethical standard of reading, this principle is fundamentally pluralistic, but it does, as the following chapters attempt to show, require a great deal of emotional sacrifice and philosophical humility, especially when the works under consideration invite us to subject our identities as readers, as *Outer Dark*, *Child of God,* and *Blood Meridian* do, to a rigorous trial of self-scrutiny. From this point of view, the act of reading is an opportunity to experience a new level of freedom from self through obedience to a higher authority. We can stand, for a time, outside the ethical barricades we have built around ourselves and discover the kind of reader we might become. This process of transformation is possible only if we are willing to grant McCarthy an equal amount of freedom to direct our experience on his own terms. In "The Art of Fiction," Henry James insisted that "the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. . . . The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting" (384). Judging the artistic or ethical value of a novel is certainly within our rights, but we undermine the validity of those judgments if we make them hastily. On the other hand, if we suspend judgment until we have journeyed through the fictional world created by a novelist, we might discover along the way that the standards on which we are inclined to base our judgment are unnecessarily restrictive and, therefore, in need of revision. This discovery will better prepare us for the task of making sense of our experience for other readers. Echoing the value of artistic freedom proposed by James, T. S. Eliot offered a standard of good

criticism in “The Perfect Critic” that emphasizes the value of critical freedom: “there is no method except to be very intelligent” (55). Between these two poles of literary experience, the difficult work of reading occurs. If we mean to develop an ethical standard of reading, we would do well to follow a principle of openness similar to the ones proposed by James and Eliot. In order to preserve our freedom in the act of reading, we must say that there is no prior obligation, no prior method, other than to be receptive to the work offered to us.

Notes

[1] In his study *Love and Good Reasons*, Fritz Oehlschlaeger explores, from a specifically Christian perspective, the ethics of reading literature, “an ethics that would take seriously the idea that Christian convictions have specific consequences for the way people read” (49). For other discussions of the intersection between Christian belief and ways of reading, see C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, and Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*.

[2] David Parker makes a similar point in his work *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*:

> Nor need an account of ethical and literary value be naively referential. Books are not good only in so far as they ‘mirror life’, or embody propositions known in some way to be ‘true’, ‘wise’, or ‘for life’, or on the side of a given conception of morality. The view advanced here is that the work we find most worthy of attention distinguishes itself not by giving approved (or even unapproved) answers to the question ‘How should a human being live?’, but by giving that question, and all it throws up, the fullest, most engaged and most intelligent examination. Ethical or moral answer-giving is what ultimately fails to satisfy interest, especially if it is of a kind that suppresses other sorts of answers. (197)

[3] Plato's rejection of mimetic art in the *Republic* based its capacity to steer the audience away from truth and Aristotle's defense of tragedy in *Poetics* based on its cathartic effect are the seminal arguments on this point. Their disagreement sets the stage for all subsequent debate about the inherent value of reading literature.

[4] For discussions about how narrative techniques and methods of characterization emerge from and demonstrate the values and beliefs of the author, see David Daiches, Sheldon Sacks, and William J. Scheick. All three engage in descriptive ethics of reading in order to show how we can investigate, through narrative structure, (a) the way an author interprets the world, (b) what an author is trying to say to us, or (c) how the experience of reading can promote ethical reflection in the reader.

[5] The field of ethical criticism is too vast and various to cover in a single study; however, the sheer number of studies and perspectives testifies to the ongoing importance of ethical inquiry in the study of literature. For a variety of approaches beyond the critics covered in more detail in this chapter, see Christopher Clausen, *The Moral Imagination: Essays on Literature and Ethics*, Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, John Krapp, *The Aesthetics of Morality*, Adam Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, Frank Palmer, *Literature and Moral Understanding*, David Parker, *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*, and Dominic Rainsford, *Authorship, Ethics, and the Reader*. See also the edited collections of James Phelan, *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology*, and Davis and Womack, *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*.

[6] For additional comments about *The Ethics of Reading*, see Booth's essay "Are Narrative Choices Subject to Ethical Criticism" in the collection *Reading Narrative*, edited by James Phelan.

[7] For further discussion, see *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* and *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, by James Phelan. Of particular interest in the latter is his chapter "Dual Focalization, Discourse as Story, and Ethics: *Lolita*," in which he expresses his ethical ambivalence to Nabokov's disturbing account of a pedophile:

> On the one hand, Nabokov is doing something extraordinary, however distasteful: occupying the perspective of a pedophile, asking us to take that perspective seriously, and, indeed, through the second story, asking us, at least to some extent, to sympathize with him. In this respect, the ethics of the novel involves performing one of the best functions of art: extending the perceptions and feelings of its dominant audience, doing so in ways that challenge preconceptions even if the challenge makes us uncomfortable and even likely to turn against the artist. (130)

[8] Sheldon Sacks takes a stronger stance on this assumption than James Phelan, insisting that the novelist is obligated, by virtue of his artistic task, to guide the reader toward a way of thinking that is commensurate with his vision:

> But it is the novelist, ironically, from whom the greatest degree of ethical revelation is demanded. Apart from any moral intention he has, he *must*, if he is to write a good novel, judge characters, acts, and thoughts as a part of his representation. It is not sufficient for him, as it is for the satirist, to show us what he does not like in the external world. And he may not limit what he reveals to the formulated ideas in which he consciously acquiesces. A good novelist may not even rest content with appropriate marks of approbation and disapprobation, for he must control our reactions with considerable subtlety on each page of his work if he is to accomplish

> its artistic end. . . . When we have read a good novelist's work it is as if we have had an opportunity to hear him speak to us of his beliefs and also have been able to observe for years how in fact he reacts to people we have been allowed to know performing actions whose motives have been made comprehensible to us for ends with which we sympathize or which we dislike. And it is not that he *may* do this, he *must* do it if he is to write a novel of any value. (271-72)

[9] Of course, the narrator need not explicitly say how we should react or respond in order to direct our assessments in a particular direction. According to Sacks, "Formal variables which affect our reactions to characters, their acts and thoughts include the author's choice of diction when he describes the activities and thoughts of his characters, the point of view from which a character is presented, the effect of any act upon those characters with whom our sympathies have already been identified. In short, they consist of a host of possible combinations of stylistic, rhetorical, and structural elements which can be summed up in the phrase 'devices of disclosure'" (65).

CHAPTER 3

THE READER AS FUGITIVE: THE ART OF PURSUIT IN *OUTER DARK*

> When he fell he slid his length again headlong in the pineneedles, rising out of a dark trough with swatches of them stuck to the paint and blood on his palms. When he looked back he had seized his wild face in both hands as if main strength were needed to look there and when he went on he went at a crazed pace deeper into the woods.[1]

This excerpt from *Outer Dark* momentarily suspends the flight of Culla Holme so that we, positioned somewhere between him and the men hunting him down, have occasion to reflect on the art of pursuit. The tactile details in the passage vividly demonstrate his panic. But there is also a structural principle at work in the narrative that reflexively doubles the action and allows us to apprehend his terror through style. Using three adverbial clauses, "when he fell," "when he looked," and "when he went on," McCarthy draws attention to a pattern framing the passage. He stalls the forward progression of our reading to mirror the abrupt collapse and slow recovery of the fugitive. The gerund "rising" decelerates the quick, forward pace of the action long enough for Culla to stand up and feel the needles on his palms. The length of this phrase, like cinematic slow motion, underscores the delay in his

flight. When he looks back, he has already put his palms to his face. Signifying his loss of control, this elliptical jump obscures the passage of time; a disorienting stroboscopic effect heightens our own sense of bewilderment. His face is “wild,” his pace “crazed,” when he moves on “deeper into the woods” because in the few seconds Culla is held in place for us by the text, his frenzy intensifies, as if the *words themselves* have caught up and taken hold of him. In this sluggish time frame, his urgency becomes more concrete for us, who, in the act of reading, are made to feel an unexpected and unwanted suspension of progress.

McCarthy’s style in this fragment permits us to feel that we have been on the run with Culla, to feel as desperate as he does to recover from his fall and keep moving. At the same time, the reflexive structure of the passage draws attention to the *fact* of narration and the *fact* that we are reading. As an element of composition, for instance, the grammatical pattern used to frame the action is the product much more of patient design than of the panic terrorizing Culla. The only principle organizing his helter skelter is the inexorable progress of time. In contrast, the *spatial* arrangement of the textual sequence manipulates this progress so that we see Culla in his various postures virtually all at once. The tension between these principles is precisely what heightens the drama for us. In a state of disorientation, we regain our bearings only by reflecting on the act of reading itself, on how narration can create analogical dramas on the level of style that allow us not only to identify more intimately with a character but also to contemplate what is at stake in that identification. We never actually believe that we are on the run with Culla, but when he stumbles in the woods, we stumble along because the teller steps in front of the story and shows us the mechanism behind the illusion. In a moment of heightened attention, like the sting of pine needles on our palms, we feel the immediate presence and control of a narrator. But the sensation of the pursuit remains. Although our

external point of view on the story might allow (even tempt) us to put Culla at an emotional distance, the *words themselves* seem to have taken hold of *us*. From this side of the text, we might feel as if we are right on his track, yet we might also feel like the fugitive as well, on the run from some menacing narrative consciousness who would have us put under arrest and held to account.

The extent to which the act of reading *Outer Dark* generates a fugitive consciousness in us depends in part on an innate desire actually to flee from that which threatens our sense of safety or freedom; if novels can in fact pose such a threat, *Outer Dark* might well create more reader fugitives than most. But this fugitive effect largely derives from McCarthy's interest in the idea of pursuit, both as a theme and as an aesthetic principle. A reader made to feel afraid is perhaps a better reader, better able to identify with a character who would otherwise shun all feelings of empathy. The dread of capture keeps Culla on the run for most of the novel, sometimes from local law enforcers but often, more mysteriously, from some unseen hand of judgment that would demand atonement for his moral transgressions. Although his flight through the woods does arise from a false accusation, he is no less a criminal otherwise. On another level, his continual flight is the Dantean punishment of a guilt-laden fugitive from *natural* law. His first action in the novel is to wake from a prophetic nightmare about vengeful punishment:

> There was a prophet standing in the square with arms upheld in exhortation to the beggared multitude gathered there. A delegation of human ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sours. The sun hung on the cusp of eclipse and the prophet spoke to them. This hour the sun would darken and all these souls would be cured of their afflictions before it appeared again. And

> the dreamer himself was caught up among the supplicants and when they had been blessed and the sun begun to blacken he did push forward and hold up his hand and call out. Me, he cried. Can I be cured? . . . The sun paused. He said: Yes, I think perhaps you will be cured. Then the sun buckled and dark fell like a shout. . . . They waited a long time and it grew chill. Above them hung the stars of another season. There began a restlessness and a muttering. The sun did not return. It grew cold and more black and silent and some began to cry out and some despaired but the sun did not return. Now the dreamer grew fearful. Voices were being raised against him. He was caught up in the crowd and the stink of their rags filled his nostrils. They grew seething and more mutinous and he tried to hide among them but they knew him even in that pit of hopeless dark and fell upon him with howls of outrage. (5-6)

But Culla is already awake when McCarthy inserts this hellish description into the narrative. It is born into the text after the fact, its arrival announced by the narrator to emphasize that it now lives with Culla like an undeniable conviction: “Awake from this dream” (5). The words read like a command to seek shelter from the sometimes frightening visions of sleep, but they also suggest that the act of waking up thrusts him into a reality haunted by the same sickness for which he dreams of seeking a cure. Like testimony recorded into evidence, the vision is written down so that it will not fade or be vulnerable to distortion. The enumeration of detail, the sheer length of it, suggests that Culla bears the weight of a permanent fear, lodged in his memory like the only truth he knows. He knows he is a grotesque beyond redemption, so he flees from the judgment that he feels certainly awaits him.

His conviction has a stronger, more concrete foundation than he can possibly know at this point in the novel. Just before Culla wakes from his nightmare, the novel begins with

what appears to be an epilogue, an italicized narrative segment that introduces an eerie triune of shadowy figures:

> *They crested out on the bluff in the late afternoon sun with their shadows long on the sawgrass and burnt sedge, moving single file and slowly high above the river and with something of its own implacability, pausing and grouping for a moment and going on again strung out in silhouette against the sun and then dropping under the crest of the hill into a fold of blue shadow with light touching them about the head in spurious sanctity until they had gone on for such a time as saw the sun down altogether and they moved in shadow altogether which suited them very well.* (3)

The "*spurious sanctity*" bestowed on these men by the setting sun immediately characterizes them as an unholy theophany. They rise up from an unknown elsewhere and seem driven by a preternatural force, set apart, perhaps, for an uncommon, terrifying purpose that is best carried out in the dark.[2] They belong to the shadows and block out the light. Likened to artists with unaccountable skills of execution, their shapes move across campfire light in "*nameless black ballet*." Immediately following this segment, Culla awakens from his fitful sleep, "from dark to dark, delivered out of the clamorous rabble under a black sun and into a night more dolorous" and into the narrative proper. The way McCarthy arranges the two scenes, especially considering their typographical contrast, suggests that the three men are born of a bad dream, the cause and the manifestation of Culla's fear. The description of his nightmare actually takes up roughly the same amount of textual space as the italicized passage (about 26 lines), further suggesting that they carry equal weight and coincide in some uncharted dimension. One link in the juxtaposition is the word *nameless*: the child in the belly of his sister Rinthy is "the nameless weight" of his shame, the sickness, so to speak,

that generates his dream and sets the rest of the novel in motion (5). The connection between his nightmare, the narrative birth of the threesome, and the actual birth of his child solidifies as the novel progresses; the guilt that Culla flees and the pursuit he endures closely parallel the murders committed by the mysterious three and the judgment they inflict upon him eventually by mutilating before his eyes the child he has denied, the offspring of his sin.[3]

The narrative shift used to establish this connection is also a signpost of the control that McCarthy will exhibit over our reading experience. We are not free to follow the path of this protagonist, or any of the other characters, without always sensing at our heels the shadow cast into the narrative on the opening page of the novel. The triune does not appear again for another thirty pages, but their "*spurious sanctity*" and their "*nameless black ballet*" linger on the way. When they reappear, so does the shadow text that first breathes life into them, and only then do we realize that the first italicized segment is not an epilogue to the novel but an integral part of a complex narrative sequence. What at first seems to be an isolated experiment in perspective evolves into an extensive framing device: an orchestrated sequence of intercalary vignettes that interrupt, echo, overlap, and finally converge with the primary narrative. We begin to anticipate the next in the sequence, and our anticipation resembles the sensation of one being followed and always looking around the next corner, even through to the sixth and final vignette. What we feel as readers caught up in a narrative sequence is only a shadow of Culla's dread of capture, which is generated by the weight of his actual transgression. But we are made *aware* of a presence in the text that could actually bring him to account. The gradual encroachment of the triune is the gear that not only makes the plot turn but also propels us to keep pace with Culla and track his progress. We are not

the target of their pursuit, but the interplay of the two narrative dimensions transforms our reading experience into an analogue of their hunt.[4]

As shadows cast into the surrealistic realm of nightmare, these vignettes exist, like the triune, in the "outer dark" of an already dark narrative. Stylistically, they impose disorienting detours to an alien elsewhere from what otherwise reads like a conventional narrative. At the same time, they eventually function like checkpoints in the plot; although they do not form a pattern, they appear frequently enough to leave a trail. They function primarily to frame and showcase the vengeful onslaught of the triune, but their structural arrangement generates and maintains the tension of pursuit, keeping pace with Culla as he wanders from place to place.[5] If the three men only *seem* to target Culla, the structural interplay of the primary narrative and the shadow vignettes gradually confirms and clarifies the appearance. The boundaries that mark off the surrealistic world of this grim triune are quite volatile; the band of killers occasionally seep out of their shadow-realm, causing a ripple in the world Culla occupies; eventually, they twice cross his aimless path. McCarthy uses their shifting presence to emphasize how the structure of the novel itself textually embodies their pursuit of Culla. This aesthetic principle in *Outer Dark* is more than a metaphor for understanding what happens to Culla as a result of his transgression. In the end, one kind of narrative pursues and overtakes another as the three men become fully present, as if incarnate, to Culla.[6] Once the triune announces itself in the opening vignette, vengeance begins to operate not only as a theme but also as an element of McCarthy's narrative design.

Echoing or overlapping the surrounding plot of the novel, the five remaining shadow-vignettes develop the triune as a shadow phenomenon that haunts the more tangible primary narrative. For instance, the second shadow-vignette shows them go

> *on through the open doors of the barn and almost instantly out the other side marvelously armed with crude agrarian weapons, spade and brush-hook, emerging in an explosion of guineafowl and one screaming sow, unaltered in gait demeanor or speed, parodic figures transposed live and intact and violent out of a proletarian mural and set mobile upon the empty fields, advancing against the twilight*. (35)

They seem unfettered by the limitations of time, transformed almost entirely within the space of the barn. This temporal jump allows us to observe two disparate moments almost simultaneously. Time simply does not pass between their entrance and exit. But when they exit the barn, time seems to come almost to a stand still. The narrative dilates this moment in a series of participles: "*marvelously armed*," "*emerging*," "*unaltered in gait*," "*transposed live*," "*set mobile*," and "*advancing*." At the same time, the phrases built on these participles give the text an inertia that confirms the relentless pace of the triune. They might be captured for a time by an elaborate image, but they have not lost any momentum. Creating the nightmarish aesthetic of this episode, McCarthy distorts time and space to underscore the alien presence of the triune, "*parodic figures transposed live and intact and violent out of a proletarian mural*." This image of motion born of stasis suggests that these figures inhabit a realm in which progress and duration do not always logically coincide. Reinforcing this impression is our double awareness that some days have passed in the story line since Culla awoke from his nightmare and that we have not seen any sign of the triune. They reappear so unaccountably that it seems possible no story time has passed at all between the first two vignettes. By this point in the novel, Culla has set out on his aimless path across the terrain, and perhaps the triune has followed him, but their nearly exclusive existence in this shadow narrative gives them the surreal potential to teleport, as it were, or at least move from place to

place on a different narrative timeline. If their reappearance here seems instantaneously to follow their birth into this shadow realm, it is in line with the nightmarish style in which they are cast. The accumulation of participial images, each one building on the previous, gathering the force of an undeniable presence, seems to communicate their relentless pace. The positive ease with which they arm themselves in this vignette is marked preparation for the onslaught to ensue as they follow Culla, "*seemingly blind with purpose*" (35).

A few pages ahead in the narrative sequence, we find evidence that the triune is actually in close proximity to, and in the same temporal frame as Culla. Being lectured on shiftlessness by the squire, his boastful but magnanimous temporary employer, Culla hears "a commotion of hens from beyond the barn, a hog's squeal" (47). This obscure detail gains significance when we recall the triune "*emerging in an explosion of guineafowl and one screaming sow*" from the barn (35).[7] By reflexive reference, McCarthy reveals the first concrete sign that the triune has made a ripple in Culla's narrative. They remain unseen, but we experience a chilling *déjà-vu*. At the same time, we now can locate the triune in the *material* world of the novel. They are no longer exclusively relegated to the shadow narrative in which they first emerge. In effect, a single detail bridges the conceptual gap between the two realms; it simultaneously announces their arrival and confirms that they have been there all along. Another interesting connection between the two narrative dimensions is the shadow-mural cast by the squire and Culla as they talk: "He looked up at the squire. Their shadows canted upon the whitewashed brick of the kitchen shed in a pantomime of static violence in which the squire reeled backward and he leaned upon him in headlong assault" (47). This "pantomime of static violence" echoes the transposition of the triune "*violent out of a proletarian mural*" (35). The shadow against the kitchen shed wall displays a temporary

role reversal between the rich squire and the destitute wage-earner Culla. Like the victim of a social uprising, the squire is cast in a compromised position, as if threatened by a force unleashed by years of economic oppression. This figuration looks ahead to the next shadow-vignette, where the squire will in fact be violently assaulted. In frightening preparation, McCarthy makes sure to point out that the next morning, before the squire sets out to track Culla for stealing his boots, he notices that his brush-hook is missing (49).[8]

The third shadow-vignette follows a moment in the main narrative when the triune causes more than a ripple; the three men appear there for the first time in bodily form: "The squire at midmorning was following a log road, urging the horse on and the horse already faded to a walk, when they came out of the brush behind him." Even here, "they" emerge out of an unaccountable nowhere. We see them "coming along the road" and eventually "seizing the horse's reins" (50). In response, the squire stands up and reaches for his shotgun, but McCarthy cuts away from the scene before the critical moment. Immediately following, the third vignette shows them entering the woods, "*deployed in the same ragged phalanx while before them passed solitary over no visible road a horse and a wagon surmounted by a harriedlooking man in a white hat*" (51). The events from the previous page are then recast in the surreal realm of the shadow-narrative, which takes the plot further ahead to the moment the head of the triune severs the squire's spine with the stolen brush-hook:

> *They altered their course and came upon a log road down which the wagon receded in two thin tracks and upon a burst lizard who dragged his small blue bowels through the dirt, breaking into a trot, a run, the first of them reaching the horse and seizing the reins and turning up to the driver a mindless smile, clutching the horse's withers and clinging there like some small and vicious anthroparian and the driver rising in*

> *remonstration from the wagon box so that when the next one came up behind him sideways in a sort of dance and swung the brush-hook it missed his neck and took him in the small of the back severing his spine and when he fell he fell unhinged sideways and without a cry*. (51)

This stylistic torrent, rivaling some of McCarthy's most compelling prose, reestablishes, after a brief detour, the absolute supremacy of the triune in their native environment. Their actions have a definite, unyielding purpose and no external arbiter. Dwarfing in tone and diction its temporal counterpart on the opposite page, this vignette is like a textual flood that has finally engulfed the primary narrative. By putting the two overlapping episodes in sequence, McCarthy creates an aesthetic counterpart to the theme of pursuit; consequently, we are literally, through repetition in the act of reading, overtaken and on some level assaulted by a gruesome act of violence.[9] Culla's absence from the scene might even suggest that *we* are in fact the ultimate target of the triune's pursuit, but the squire's recent interaction with Culla seems to be strong enough evidence that they are gravitating toward *him*.

Underscoring this shadowing effect, the relative position of killer and victim when the squire is cut in half recalls the "pantomime of static violence" cast by Culla and the squire on the kitchen shed the night before. As Culla looks up at the squire, his shadow is leaning upon the squire's in "headlong assault" (47). The following day, as if fulfilling some prophecy, the leader of the triune attacks the squire from the ground, reaching up to the wagon with the brush hook. To a certain extent, the triune delivers a proletarian judgment on the squire (harvesting him like one of his crops), releasing Culla from the wrath of a man scorned. From this point of view, their attack has the preemptive function of protecting him from the consequences of his actions. From another point of view, one that actually plays out

as the novel progresses, the triune ends the life of a man Culla has offended to signify their exclusive claim on his punishment.[10] Either way, his assault on the squire from the ground suggests that the head of the triune is not merely following Culla like a shadow on his path. At times, he *becomes* his shadow, the "outer dark" of the fugitive, literally carrying out in this episode the "pantomime" actions of his shadow on the kitchen shed. This positional doubling also draws attention to the nature of the assault. Culla's shadow has the appearance of a reckless, unpremeditated attack: *headlong*. But the triune seems to be in utter control, deployed in strategic combination to stop the buggy and catch the squire off guard. The style of the passage itself seems to mimic both qualities so that we are face to face once again with the unaccountability of the triune. As the vignette textually overwhelms the surrounding narrative, they deliver judgment with a relentless but channeled force.

Although the threesome, to this point, remains unaccountable, even to us, we at least have begun to realize that Culla has more reason to be afraid than we have. At the same time, McCarthy recreates that unease for us through the interplay of narrative and shadow narrative. When the three men first emerge from the shadow dimension into the primary narrative, Culla has yet to discover their existence. He is as unaware of their assault on the squire as he is unaware of the actions of his shadow on the kitchen shed wall. The ironic distance created by his obliviousness maintains a level of suspense for us that is quite distinct from his perpetual unease. Culla is on the run from an unseen force of judgment, but we have witnessed the transposition of that judgment into recognizable force. Culla's ignorance of the triune only intensifies the dread that accompanies our knowledge. We cannot help but remain cognizant of the shadow dimension of this novel as we read, always guessing when the triune will next emerge, alert to details that might otherwise go unnoticed in the narrative stream.

For their proximity to the action in the primary narrative is no longer a matter of conjecture and still far from predictable. Looming over the novel, as a result, is a sense of imminent convergence. McCarthy orchestrates this mystery so well that we are invited to ask in what capacity and for what purpose the triune might eventually be fully present to Culla and, by extension, more accessible to us. Their violence against the squire opens the door to an unknown but irresistible destination. The third vignette is therefore a significant turning point in our reading experience. By confirming the real presence of the triune before showcasing their brutality, McCarthy creates a reading situation in which we might begin to account for our role in this theater of pursuit.

The placement of the fourth vignette scrambles some of the bearings established by the second and third, for it does not contain any events that leak into or double back on the primary narrative. However, it does provide indirect evidence that the triune exerts a drastic influence on Culla and his place in the world he inhabits. The bearded member of the triune, apparently on his own for this occasion, emerges from darkness to join a group of townsmen standing in torchlight around the corpse of the squire:

> *He wore a shapeless and dusty suit of black linen that was small on him and his beard and hair were long and black and tangled. He wore neither shirt nor collar and his bare feet were out at the toes of a pair of handmade brogans. He said nothing. They gave before him until he reached the wagon and stood looking down at the man in the bed of it. They waited, a mass of grave faces. He turned slowly and looked about him. Its old man Salter, one said. Dead. Stobbed and murdered. He nodded. All right, he said. Let's be for finding the man that done it*. (95)

In addition to the corpse of the squire,[11] the clothes on the man clarify the temporal placement of this episode. A few pages earlier in the primary narrative, Culla wanders into a crowd gathered around three disinterred coffins. One of the corpses is missing his coat and pants, and a man near Culla says to him, "I reckon whoever done it will be wearin a black suit" (88). When the bearded man appears later, he is wearing nothing else. The suit is "*shapeless and dusty*" and is "*small on him*" (95). These details indicate that the triune has robbed the graves, but the bearded man is never suspected. Instead, he volunteers to be the protector of civil safety by heading up a party to find the man who killed the squire. The passage suggests that he gains their confidence through some unaccountable compulsion:

> *And in the glare of the torches nothing of his face visible but the eyes like black agates, nothing of his beard or the suit he wore gloss enough to catch the light and nothing about his hulking dusty figure other than its size to offer why these townsmen should follow him along the road this night*. (95)

The crowd naturally gives him sway, perhaps, because he can channel their vengeful energy. Because their resolution is strong but blind, the bearded one can vindicate his own actions by killing again, at once satisfying and exposing the perversion of the crowd's thirst for justice.

Adding to the irony of his power to recruit the very mob he has created is that Culla, for an equally inexplicable reason, has already been accused of robbing the graves from which the bearded man has stolen the suit. Shortly after Culla first looks at the corpses with the rest of the crowd, he becomes the target of suspicion:

> The clerk was talking to a number of men on the porch. When he saw Holme he cut his eyes away quickly. He went on talking. One of the men turned and looked at Holme. . . . After a few minutes two more turned and looked at him. . . . Holme

started across the square, walking slowly. He was listening behind him very hard. When he reached the corner he looked back. Three men were crossing the square at a fast walk. He began to run. (88)

The short direct statements mimic not only the quick exchange of glances but also the slow and gradual awareness that begins to grip Culla. The townsmen come to suspect that he is the thief almost entirely because he is an outsider, but the suspicion is no less real for being misplaced. This scene recalls the nightmare from which Culla awakes at the beginning of the novel, but now he truly is in the surreal position of one being pursued for a crime he did not commit. The stage is set for seeing this connection once the crowd has gathered to look at the corpses:

> There were now several hundred people clustered about the wagon and they began to talk in a rising babble of voices. The sun stood directly over them. It seemed hung there in glaring immobility, as if perhaps arrested with surprise to see above the earth again these odds of morkin once commended there. (87)

The motionless sun and "rising babble of voices" point to images in the earlier passage that have now apparently caught up to him. This textual *déjà-vu* gives prophetic significance to that dream and solidifies the connection between it and the triune on his path. The three townsmen who begin to chase Culla are clearly not the three killers who murder the squire, but the fact that *three* men follow him out of the square is no incidental detail. Rather, the narrative refers back to itself, sometimes even serving as an analogue for what is more intangibly occurring in the *outer dark* portion of the story. In the fourth vignette, when the bearded leader emerges from darkness wearing the black burial suit, we look behind in the text to see Culla on the run and remember that his flight from the law is in some way a flight

engineered and launched by the triune itself, the embodiment of the judgment he dreads so severely for sins over which earthly lawmen have no jurisdiction.

As we look behind and look ahead, gathering details like a tracker, hearing echoes like noises of unknown origin, our reading experience continues to engender another kind of pursuit. The narrative sequence keeps us running from the triune by occasionally dropping fearful signs of their hidden purpose, but it also keeps us moving forward in anticipation of some ultimate incarnation that will shed sufficient light. When the bearded one presents himself to the mob, however, the triune is to some extent, though not fully, demystified. The concrete details of the scene reveal the kind of creature he is. His presence becomes more tangible; his dimensions come into better focus; he speaks to the men with authority, and like converts to a new faith, they believe in him. The mob's perverse confidence ironically lifts him to the status of a prophet or guide who knows the way, echoing once again the nightmare prophet who sinisterly promises Culla, "Yes, I think perhaps you will be cured" (5). He looks as if he has literally risen from the grave, not to the triumphant and purified state of a divine messiah but still covered in the filth and rags of a corpse, come not to save the people from their transgressions but to validate and promote them. As a prophet or messiah, he wields the destructive force of vengeance, not the rejuvenating spirit of forgiveness. He exonerates himself and *extends* the sins of the people. In any case, he never appears to be telling the truth from our point of view because we know that he has killed the squire, but his ability to manipulate a crowd thirsty for vengeance seems born of some irresistible power to expose what is darkest in human nature. The mob, consumed by its own desire to kill, is led astray by the one who should be the target of its outrage. This inversion of justice is so poetically satisfying that we are brought into a kind of intimacy with the bearded leader. His immediate

power to congregate an aimless gathering of vigilantes testifies to his prophet-like demeanor. He seems to know the unknown, to be driven by a dauntless faith to an end that is already written. He simultaneously awaits and brings to pass the inevitable. At the same time, he *is* that end, the very object of his own prophecy, the one who has yet to arrive in the fullness we anticipate. He is the reason we turn the page, our ambassador of resolution. As readers, we might commit to this man because he seems willing to lead us to the judgment he has promised to deliver. Of course, this surrender would imply that we had become thirsty in our own way for vengeance, that we need to see a harsh punishment carried out simply because a transgressor has made an attempt to flee from it.

We do eagerly await the judgment from which Culla seems to be running because his final confrontation will bring closure to the mystery that has hounded us from the beginning of the novel. "*Let's be for finding the man that done it*," the bearded one says. We are permitted to join him now, content to be privy to his secret and protected from blame behind "*his hulking dusty figure*." When the last part of this vignette shows "*hung from a blackhaw tree in a field on the edge of the village the bodies of two itinerant millhands*" (95), we have another image burned into our consciousness, a vision of the narrative future that might take on the material form of a sign, guiding us on a path toward a purposeful end. Five pages later, Rinthy, who is looking for her abandoned child (what might be the only righteous and natural pursuit of the entire novel), sees "two hanged men in a tree like gross chimes." She never seems to be a target of the triune on any level, but her aimless journey to find her baby is wrought with pain (because she cannot relieve the accumulation of milk in her breasts) and desperation (because she knows her child is alive and in danger). She can only wonder "at such dark work in the noon of day" (100). Further on, Culla sees

> a dead tree in a field from which hung the bodies of three men. One was dressed in a dirty white suit. Nothing moved. The buzzards swung away beyond the woods and there was no sound and no movement anywhere. There was only the gradual gathering of light to which these eyeless dead came alien and unreal like figures wandered from a dream. (146)

The third one is Clark, the man who hires Culla the day before to dig graves for the first two in order to satisfy the owner of the field in which the tree stands. Presumably, the triune puts Clark in that tree for the same reason they murder the squire: his association with Culla. We never see the triune kill Clark, but hours before Culla discovers the hanged men, he notices "something fearful" pass on the dark road. He cannot account for it anymore than he can the three men hung in the tree, "like figures wandered from a dream," but we are permitted to read these details like signs of a prophecy on the eve of fulfillment. They are confirmation of a tantalizing belief.

For Culla, as the simile suggests, the image of three men hung in a tree is a strange vision that would more appropriately be found in a dream. They seem to have *wandered* into his world, where "the gradual gathering of light" exposes their alien nature. The irony of this moment goes beyond our knowledge of real danger in the vicinity or our deepening sense that judgment for Culla is close on his trail. The three dead men are unaccountable to Culla for the same reason the murderous triune remains absolutely invisible to him. If we recall the opening shadow-vignette in which the triune, "*strung out in silhouette against the sun*" (3), is first introduced, the three men seem quite literally to be "figures wandered from a dream" (146), especially given the placement of this vignette immediately before the moment Culla wakes from his nightmare. On some level, they embody the relentless pursuit of judgment, in

fear of which Culla has refused to confront his own shame. This fear is quite succinctly displaced into a nightmare that in some other dimension has issued forth the threesome that now hounds him. They are invisible to him, just as traces of their presence are meaningless to him, because he will not or cannot hold himself accountable for the sins he has committed. The judgment Culla dreads is, to him, still only as substantial as a dream. His response to the three dead men in the tree, therefore, is to move on; they constitute no signal for him to contemplate, no trace of a force more powerful than his own abnegation. But for us, the three dead men in the tree are reminders of the living threesome who leave death in their wake, traces of a strange authority that is in fact making its way out of the dubious safety of dreams into the certain danger of a world off track.

Whereas the fourth vignette extends its shadow in several directions and over far textual distances, the fifth vignette has a more immediate connection to a contiguous episode in the main narrative. Some time before Culla meets Clark and is hired to dig graves for the two hanged men, and so before he sees the three dead men in the tree, he happens upon an old man, sitting alone on his porch, who is kind enough to offer him a drink of water. After an uncomfortable delay in his progress down the road, Culla moves on again. We then cross over the threshold into the fifth vignette, which describes the old man's gruesome death at the hands of the bearded one, exceeding the brutality first displayed in the third vignette:

> *Three men mounted the steps and one tapped at the door. And who is there? A minister. Pale lamplight falling down the door, the smiling face, black beard, the tautly drawn and dusty suit of black. Light went in a long bright wink upon the knifeblade as it sank with a faint breath of gas into his belly. . . . Minister? he said. Minister? His assassin smiled upon him with bright teeth, the faces of the other two*

> *peering from either shoulder in consubstantial monstrosity, a grim triune that watched wordless, affable. He looked down at the man's fist cupped against his stomach. The fist rose in an eruption of severed viscera until the blade seized in the junction of his breastbone and he stood disemboweled*. (129)

Unlike the third vignette, which contains details that temporally overlap a contiguous episode, the fifth does not clearly indicate when the murder takes place in relation to Culla's departure. Night has fallen, and they *seem* to arrive on the same day because of where the episode is placed in the text. Moreover, immediately following this shadow passage, the main narrative picks up where it leaves off two pages earlier, possibly indicating that the triune arrives on the same night Culla is walking down the road only hours after meeting the old man: "He kept walking after the sun was down. There were no more houses" (131). This temporal ambiguity only sharpens our focus on the spatial clarity of the scene. The triune seems more like a shadow of Culla here than at any earlier point in the novel. As if filling in a void that he has left behind, they stand exactly where he is standing only one page earlier. When they come to the porch, the old man's hounds descend "*into the outer dark*" (129). This metaphorical reference suggests that the realm from which the triune has emerged to kill the old man is not all that different from the nameless landscape Culla has been aimlessly traversing all along. Although they still inhabit the shadow dimension of the text when they knock on the old man's door, their "*consubstantial monstrosity*" suggests they are somehow gradually materializing, on the verge of rebirth from a quasi-spiritual shadow world into a world of flesh and blood. The possibility that they and Culla are beginning to share (or have always shared) a single realm of darkness reinforces the idea that the shadow narrative of the triune has been closing in on the primary narrative of the fugitive. As readers, we participate

in this textual pursuit by default, but we also, as a result, look ahead to the imminent meeting of Culla and the triune. Our reading experience mirrors our growing desire for resolution.

The language of the fifth vignette brings the religious overtones of the previous shadow episodes to a more audible pitch, reinforcing the prophet-proselyte relationship that has begun to develop between the bearded killer and the reader. Having learned to look ahead and knowing what to expect from the triune, we seal the violent fate of the old man as soon as Culla stops to converse with him. So the brutality of the fifth vignette, let alone the triune's appearance on the old man's porch, comes as no surprise. We are not particularly overwhelmed, perhaps, by the carnage. But this shadow episode openly invites us into a state of reflective accountability that is startling: "*And who is there? A minister*." Following a vague and innocuous description of the threesome as seen by the old man "*through the warped glass of his small window*" (129), these words are a secondhand rendering of a spoken exchange between the old man behind the door and the bearded killer on the front porch. But they also read like words addressed to an inquiring audience, as if the narrator has himself emerged from the outer dark to testify that we are much more closely involved in the events of this shadow dimension than we have been before: "*And who is there*?" The old man's dialect would have transformed this phrase into a more vernacular register. Read in narrative form, these words compose a rhetorical question meant to indulge some kind of anticipatory excitement; consequently, the narrator shows us that we are, in fact, being held to account for our excitement by some other presence in our reading situation. We *already* know who is there, so the question reinforces our yearning for the inevitable. But the answer to the question, "*A minister*," suggests another possibility, that the narrator is appealing to a new curiosity: who will the bearded man pretend to be this time? We are told by the narrator,

at the same time that the bearded man responds to the old man's inquiry from inside the house, that he is impersonating a minister.

He becomes who he needs to become to gain access to the old man, an audience of one to whom he will testify in a language that we have had to learn to read in this novel: brutality. As a minister, the bearded killer might be understood to be wielding the word of God, but in this vignette, he uses no words: "*Light went in a long bright wink upon the knifeblade as it sank with a faint breath of gas into his belly*" (129). In the Book of Hebrews, "the word of God" is the ultimate tool of accountability because it penetrates more deeply than language alone: "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" (4.12-13). McCarthy literalizes the figurative dimension of this metaphor and has this minister actually wield a blade. The killer testifies to his own ability to judge by laying bare the insides of the old man, not as punishment but as demonstration. The old man is appropriately skeptical: "*Minister? he said. Minister?*" (129). His killer seems to be no minister at all. And with the old man, we might ask, "what kind of minister delivers this kind of sermon?" But knowing, with more certainty now, that this threesome is en route to a destination we have grown desperate to reach, we might ask instead, "what kind of sermon must we prepare ourselves to hear from this kind of minister?"[12]

Like a thief in the night, the bearded one knocks on the old man's door and, in mock benediction, shortly after inserting the blade, smiles "*upon him with bright teeth, the faces of the other two peering from either shoulder in consubstantial monstrosity, a grim triune that*

watched wordless, affable" (129). The only blessing he can offer is a brutal execution, but the way is prepared for us to witness the ceremonial qualities of this encounter. The narrator transforms what might have been merely another assassination into a symbolic ritual, for which we are the primary audience. Containing words that place before us a "*wordless*" triune, the narrative invites us to look away from words momentarily to consider how the act of reading might resemble participation in a ritual, how we might surrender to an experience of the unutterable once it has been delivered to us by words. Standing on this side of a text before which no reader seems able to hide, we might entertain the notion that McCarthy has momentarily played double to the old man's assassin and impersonated a minister. Wielding his own "two-edged sword," he has the narrator address the audience directly in order to lay bare that part of us that has committed to the ritual being played out on the altar to which we have come. When the old man steps back from the doorjamb, "*as if to let them pass,*" we stand with the wordless triune in front of an opening made accessible by our growing faith in the judgment that awaits Culla on the other side.

Indeed, the murderous threesome, now a consubstantial triune, has passed through the proverbial door when they finally cross paths with Culla. Like a prophecy fulfilled, they become flesh and blood, as it were, entering into the main narrative. In the nightmare that conjures this triune into existence at the beginning of the novel, the prophet tells Culla, "Yes, I think perhaps you will be cured" (5). The meaning of this prophecy, mysterious at first, gradually takes form through the series of vignettes in which we see the triune deliver a strange sentence on particular individuals who cross paths with Culla. When the bearded killer ultimately assumes the role of minister in the fifth vignette, the prophecy that has guided our reading of the novel takes on an even more sinister tone of irony. The ambiguity

of “perhaps” is extended by the ambiguity of “cured,” a word normally associated with the end of a physical disease, sanctification of the spirit, or delivery from some sort of affliction. In each case, the cure is a form of salvation, the restoration to health of one who is sick. But the triune of *Outer Dark* is a scourge that represents judgment, not salvation; if the bearded killer *is* a messiah, he brings a strange sort of salvation, removing souls rather than restoring them. When Culla asks whether he can be cured in his dream, the response of the prophet might be a twist on the supposed object of “cure”: to cure Culla might *not* be to cure him of sickness but to cure the sickness that *is* Culla. This ambiguity locks us in a double bind that makes our allegiance uncertain and unstable. Do we align ourselves with the triune, whose rampage is horrifying but seems to promise accountability, or do we extend our sympathy to Culla, hoping for his deliverance from what will likely be a gruesome punishment? Whether we recognize it at the start or in hindsight, this dilemma is an integral factor in the emotional conversion some of us undergo when we begin to run *after* Culla and stop running *with* him.

Moments before Culla actually meets the three men, he spots a campfire from the deck of a makeshift river ferry that has broken loose midstream: “Some trees passed across the front of the fire and he thought they were men and then a man did cross it, an upright shape that seemed to be convulsed there for a moment before going from sight like something that had incinerated itself.” After his request for rescue is answered, he sees “three men standing on the bank of the river in the gentle rain with the fire behind them projecting their shapes outward into soaring darkness and with no dimension to them at all” (168). McCarthy seems to extract as much irony from this occasion as possible, having the triune gradually “materialize” into a narrative realm that has been little more than haunted by *signs* of their existence. Before he throws his line to them, Culla hesitates: “He was trying to see

them but they were only silhouettes" (169). His fear again has a stronger foundation than he can know; somehow, though he cannot account for them, he can sense that these men are, like the three corpses hanging from the tree, "alien and unreal like figures wandered from a dream" (146). His uncertainty reflects a troubling shift in the narrative continuum, a shift that cannot occur without due preparation. When they hitch him to the shore, he has not seen them as they are, nor does their shadowy dimension fuse with his narrative completely until he enters the fire ring, when they come into clear focus:

> When he entered the little clearing there were only two of them standing there. One was holding a rifle loosely in one hand and picking his teeth. The other stood with long arms dangling at his sides, slightly stooped, his jaw hanging and mouth agape in a slavering smile. . . . The third one was standing just in the rim of light to his left, watching him. He was dressed in a dark and shapeless suit that could not have buttoned across his chest and he wore a shirt with some kerchief or rag knotted at the neck. His face scowled redly out of a great black beard. (169-70)

These details on a first read might appear to constitute a classical peripeteia, pointing to some unexpected twist of fate, but the narrative structure maintaining the flight-pursuit sensation throughout the novel should have prepared us in this moment to feel something other than surprise. On a second read, we certainly share the reaction of the three men, who watch Culla with an intent curiosity but seem utterly prepared to receive him.

When the bearded one speaks to Culla, his sardonic tone conveys a feeling of satisfaction by which we are both frightened and fascinated, as if a sinister plan carefully engineered is on the brink of fulfillment. Of particular interest is his philosophy of naming because it recalls and brings into sharp relief Culla's primary transgression: his desire to

leave his child nameless in the woods. The bearded one, though without a name himself, first compels Culla to reveal his:

> You've set there and dried and warmed and et but you've not said your name. A feller didn't know he'd think you wanted it kept for a secret.
>
> I don't care to tell it, Holme said. Folks don't commonly ast, where I come from.
>
> We ain't in them places, the man said.
>
> Holme, Holme said.
>
> Holme, the man repeated. The word seemed to feel bad in his mouth. He jerked his head vaguely toward the one with the rifle. That'n ain't got a name, he said. He wanted me to give him one but I wouldn't do it. He don't need nary. You ever seen a man with no name afore?
>
> No.
>
> No, the man said. Not likely.
>
> Holme looked at the one with the rifle.
>
> Everything don't need a name, does it? the man said.
>
> I don't know. I don't reckon.
>
> I guess you'd like to know mine, wouldn't ye?
>
> I don't care, Holme said.
>
> I said I guess you'd like to know mine wouldn't ye?
>
> Yes, Holme said.
>
> The man's teeth appeared and went away again as if he had smiled. Yes, he said. I expect they's lots would like to know that. (174-75)

We certainly would. Referring both to the mute imbecile and himself, the bearded one adds, "Some things is best not named." And long after the conversation has drifted away from names entirely, he returns to the subject without warning, as if nothing that has been said in the interim can mask its significance: "I wouldn't name him because if you cain't name somethin you cain't claim it. You cain't talk about it even. You cain't say what it is" (177). This *non sequitur* suggests that the bearded one has a lock on Culla's main insecurity, the guilt that has haunted him from the beginning. At the same time, we come face to face with our own desire to know the name of this prophet-minister-killer figure when we are forced to accept the mystery. On the one hand, an inability to say what something is might free one from having to own it or from trying to account for it; upon meeting the bearded one, Culla is frustrated in his attempt to liberate himself by leaving his child nameless. On the other hand, our *need* to name that which cannot or should not be named reveals a deeper evasion of responsibility; by naming the unnamable, we might keep ourselves from complete surrender to the ritual we have come to witness. And denied his name, we are reminded of the many attempts we have made to name him ourselves, perhaps to identify him or validate his actions but more likely to lighten the burden of having to understand him or, worse, identify *with* him. Without a name, we cannot claim him, talk about him, or even say what he is; with a name, we might have been able to keep our distance.

Instead, we are drawn further into mystery because Culla is allowed to live; in fact, the three men exact little more punishment than to force him to participate in a cyclical boot exchange, a ceremony in which Culla must ultimately trade the boots he steals from the squire for the shoddy pair worn by the mute member of the triune. The bearded one uses this

mock-ritual to assert his authority over Culla and to reinforce the issue of accountability addressed earlier in their conversation about naming:

> You don't have much to say, do ye? the man said.
>
> No.
>
> I guess you think maybe you and me should of traded.
>
> I don't care, Holme said.
>
> I believe in taking care of my own, the man said. That's the way I think.
>
> Ever man thinks his own way, Holme said.
>
> Leave him alone Harmon. (180-81)

The bearded one has delivered his sermon, and perhaps *because* it falls on deaf ears, he wants Culla to remain alive for a subsequent encounter. And McCarthy would have us maintain our faith in the outcome we have come to expect: some kind of binding punishment on the man who has *not* taken care of his own. The bearded one can tell that Culla is withholding the truth about his sister Rinthy, whom he claims has run off with the tinker: "That ain't all, is it? the man said." The secret remains unspoken when the triune departs, but we sense that the leader can see it as clearly as we know it and is not finished with Culla. Indeed, the ritual that he will administer to Culla the second time they meet carries a far more horrifying and direct message than a forced boot trade or suggestive interrogation.

In order to prime us for this second meeting, the sixth and final vignette gives us one final look at the shadow realm from which the triune has emerged. Carrying the child, the tinker pulls his cart into a campsite recently departed, his arrival announced by the same religious diction that ushers in the triune at the beginning of the novel:

> *What discordant vespers do the tinker's goods chime through the long twilight and over the brindled forest road, him stooped and hounded through the windy recrements of day like those old exiles who divorced of corporeality and enjoined ingress of heaven and hell wander forever the middle warrens spoorless increate and anathema. Hounded by grief, by guilt, or like this cheerless vendor clamored at heel through wood and fen by his own querulous and inconsolable wares in perennial tin malediction*. (229)

On one level, we are being summoned to an evening worship service, the tinker's tin wares announcing the ritual to take place only pages ahead. At the same time, the vespers on this occasion are noticeably discordant and delivered by a tinker "*stooped and hounded*," likened to a spiritual exile compelled to wander by the curse that follows him. We have a moment to reflect on *our* motivation, to consider what hounds us, to wonder whether we are on the path of the faithful, drawn to the possibility of redemption, or compelled merely to outlast some indefatigable shame, our fascination with the perverse. Because the answer lies ahead in the text, an integral part of our preparation for the ritual is a commitment to confront ourselves, whatever we might discover. When the tinker sees where the "*shapes of risen sleepers lay in the pressed and poisoned grass*," we know that the final threshold has been crossed. These imprints are nearly all that remain of the triune in this dimension. They do sneak back in to kill the tinker and steal the child, the custody of whom is necessary to fulfill their purpose, but when they appear, they seem alien and inappropriate: "*The three men when they came might have risen from the ground. The tinker could not account for them*" (229). Reinforcing the textual transfer that has already occurred, they appear only for an instant, unaccountably, the way they appear in the main narrative several times earlier in the novel. In possession of

the child, the three men are armed with the most powerful weapon that they can use against Culla: his unnamed son.

As if to emphasize that we have ourselves crossed an irreversible threshold when we turn the page, Culla stumbles into their presence again almost immediately. They are seated around the same fire where they kill the tinker on the previous page, but the scene is an eerie echo of their first meeting with Culla some weeks earlier: "He looked at them. They wore the same clothes, sat in the same attitudes, endowed with a dream's redundancy. Like revenants that reoccur in lands laid waste with fever: spectral, palpable as stone." In keeping with their theophanic quality, the three men are this time likened to resurrected creatures. They are both ghostlike and material, a manifestation, somewhere between the spiritual dimension and the natural world, of Culla's nightmare of judgment. Apparently, Culla has been careful to avoid crossing their path again, but the narrator so abruptly sets the scene that it carries the weight of inevitability:

> When he saw what figures warmed there he was already among them and it was too late. There were three of them and there was a child squatting in the dust and beyond them the tinker's cart with the hung pans catching the light like the baleful eyes of some outsized and mute and mindless jury assembled there hurriedly against his coming. (231)

We are made to focus on the child almost exclusively, its presence burned into our minds as Culla himself is at last confronted with a now grotesque and mutilated version of the new born babe he has left behind:

> He looked at the child. It had a healed burn all down one side of it and the skin was papery and wrinkled like an old man's. It was naked and half coated with dust so that

it seemed lightly furred and when it turned to look up at him he saw one eyeless and angry red socket like a stokehole to a brain in flames. He looked away. (231-32)

Even in our disgust, the vision captivates our attention because as we piece together what must have been done to this child, we also remember that we have willingly arrived at this brink of resolution. The brutal description carries the same theophanic weight that we have come to associate with the triune, shifting our eyes momentarily away from their incarnation as a force of vengeance to the meekness of an innocent made to suffer for the transgression of his father. The child's fate is tied to the judgment that the three men have been charged to deliver. And Culla has been summoned to this makeshift court to witness, in iconic fashion, the fulfillment of his deepest wish: the end of the sickness that has hounded him from the start.

Culla's first words are evidence enough to convict him: "Whose youngern? he said." Even the mindless thug can see through Culla's pretense: "Harmon guffawed and slapped his thigh" (232). The interrogation that follows, conducted by the bearded one as before, only draws out his testimony so that we, gathered to watch the proceedings of this trial, can witness his last effort to escape accountability. For example, he asks, "What happent to his eye?" Playing judge and prophet at once, the bearded one turns the question back on Culla and redirects the point to a philosophical conclusion:

What eye.

His eye. He gestured. The one he ain't got.

I reckon he must of lost it somewheres. He still got one.

He ort to have two.

Maybe he ort to have more'n that. Some folks has two and cain't see. (232)

Culla has no response perhaps because he cannot follow the argument, but he might simply see the trap set before him and retreat to safety. But the point is made clear that Culla is either blind or refusing to look at his own guilt. Pressed to answer for his presence in this barbaric court, Culla further exercises denial:

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

Culla's attempt to divert the rhetorical direction of the interrogation is countered by another diversion meant to establish definitively the undeniable authority before him. Culla is indeed bound by his own desire to flee because he has gone nowhere beyond the grasp of judgment.

The pressing question for us in this moment is whether we are the charged members of an "outsized and mute and mindless jury" or curious spectators in an audience who know the truth already; stepping back further to reflect on the act of reading itself, we might ask whether, in terms of accountability, being a spectator in an audience is categorically different from being on a jury. The occasion seems to call for our participation in the judgment, not mere observation of its execution. Culla has no advocate in this situation; we are permitted to

witness his pretense and even enjoy the futility of his diversions. All he can do is deny what is plainly true to the triune and the rest of us. When finally asked to account for his incest and abandonment, Culla tries to hide what he actually has done by denying a false accusation:

> I figure you got this thing here in her belly your own self and then laid it off on that tinker.
>
> I never laid nothin off on no tinker.
>
> I reckon you figured he'd keep him hid for ye.
>
> I never figured nothin.
>
> What did ye have to give him?
>
> I never give nobody nothin. I never had nothin.
>
> Never figured nothin, never had nothin, never was nothin, the man said. He was looking at nothing at all. (233)[13]

He cannot say, in his defense, "I only left it in the woods," but his denial is tantamount to an involuntary confession in the ears of the judge. For us, his denial is nothing more than an extension of his flight because we have not had to "figure" anything about Culla's actions. They have been narrated to us. What we know, however, is eerily similar to what the bearded one suspects to be true. He does not know what the narrator knows, but he seems to know more than he would if he were a mere mortal: "What are you? Holme muttered" (234). We have the same question throughout the novel because what we know about Culla's actual guilt seems otherwise inaccessible to all but the narrator and Culla himself. We have had to "figure" what the triune is, from where the men have come, by whom they have been sent, and for what purpose they have pursued Culla. So we retain the point of view around this campfire court of a jury charged with observing testimony, weighing evidence, and assessing

credibility. We are granted the authority of higher judgment but denied the ability to exercise it in a way that might shape the outcome of this story; beyond the determination of guilt or innocence, we come face to face with the sentence as it is carried out, powerless to guide its direction.

Yet we expect the sentence to end in Culla's execution, to which we might not object in the least. The dramatic irony generated in this scene by our spectatorship seems channeled toward this inevitability, and we have witnessed too many other executions in preparation for his own brutal demise. The final stage of this ritual, however, is more a test of our resolve than a direct punishment. When forced to hand over the child to the bearded one, Culla reveals the protective instincts of a father; for a moment, we see fear beneath his hardness:

> What do you want with him? Holme said.
>
> Nothin. No more than you do.
>
> He ain't nothin to me.
>
> No.
>
> Where's that tinker at if he was raisin him?
>
> He's all raised out. He cain't raise no more.
>
> You don't need him.
>
> Water in the summer and fire in the winter is all the need I need. We ain't talking about what I need. . . . That ain't what's concerned.
>
> No.
>
> You ain't no different from the rest. From any man borned and raised and have his own and die. They ain't one man in three got even a black suit to die in.

Holme stood with his feet together and his hands at his sides like one arraigned.

What's his name? he said.

I don't know.

He ain't got nary'n.

No. I don't reckon. I don't know.

They say people in hell ain't got names. But they had to be called something to get sent there. Didn't they.

That tinker might of named him.

It wasn't his to name. Besides names dies with the namers. . . . He reached and drew from his boot a slender knife. (235-36)

By asking for the name of the child, the bearded one extends what might be his first gesture of mercy. He has primed Culla for the ultimate act of resignation and atonement: confession. When he pleads ignorance, the ritual runs its course almost automatically, without mercy. Despite his pleading, Culla must watch his unclaimed son be sacrificed on an unholy altar:

Harmon was watching the man. Even the mute one stirred. The man took hold of the child and lifted it up. It was watching the fire. Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a long cat's eye slant and malevolent and a dark smile erupted on the child's throat and went all broken down the front of it. The child made no sound. It hung there with its one eye glazing over like a wet stone and the black blood pumping down its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. He was drooling and making little whimpering noises in his throat. He knelt with his hands outstretched and his nostrils

rimpled delicately. The man handed him the child and he seized it up, looked once at Holme with witless eyes, and buried his moaning face in its throat. (236)

Readers with religious sensitivity will no doubt recognize and perhaps lament the Eucharistic reference in this scene. The bloody death of the child at the hands of the bearded leader is reminiscent of its birth: the child comes into the world "through in a pumping welter of blood" (14) and finally hangs in silence with its throat slashed, "the black blood pumping down its belly" (236). The mute member of the triune is given the child for feeding, and the scene closes with a demonic parody of sacramental communion, which is effortlessly transformed here from a means of grace to an act of judgment.[14] Incarnate forms themselves, the three men perform in the physical realm a violation equivalent to the one that Culla has perpetrated in the spiritual realm. But the sacrifice is merely a demonstration, and the scene ends before we see any reaction from the father.[15] Without a point of reference to gauge the intended outcome of this ritual, we are suddenly made to see these events unfold not as a jury but as the accused. Our reaction must suffice, if any reaction is to be had.

But this change in point of view is the key to McCarthy's ethical achievement in *Outer Dark*: to confront his readers with a puzzling dilemma of allegiance. If we are not utterly repulsed by McCarthy himself (and I do not think we should be), we might at least feel led astray by the murderous threesome we at some point have made a commitment to follow. When we are made to stand in the place of the accused, we are made to feel the weight of a sin we have not committed. From there, we need not step very far to associate our burden with Culla's suffering and begin to see Culla as a victim of inhumane treatment. At the same time, we might begin looking for a way in which we have been guilty of a similar sin, albeit a sin in the literary dimension: hasty allegiance. Our hunger for resolution, when

so closely tied to vengeful sentiments, is the mindless urge of an audience caught up in a fiction. We offer ourselves to the bearded killer, whose charisma and sheer brutality can seduce a mob and somehow promise satisfaction. The brutality we are made to watch in the sacrifice of a child is beyond the pale, but our disgust is heightened partly by the sudden realization that we are engaged in the image. From McCarthy's point of view, have we relinquished an essential responsibility? Are we made to *feel* like fugitives, or have we been on the run from an original violation? If we are guilty of hasty allegiance, especially allegiance to an idea, we should be able to sympathize with Culla's need to abandon his deepest fear in the woods. Our confrontation during the ritual is a way of revisiting the dilemma of allegiance that we have left behind. When we tilt the delicate balance between Culla's flight and the triune's pursuit in favor of the promise of resolution, we simplify a complex situation and place ourselves on the path of least resistance. At the end of that path is a renewal of difficulty, where the act of reading is realigned with the *problem* of ethical commitment: the occasion of choice, not the choice made. This narrative terminal is so abrupt and disorienting that McCarthy seems to have anticipated that we might be looking for a more harmonious cadence, or at least some validation for our commitment to justice. Instead, we are made witnesses to a greater injustice that casts doubt on our allegiance and threatens our confidence.

Shaken by this narrative reversal, having endured the same assault as the fugitive we have held in judgment, our new dilemma is not unlike Culla's at the beginning of the novel. His essential crime is to leave his child unnamed, to shield himself from the consequences of his own nature and the choices that come out of that nature: the child left anonymous and exposed in the woods is the offspring of a shameful sexual act. When he retreats and begins

his flight, he disowns his original sin of incest and violates the more fundamental standard of integrity and self-judgment. He cannot bear the guilt, so he decides to turn away. The triune makes him pay by exposing to him the full picture of his abnegation. The three men are not sent to protect the child but to guarantee that Culla lives through and is given an opportunity to *see*, if not name, the ugliness of denial. He runs because he knows that to name his child is to admit that the child belongs to him, that he is bound by the promise of fatherhood to bear the weight of his shame. His resignation has an analogue in the world of literary engagement, especially in our engagement with *Outer Dark*. Whatever our response to the ritual sacrifice of the babe might be, layers of ethical difficulty account for the troubling unease surrounding that response. The most immediate response is probably disgust, an emotion visceral enough to cloud any other possible assessment.[16] Unnerved by the brutality, we might raise questions about authorial decency. Even if we stay within the world of the novel, we ponder questions of allegiance and justice, blame and punishment, raised by the symbolism of the scene. But ultimately, the narrative germinates a more fundamental dilemma related to our willingness to extend our engagement with the text. Our resolve as readers need not coincide with our personal sense of propriety or fair play. If this story takes a turn that upsets our expectations, it calls attention to the less predictable contingencies involved in the act of reading. If this story shifts the direction of judgment from protagonist to reader, it calls attention to choices of allegiance made in the act of reading and invites us to embrace the consequences. The ethical dimension of our reading experience is not so much a question of whether we choose right but whether we confront the difficulty of having to choose in the first place. At the most troubling turn in the novel, denied the resolution we thought we were promised, we must resolve not to flee.[17]

We fail in this commitment by refusing to name the experience we have undergone or by giving it a name that relieves our guilt or emotional confusion. Indeed, if we cross the threshold and watch the ritual unfold, the consequence is to witness a dreadful climax and bear the weight of a new fictional imprint, an unprecedented image of brutality. Yet the act of reading itself, propelled by a desire to see judgment take its course, has brought us to this place. An additional burden is created by a flood of questions that are virtually impossible to answer with any level of certainty. Is this assault a test? Does it teach us a lesson? Does it generate sympathy for Culla? Is it a cheap thrill of terror? Is it disrespectful imagery? Does it satisfy a sick-minded hunger to watch and revel in destruction? Does it *promote* violence? Is it twisted "evil"? Or is it the fictional display of "evil," exposed for what it is to an audience who would otherwise remain sheltered behind more appealing notions of human depravity? Overwhelmed by the complexity of these questions, we might look for a way to streamline our response, to simplify the narrative by reconstituting its elements into a more recognizable mold. The world of *Outer Dark* presents such an interpretive temptation. The mythical setting permits allegorical reading at every turn. Both placeless and timeless, the nowhere landscape traversed by Culla during his flight is a fitting arena for the penance of a sinner; he has nowhere to go and so must in the end face himself. On another level, the novel might garner praise (or criticism) for its bold vision of godless existence. If we assign each of its motifs a proportional role in telling the story of flight from guilt and eventual payment for sin, the novel starts to look like a tool for proselytizing a ready audience. Indeed, *Outer Dark* has been called a moral parable, a tale of retribution set in a fallen world, and a biblical parody about the universality of evil.[18] Although these labels point to significant elements of our experience with this novel, they carry the added convenience, when applied definitively,

of keeping us at a safe distance from questions that are central not only to the drama that unfolds in the narrative but also to a responsible evaluation of our role in that drama.[19]

From this removed vantage point, "evil" or "sin" is useful as a theme that drives the conflict of a meaningful story and prepares the way for an edifying resolution. But although the narrative of *Outer Dark* has a quasi-apocalyptic, ominous quality that provokes thought about the human condition, it dramatizes no life-changing epiphanies. The chronology of the novel resembles the paradigm of Christian teleology: Culla's sin is born in the beginning; he tries to destroy it and fails; he is pursued by his own sense of guilt; and in the end he faces judgment and indirect punishment. Perhaps he is purified by fire, as it were. But he remains an unguided journeyman as the novel comes to a close:

> before him under the high afternoon sun his shadow be-wandered in a dark parody of his progress. . . . Late in the day the road brought him into a swamp. And that was all. Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned. . . . He wondered why a road should come to such a place. (242)

Having turned back, Culla laments the uncertain fate of a blind man on the same path: "He wondered where the blind man was going and did he know how the road ended. Someone should tell a blind man before setting him out that way" (242). So the novel ends with a proverbial statement, but the origin of the words remains unclear. If they express the actual thoughts running through Culla's mind, we might consider that our fugitive has developed an ability to empathize. Having been made to see, perhaps he remembers a time when he was in the dark. Alternatively, Culla might see his own blindness for the first time, acknowledging with sober vision his incurable forsakenness. But the statement could as well be a narratorial

assessment made for the sake of the reader: "someone *should*," but no one can. From this point of view, the ending leaves us on the border of a "spectral waste," unguided and alone.[20]

When Culla asks the blind man, who claims to be "at the Lord's work," if he is a preacher, the blind man gives voice to the ambiguities that shroud the ending: "No. No preacher. What is they to preach? It's all plain enough. Word and flesh. I don't hold much with preachin" (240). On this side of a pivotal sacrifice, we are left without an explanation because, perhaps, we are meant to see *only* what is already plainly true and to refrain from a yearning to see that which is beyond our limitation. Culla himself gives voice to what might be a spiritually unsatisfied feeling shared by many readers of this novel when he asks why the blind man does not pray for sight: "I believe you'd like to see your way." The blind man will not pray for that kind of vision because he would be sinning to pray for what he does not need: "What needs a man to see his way when he's sent there anyhow?" (241). Sensing that Culla is obsessed with the idea of being cured, the blind man describes a memory that eerily echoes the nightmare that haunts Culla at the beginning of the novel:

> I heard a preacher in a town one time, he said. A healin preacher wanted to cure everybody and they took me up there. They was a bunch of us there all cripple folks and one old man they did claim had thowed down his crutches and they told it he could make the blind see. And they was a feller leapt up and hollered out that nobody knowed what was wrong with. And they said it caused that preacher to go away. But they's darksome ways afoot in this world and it may be he weren't no true preacher.
>
> I got to get on, Holme said.
>
> I always did want to find that feller, the blind man said. And tell him. If somebody don't tell him he never will have no rest. (241)

The blind man wants to tell “that feller,” who might very well be standing before him now, that he was denied a cure for his affliction only because the preacher who could not help him might have been an imposter. The obvious irony is that there is no preacher, genuine or not, who can cure the affliction that causes Culla to suffer. Likewise, we are denied a resolution for our dilemma not because McCarthy has only pretended to guide us in that direction but because some tensions must remain taut. The narrative ending in *Outer Dark* challenges the presupposition that the ethical value of a story exclusively resides in its cathartic release. To wait for or manufacture that release when we should rather ponder its absence is tantamount to the ineffectual prayers of the faithless.

McCarthy is no preacher himself, but he is a kind of literary disciplinarian. He does not try to communicate a particular message, but he wants us to experience how dangerous it can be to pray for the wrong kind of vision. To look for a redemptive purpose in *Outer Dark* is to feel more deeply the vengeful assault of McCarthy’s aesthetics of pursuit because when we are denied that edification, the undeniable ugliness of the story becomes more concrete. The irreducible difficulty of that ugliness, of reading about it, breaks through any decorative wall of interpretation we might erect. Culla wants to assume that a man “at the Lord’s work” must be a preacher, but the old man deflects the question by pointing to a central mystery, like a writer asked about the meaning of his own creation: “It’s all plain enough. Word and flesh.” McCarthy might say that the pursuit of the unholy triune is plain enough, though utterly mysterious. We have been spurred by that mystery to keep reading. Despite the dread mixed in with our longing, we choose to continue reading because we would rather reach the destination of the triune than be left without an answer. But even after we witness the ritual, we have no clear answer, only a renewed sense of difficulty. In the end, we might benefit

more from seeing how the pursuit is a way of telling a story whose ethical purpose lies in the way it must be read, according to its own internal principles, rather than in an unmistakable message communicated by its content. The didactic "usefulness" of the story proper in *Outer Dark* is ambiguous, in so far as we have no reference point on which to base our allegiance to one character or another, but the novel is a potent exercise in reading because it reinforces at every turn the various ways a reader must live with a certain level of blindness.

Near the beginning of the novel, before the child enters the world, McCarthy directs our attention to the act of reading itself. When the tinker first meets Culla, he tries to sell him some pornographic material:

> He motioned with crook'd forefinger. I'll just show ye, he said. Here.
>
> What is it?
>
> The tinker reached down among his traps, groping in a greasy duck sack. He brought forth a small pamphlet and handed it slyly to the man.
>
> The man stared at it, thumbed it open, riffled the crudely printed butcherpaper.
>
> Can ye cipher?
>
> Naw. Not good.
>
> Don't matter noway, the tinker said. It's got pitchers. Here. He reached the book from the man and taking a confiding stance at his side flipped the book open to a sorry drawing of a grotesquely coital couple.
>
> What about that? said the tinker. (8)

Culla wants nothing to do with the words or pictures, pushing the pamphlet away from him. Looking back on this moment from the end of the novel, we can entertain the possibility that McCarthy has offered us a chance to admit that "ciphering" is not our forte and we would

rather not be subjected to disgusting pictures. This reference to at least two common ways of reading foreshadows two salient requirements of the narrative to come: reading signs in the text to trace the pursuit of the triune and enduring horrific scenes of violent brutality. This analogical reference to reading continues when, the morning after Culla leaves his child in the woods, we see the tinker following his tracks. When those tracks cease without explanation, the tinker says, "Whoa now. . . . Which way we a-goin here?" He picks up the track again on the other side of the creek: "Ah, he said. We a-takin to the deep pineys" (19). The confusion he experiences in the woods is another comment on the level of control we can claim or the level of certainty we can expect in the act of reading:

> After he had gone a mile or so he ran out of any kind of track at all. He circled and returned, finding nothing. Finally he crossed the branch and went down the far side and very soon he came upon the tracks again. He followed them into a small clearing and here they ceased. He looked about him. It appeared to be the same place in which the tracks coming up the near side had vanished. As if their maker had met in this forest some dark other self in chemistry with whom he had been fused traceless from the earth. Then he heard the child cry. (19-20)

The tinker is led to the crying child without knowing how close he is to the destination of the track. He arrives at a clearing that he would not find if he were unwilling to follow tracks that made no sense to him. From this point of view, to "cipher" means to discover rather than to explain or understand. This idea extends to our act of reading. If we reach the end of the novel and then retreat from the mystery that becomes fully present to us, we will not see that the message of this novel is not hidden beneath "outlandish symbols in the dust" but openly articulated in the criss-crossed tracks created in this theatre of pursuit (27).

McCarthy draws further attention to the significance of tracks and tracking in the novel when he gives detailed descriptions of the brindled roads traveled by the characters. On his way to some unnamed destination, Culla pauses for a moment in one of the few named locations in *Outer Dark*:

> When he did reach Preston Flats the town looked not only uninhabited but deserted, as if plague had swept and decimated it. He stood in the center of the square where the tracks of commerce lay fossilized in dried mud all about him, turning, an amphitheatrical figure in that moonwrought waste manacled to a shadow that struggled grossly in the dust. (131)

The road traveled by the tinker is equally hardened, creating an uneven, destabilizing surface that requires focused effort to maneuver:

> The mud in the road had cured up into ironhard rails and fissures which carts and wagons had cloven in the wet weather past and the tinker's cart bobbled drunkenly among them with the tinker shackled between the shafts and leaning into the harness he had devised for himself. He was looking at nothing other than the road beneath him and when the girl spoke to him he started in his traces like one wrenched from a trance and halted and looked about. (184)

In both cases, the tracks are anonymous evidence, signs of an earlier presence that yield no meaningful interpretation. Culla is surrounded by them, directionless, and the tinker must struggle without sure footing.

Tracing the motifs and progression of *Outer Dark* might at first seem to promise a teleological stability that many of us look for in a novel. But the climactic moment of the ritual and the ambiguous aftermath upset this expectation. Looking backward, retracing our

steps to make sense of the path we have traveled uncovers a surface not unlike the fossilized tracks that criss-cross the roads of this novel. Various plot lines connect with and echo each other, but they destabilize conventional principles of organization.[21] Any attempt to discern the shape of this narrative is matched by its disorder, which becomes more and more intricate and chaotic the more light is shed upon it. To this extent, this novel enforces the limitations of vision.[22] Acknowledging this limitation is one way to avoid the literary equivalent of Culla's mistake. Culla must witness the death of his nameless child because he is not willing to embrace the reality of his transgression; he cannot claim the child or name the child. The vengeance of the triune is to make him face these facts. As "ministers" of evil, they might have no other message to convey, no external truths to illuminate. Yet *Outer Dark* tempts the reader to pray for the wrong kind of eyes, for a way of seeing that will only make its assault more potent. In this way, perhaps, McCarthy wants us to face our aesthetic transgressions. He pursues those readers who would flee from this story even as they read it, those who would refuse to name it for fear of having to say what it is.

Notes

[1]Cormac McCarthy, *Outer Dark* (New York: Vintage International, 1968), p. 94. All further page references to this edition will be made parenthetically.

[2] Up to a certain point in the story, this threesome does seem to embody "the mindless evil in the world" (Lask 33). But their brutal onslaught ultimately expresses a dark purpose that is perhaps, from the point of view of retributive justice, neither mindless nor evil. They are one exception to the common claim that "the violence in McCarthy's fiction must be senseless, is often unmotivated, and above all is supremely irrational" (Giles 18).

[3] The notion that Culla is running away from the reality of sin is a common interpretation, one that Robert Jarrett applies to the concepts of denial and alienation: "It is not their incest that drives the brother and sister apart but Culla's inability to recognize his own sin in the form of his child, whom he abandons the day of its birth" (16). In an alternative reading of *Outer Dark*, Ann Fisher-Wirth suggests that Culla's flight is not so much an act of denial born of guilt as an act of resistance born of ontological crisis: "The plot of the novel enacts one long flight from, and one long arrival at, the 'mire': one long descent into the abject, and—in helpless revolt against this descent—one long series of outrages against the feminine" (128). In this reading, the child is the symbolic battleground of psychological warfare between "the hard dream of mastery" and the return of the repressed (136).

[4] In his review of *Outer Dark*, Walter Sullivan criticizes what he sees as a failure to make particulars cohere into a universal vision:

> Nothing apparently is included for the way in which it relates to the other elements of the novel or for the truth to which it will finally lead us. . . . The question is not whether these things taken separately exist, but rather what kind of world they come together to create, what kind of unity they make. And the answer is: none. (661-62)

The answer is, in actuality, some kind of unity that is difficult to define if we are looking for a world we already know. The episodic arrangement creates a surreal effect that leaves some of us feeling unguided or misguided, but the narrative lines are not aimless or disconnected for being hard to trace.

[5] Emphasizing a different cognitive drama generated by the fragmented narrative of *Outer Dark*, Holloway claims that "the gradual mapping of contiguous narrative zones around the activities of the ubiquitous triune simultaneously forces the reader into a rethinking of those

disparate heterotopic elements as a totality or narrative whole" (90). Although quite different from the aesthetics of pursuit I explore, this activity points to another ethical dimension of fiction that is often discussed among McCarthy critics: political responsibility.

[6] Credit goes to William Spencer for the basic idea, but my approach to it is quite different. Spencer focuses not on McCarthy's representation of vengeance through structure but on "the separateness of evil" implied by the change in typeface:

> McCarthy calls into question the humanity of the band of murderers in *Outer Dark* even further through the typography of this novel. The image of the three marauders begins the novel in a one-page italicized chapter, the italics adding to the mystery and seeming separation of these creatures—as if they are too far out of bounds of normal humanity to be described in the usual typeface. The italics make them seem unreal or surreal, and nightmarish. McCarthy continues to restrict description of these three primarily to six set-off, one-page, italicized chapters (3, 35, 51, 95, 129, 229), though the novel increasingly brings them into the main story line so that there is only one italicized chapter in the last one hundred pages. Early on, the effect of this pattern of interwoven chapters and the changes in typography is to imply the separateness of evil, to posit evil as a nightmarish force outside of humanity—but as the italics are dropped, so is the illusion of the separateness of evil. (85-86)

[7] Credit again goes to William Spencer, who keenly notices this repetition of a single moment in the chronology of the novel: "Throughout much of the novel the evil threesome travels a path just behind or just ahead of [Culla]. The italicized chapter which depicts the three murderers stealing farm implements from a squire's barn (35) serves as an unusual

flash forward technique since later Culla hears ‘a commotion of hens from beyond the barn, a hog’s squeal’ (47)” (86).

[8] It is significant that they take the brush-hook. The tool provides an image for the textual processes at work not only in the italicized interchapters but also in the novel as a whole: slicing and fragmentation. Furthermore, their theft of the brush-hook is attributed to Culla, who has in fact stolen only the boots. The squire’s vengeful rage deepens when he notices the brush-hook is missing, and although he would set out to find Culla regardless, he sets out with a stronger sense of violation and justice. The triune is thus responsible for increasing the charges against Culla, virtually boosting his fugitive status.

[9] According to one reviewer, passages like this one “abound” and “detract from the better things” in the novel: “reducing, not increasing, the pressure, they seem to be there to complement the nightmare quality of much of the novel; their effect, unfortunately, is to all but submerge it” (“Wandering” 1409). Another reviewer was “troubled” by this style of writing:

> For the most part the style is austere and colloquial, but now and then McCarthy bursts into a gaudy prose studded with uncommon and sometimes incomprehensible words. . . . Such passages are pretty bad in themselves and entirely out of keeping with the tone of the book as a whole. (Hicks 22)

According to Patrick Cruttwell, these passages display language “on which the shadow of Faulkner lies very dark—proving once again what a disastrous model for lesser men that writer is. Mr. McCarthy has got from him the interminable shapeless sentence and the trail of very literary epithets which look impressive” (18). These assessments are valid if style is little more than the preferred dress of a storyteller. From my point of view, “the better things”

are these shifts in register, all of which (a) remind us that we are reading, (b) complicate the tone of the novel, and (c) promote reflection on the purpose of rhetorical assault. See Jarrett (121-26) for a general discussion of McCarthy's stylistic complexity, which tends "to expose fictional language as a rhetorical illusion—a writerly or written fictive language that points our attention toward itself, not toward an 'outside' world that it represents" (126).

[10] My assertion that the three killers remove the squire as an agent of justice clearly opposes the claim that they "coldly and senselessly murder him" (Giles 24). From my point of view, Giles seems much more flexible in his reading when he claims that "their cold murder of the squire constitutes, on one level, retaliation against an exploitative social order" or that "they seem personifications of some delayed and apocalyptic judgment" (27). He also describes them, metaphorically speaking, as "psychic avengers" and "agents of retribution" (especially during the ritual sacrifice of the child). But I would suggest that the mimetic and metaphoric dimensions are not easily distinguishable in *Outer Dark*. The idea that the three men, on any level, are "a savage gang of roving outlaws who assault the community out of sheer malevolence," an embodiment of "excessive evil," is ultimately overshadowed by a more complex impression of motivation and purpose (29).

[11] We know that old man Salter is the squire because of the word *stobbed*. Given the region of the novel, this participle would seem to have its origin in the noun *stob*, meaning "a stick, a twig broken off." However, *stob* is also an alternative pronunciation of *stub*, referring to "a stump, portion remaining after mutilation" (*OED*). We might interpret *stobbed* to mean something like "broken in two like a stick."

[12] Matthew Guinn suggests a metaphorical connection between this brutal murder and McCarthy's desire to upset reader expectations:

> As he is eviscerated, so, too, is belief in a "purpose to everything." Within the violent world of the novel, uncertainty is the only constant, and a teleological conception of humanity is a dangerous indulgence in naïveté. A philosophical system that would propose an order for the universe is, like the old man, exenterated, its constituent elements extracted and destroyed. It is a violently symbolic episode that indicates McCarthy's departure from the conventions—philosophical as well as literary—tradition. (99)

This reading fits quite nicely into my idea that we are constantly having to negotiate our desire to believe we are en route to some kind of resolution and our absolute lack of knowledge about when or how or even whether this resolution will occur.

[13] Christopher Metress argues that this verbal fencing "expresses a vision of negation both generated by and leading to nihilism" in contrast to the *via negativa*, a way of unknowing born of inherent mystery and divine otherness (151). However, the bearded leader seems to be mocking the insistent and repetitive denial of Culla in order to enforce his own brand of accountability. The point of the exchange is to dramatize an ethical conflict; the bearded leader is a minister of vengeance, not meaninglessness.

[14] See I Corinthians 11: 27-32: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world."

[15] Jarrett points in the direction of my argument: “as both meal and sacrificial offering, Culla’s child thus suffers the punishment for Culla and Rinthy’s incest. Furthermore, the outlaw’s murder of Culla’s child actively achieves the death that Culla himself has sought near the novel’s opening when he abandons the child in the woods” (17). I argue that the child is made to suffer *in order to* punish Culla; the demonstrative nature of the ritual requires the sacrifice of the child, but there is no atonement achieved by the sacrifice.

[16] If the emotion is strong enough, we might simply close the book. Even the most able readers have had their problems finishing McCarthy novels. Guy Davenport, in his review of *Outer Dark*, writes, “The plot is like the finding by a malevolent hand the thread that knits the world; page by page it plucks the stitches loose until the fabric parts in a catastrophe so awful that one’s eyes leaves the page by sheer reflex” (4).

[17] Robert Coles, in his refreshingly personal review of *Outer Dark*, gives early voice to some of the ethical concepts I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter:

> One begins by wondering what McCarthy’s psychological and political purposes are. (Everyone, we have discovered, must have such purposes, and be knowingly or unwittingly at their mercy.) Soon, though, we are asked by the author to stay in the presence of this “outer darkness” and suffer what Conrad called “the horror, the horror” or else dismiss his novel as dense and out-of-date and so muddled with Biblical and Attic overtones that it is the worst of all possible things today—*irrelevant*. (133)

Coles is primarily concerned with honest accountability in the act of reading, and he rightly sees that McCarthy’s ethical concern in *Outer Dark* is the meaning of commitment. In a similar fashion, Christopher Metress argues that

> instead of creating a work in which his characters take the *via negativa* toward understanding divine darkness, McCarthy has fashioned the novel in such a way as to make *it* a kind of *via negativa*, a road down which we travel as readers as we learn to unlearn our assumptions about God and embrace unknowing as "the most goodly knowing" of the metaphysical. . . . McCarthy is inviting us to bring to the novel our metaphysical preoccupations in order that he might strip away and subvert our *preconceptions*. He is inviting us, in the tradition of apophatic theology, to unlearn what we believe we know, not because what we believe in doesn't exist, but because what we believe in can't really be known. (149)

This argument, however, leans away from the central ethical questions I have raised about reader allegiance and the dilemma of justice. Metress suggests that *Outer Dark* is an exercise in religious awakening, that the experience of reading the novel should influence the *way in which* we believe, whereas I am more interested in how the novel subverts preconceptions held and pre-commitments made in the activity of reading.

[18] See Arnold ("Naming"), Schafer, and Spencer.

[19] One such question is deftly raised by John Grammer: "*Outer Dark*, like much of McCarthy's work, seems positively turgid with moral import, and yet it is difficult to say just what the moral issues involved might be. . . . How is it that incest calls forth such dire retribution? And whence, in McCarthy's apparently godless universe, does this retribution come" (24). The key words of *ethical* import here include "seems," "difficult," "might," "how," and "apparently"; Grammer does propose an answer (as I do), but he acknowledges first that the act of reading this novel is a confrontation with uncertainty and limitation. Any working answer must emerge from this initial experience.

[20] Our experience is not unlike the abandonment of sister Rinthy, who finally stumbles upon the place of her child's death and its skeletal remains but is left unfulfilled in her quest: "She went among this charnel curiously. She did not know what to make of it. She waited, but no one returned" (237).

[21] The first time I wrote about this novel, I explored the spatial dimensions of its narrative structure. McCarthy uses several techniques: intersecting plot lines, textual echoes, recurring themes, and overlapping narrative threads, to name a few. They are common techniques, but they all exemplify Joseph Frank's concept of "reflexive reference," or how different units of meaning in a text form spatial relationships outside the chronological sequence of narrative events (27).

[22] Vereen Bell asserts that the "aura of allegory" in the novel "at once invite[s] and thwart[s]" our attempt to interpret it. This experience "gives us a sense of what it is like to be the searching but unreflective characters we are reading about" (33-34). The motif of light works in a similar way. For instance, shadow-edged forms never come into sharp focus—vision remains problematic. Washing at the well by the light of a lamp, Rinthy sees "in frenzied colliding orbits about the lamp chimney a horde of moths and night insects." A moment later she hears a boy approach: "Had she not had the lamp she could have seen him where he stood in the deeper shadow of the eaves watching her" (63). In *Outer Dark,* light both illuminates and blinds; it serves as a centering beacon but attracts an indiscriminate mob. However, Bell's use of the word "unreflective" might apply to the characters, but it need not apply to the reader. The whole point of McCarthy's aesthetics of pursuit is to make us more reflective and less prone to settle for what *seems* plainly true or the simplistic equations of pure allegory. For a detailed account of the links between *Outer Dark* and the

allegorical structure of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, see Hillier. The extensive correspondence between these two texts presents an interesting dilemma for the reader: are we free to read *Outer Dark* as an allegorical parody of the pilgrim's quest for salvation, or has McCarthy drawn our attention to the allegorical method of storytelling as a way of subverting our own quest for certainty in the world of fiction?

CHAPTER 4

THE READER AS WITNESS: THE ART OF TESTIMONY IN *CHILD OF GOD*

> Ballard in a varnished oak swivelchair. He leans back. The door is pebble-grain glass. Shadows loom upon it. The door opens. A deputy comes in and turns around. There is a woman behind him. When she sees Ballard she starts to laugh. Ballard is craning his neck to see her. She comes through the door and stands looking at him. He looks down at his knee. He begins to scratch his knee.[1]

This present-tense passage from *Child of God*, due in part to its strained simplicity, creates the illusion of unfiltered perception. Immediately following this paragraph, the point of view shifts back to the past tense, restoring to the act of reading the sensation of safe and controlled distance. But momentarily, we perceive as bystanders, exposed to detail that might not matter, or might after all. Without bearings to guide our attention, we watch not knowing what to look for; the rigid pace of the sentences, the first of which is no sentence at all, seems to prohibit reflection on what the sentences mean, obscuring any direction the enumeration of detail might be pointing. Lester Ballard has been brought to the sheriff's office on *suspicion* of rape, but the expected legal protocol does not happen until after this narrative detour. For the span of a few seconds, the narrator seems to step aside, as if temporarily suspending his

control of the story, so that our perception of Lester is no longer tethered to the string of words depicting him, any more than he is tethered to any recognizable standard of human civility. In this segment, the present tense compromises the ordering effects of narration, yielding a text not fully composed, or partly decomposed.

The passage begins with the phrase "Ballard in a varnished oak swivelchair," words that approximate a complete idea. We have Ballard himself before us, an unmediated image, made inactive and virtually indefinable by the absence of a verb. The fragment reads like part of a shooting script, a list of details as yet undirected, a rough guideline for the camera eye at the beginning of a scene. Accordingly, the sentences that follow do not fill out the scene but catalogue the raw materials needed to give it shape and substance. What does the protagonist do? ("He leans back.") What does he see? ("The door is pebble-grain glass. Shadows loom upon it. The door opens.") Who is there? ("A deputy comes in and turns around. There is a woman behind him.") What happens? ("When she sees Ballard she starts to laugh. Ballard is craning his neck to see her. She comes through the door and stands looking at him.") How does he respond? ("He looks down at his knee. He begins to scratch his knee.") One element after another is presented to the reader, but there is no coherent vision for the scene in the words themselves. Without the controlling hand of the narrator, we gather the details in the order they come and, as an onlooker would, try to make them cohere. Left as they are in the narrative, the images make us *look* before we *comprehend*. The local flavor of the police station, the principal actors, the blocking, the telling gestures—these elements of composition seem to await final arrangement.[2] McCarthy's narrative technique here brings into sharp relief our presence as readers of this novel and suggests that we are being asked to remember what lies underneath the civil surface of a story being told in its finished form.

The next paragraph shifts back into a familiar mode of storytelling: “The sheriff got up from his desk. Shut the door, Cotton” (51). The return of the familiar past tense creates a stark contrast in style, although the effect is closer to relief than shock. We have for a few seconds been forced to read in a strange dimension, one that periodically, and significantly, reappears at various times in the novel, and now we are permitted to look with the directive eye of our narrator once again. But McCarthy does not let us forget our recent detour. Not a page later, after the woman accuses Ballard of rape and battery and Ballard retorts, “She ain’t nothing but a goddamned old whore,” the narrator describes their hustle in a style not all too different from the passage above:

> The old whore slapped Ballard’s mouth. Ballard came up from the swivelchair and began to choke her. She brought her knee up into his groin. They grappled. They fell backward upsetting a tin wastebasket. A halltree toppled with its load of coats. The sheriff’s deputy seized Ballard by the collar. Ballard wheeled. The woman was screaming. The three of them crashed to the floor. (52)

The paragraph is the same length as its present-tense counterpart. It contains the same rigid pace and forced simplicity. It enumerates the same kinds of details, drawing our attention to the bodies of the characters but also to the otherwise negligible objects in the room affected by their eruptive movement. Yet the past-tense perspective on the action changes the way we perceive these events. The sentences read clumsily and force us to look at details that might not be significant, but from the distance restored to our vision, they now capture the feel of a brawl instead of feeling uncomposed. We see the action unfold the way action unfolds in a carefully orchestrated story. And although the action we observe in this scene lacks the civility we would expect from an interrogation in a police station, the tense of the passage

maintains a level of narrative civility that its counterpart lacks. Placing these two paragraphs in such close vicinity, McCarthy reinforces, on the level of style, the conceptual difference between unmediated perception in the present and the filtered experience of events that have already occurred.

Notwithstanding his conventional use of the past tense throughout *Child of God*, even when the events are meant to feel immediate, McCarthy manipulates narrative expectation in order to emphasize the various perceptual dimensions of the reading act.[3] Most of the novel is cast in past tense, but the few times that McCarthy does shift to the present cause us to read the rest of the novel with the impression that the present tense is always lurking beneath the surface. When the novel begins, past tense captures the progress of an auctioneer and his attendees through the woods: "They came like a caravan of carnival folk up through the swales of broomstraw and across the hill in the morning sun" (3). After this statement, however, is a long participial extension, shifting our attention away from the stabilizing verb "came" to a string of untethered actions:

> the truck rocking and pitching in the ruts and the musicians on chairs in the truckbed teetering and tuning their instruments, the fat man with guitar grinning and gesturing to others in a car behind and bending to give a note to the fiddler who turned a fiddlepeg and listened with a wrinkled face. (3)

After layers of action cascade into view, one after another or all at once, erupting from under a relatively uneventful surface, we return to the simple past (though we only seem to have left it in the first place). Framed by actions fixed in time, the narration permits us to stand by and watch for an unmeasured duration, perceiving events that probably take longer to occur than the act of reading the passage.

But McCarthy quickly disrupts the sensation that we are the intended audience of this approaching "caravan of carnival folk" when they come "in sight of an aged clapboard house that stood in blue shade under the wall of the mountain" (3). Their arrival is seen by another, and to redirect our watchful eye, and complicate our role as audience in this novel, the narrative suddenly shifts to the present tense to introduce Lester Ballard:

> To watch these things issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning is a man at the barn door. He is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps. Wasps pass through the laddered light from the barnslats in a succession of strobic moments, gold and trembling between black and black, like fireflies in the serried upper gloom. The man stands straddlelegged, has made in the dark humus a darker pool wherein swirls a pale foam with bits of straw. Buttoning his jeans he moves along the barn wall, himself fiddlebacked with light, a petty annoyance flickering across the wallward eye. (4)

With the words "to watch these things," our point of view shifts from outside the barn to inside the barn, from what Ballard is looking at to Ballard himself, watching. At the same time, the narrator turns our point of view inward, acknowledging our presence as readers and inviting us to read as participants. We are abruptly told who this man is as if we have, out of turn, interrupted to ask. The offhand response, "Saxon and Celtic bloods.[4] A child of God much like yourself perhaps," is a defining moment in the narrative, for it prohibits us from distancing ourselves from Ballard before we even have the notion to do so. At the same time, the word "perhaps" leaves open the possibility that we might not want or even be able to identify ourselves with Ballard on any level, let alone such a fundamental one.[5]

But the possibility of identification with Ballard is not, in the end, the fundamental dilemma facing the reader of this novel. If it were, the dramatic arc of the story would be a straight line for most of us because he is from the start excessively unappealing. McCarthy makes him "small, unclean, unshaven," and before we even hear him speak, he urinates on the barn floor: "He stands straddlelegged, has made in the dark humus a darker pool. . . . Buttoning his jeans he moves along the barn wall" (4). Our attention is drawn not to any of those qualities that make a character seem mindful or complex but to the simple reality that he is a male animal, equipped with an organ designed to drain the waste from his body. The words "straddlelegged" and "buttoning" are particularly visual markers of his mid-region, which is surely as unclean as the rest of him.[6] In light of Ballard's unsavory appearance and animalistic demeanor, the phrase "a child of God much like yourself perhaps" works on several levels of irony. He perhaps is a child of God. We perhaps are like him. He perhaps is not a child of God or like us at all. He perhaps is a child of God in a way that we would never be able to understand. There perhaps is no such thing as a child of God. The gentle tone is an inviting suggestion that identification is a *remote* possibility but also a menacing proposal to inquire about *how remote* that possibility is. Whether we do identify with Ballard is less critical than whether we can bring ourselves to consider how we might. To do so, we must look at him, fascinated perhaps not only by the creation of a character with whom we might never identify but also by the barbaric lack of civility governing Ballard himself.[7]

So that we might eventually be able to see him (in the fullness of his degradation to come) with an unfiltered eye and a mind unencumbered by the burden of identification, the narrative point of view established in this early passage orients us to a way of looking that many of us are more than likely unprepared or unwilling to embrace initially. Inside the barn,

we observe his private behavior for the first time, in his natural habitat as it were. This point of view is the guiding principle for a number of subsequent observations in the novel that are more and more private, and more and more disturbing. We are made impossible witnesses who at once must stand close enough to Ballard to watch and far enough back to watch objectively. To help us develop this balance, the narrator extends our present-tense attention to Ballard as he watches the auction for his land approach:

> Standing in the forebay door he blinks. Behind him there is a rope hanging from the loft. His thinly bristled jaw knots and slacks as if he were chewing but he is not chewing. His eyes are almost shut against the sun and through the thin and blueveined lids you can see the eyeballs moving, watching. (4)

The use of the second-person pronoun, now for the second time, is the main source of that balance. Far from an unknown variable or anonymous presence in the narrative, the reader is indentified as an onlooker. Despite being able to perceive such close detail as the movement of jaw muscles underneath his skin and eyeballs underneath his lids, we are addressed as a separate and detached entity. We do not *happen*, nor have we chosen, to be standing next to this character but have been strategically positioned, asked to look at what we are shown. This objectivity is not necessarily a liberating distance, but it does preclude any obligation to empathize with what we see. From this point of view, the act of reading *Child of God* is an exercise in gathering evidence required to make an informed judgment. The implication is that we are being prepared not only to identify with "the least of us" but also to become witnesses to his condition who might testify.

To reinforce the importance of watching, the narrator presents Ballard as an animal with keen vision, a man who is inclined to interact with the world by looking from a distance:

"you can see the eyeballs moving, watching" (4). Vivid details about the crowd follow in fragmented prose to capture in snapshot fashion the images seen by Lester: "A man in a blue suit gesturing from the truckbed. A lemonade stand going up. The musicians striking up a country reel and the yard filling up with people and the loudspeaker making a first few squawks." Apparently, nothing escapes his gaze, but the style used to enumerate these details again lacks the civility of polished expression. Verbless events cross his line of sight, as if he is no more than a passive observer, incapable of putting these details together into a coherent picture. Shown his point of view momentarily, watching him watch, we gather these details as signs of a mind deranged and disordered by the threat of being cast out. As the auctioneer begins, Lester continues to watch, but the narrative records, almost exclusively, the voice over the loudspeaker. Another sign of Lester's perception emerges halfway through the auctioneer's pitch: "Bowing, pointing, smiling. The microphone in one hand" (5). When the auctioneer finishes, Ballard has moved down to the truck, "standing in front of him. Small man, ill-shaven, now holding a rifle" (7). By this time, our point of view has shifted to the line of sight of the auctioneer, who sees only a fragment of a man, described in a way eerily similar to our first look at him in the barn. In clear view of others, Lester loses the control of a voyeur and becomes the center of attention, a mockery. He tries to upstage the auctioneer by challenging him to a fight but fails: "Get down off that truck, he hissed" (7). Having watched Ballard behind the barn wall, we are less threatened than the other bystanders in the crowd, who look "like compositions in porcelain from an old county fair shooting gallery" (8). Though Ballard is now in the mix of a boiling conflict, we retain our objective stance.

But before this conflict can play itself out, McCarthy cuts the scene short and shifts to an altogether different narrative point of view. The narrator disappears completely, and the

time frame leaps ahead to an unidentified moment in the future. Instead of watching what happens from our objective stance, we listen to (or read) another eye-witness give a hindsight account of the remaining events:

> Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that. It must of thowed his neck out someway or another. I didn't see Buster hit him but I seen him layin on the ground. I was with the sheriff. He was layin flat on the ground lookin up at everbody with his eyes crossed and this awful pumpknot on his head. He just laid there and he was bleedin at the ears. Buster was still standin there holdin the axe. They took him on in the county car and C B went on with the auction like nothin never had happent but he did say that it caused some folks not to bid that otherwise would of, which may have been what Lester set out at, I don't know. John Greer was from up in Grainger County. Not sayin nothin against him but he was. (9)

Comprising an entire chapter by itself, this vignette seems strategically placed to disorient a reader who has only moments earlier in the act of reading become oriented to an unfamiliar narrative stance. Although it helps fill out the previous scene, its parameters are undefined. Without the narrator to identify the speaker, situation, or time, we are left to wonder why McCarthy would bring closure to a scene through an anonymous account rather than through the narrative point of view that we are initially asked to adopt. Indeed, our confusion is the rationale, just as it is when the narrator makes the first shift to present tense on the second page of the novel. This vignette, another shift to the present tense, this time in some unknown future time frame, further redefines (or extends) our role as audience in this novel. We are asked to *listen* to the testimony of an anonymous other who has witnessed all that we have witnessed and more. By complicating the idea of audience, McCarthy reinforces how the

narrative events in this novel are not simply elements of a story being told but evidence to be gathered for future retellings.

When the narrative proper picks up again in the following chapter, this vignette seems even more out of place than it does initially, but we eventually discover that it is the first of several intercalary detours showcasing stories told by various members of the community. Structurally similar to the shadow vignettes that trace the pursuit of the demonic triune in *Outer Dark*, these departures underpin testimony as both a theme and aesthetic principle in *Child of God*. Shifting back and forth between episodes that allow us to watch Lester engage in behaviors that are essentially private and vignettes that allow us to listen to testimonies about his public reputation, the structural arrangement of the first third of this novel reveals how extensively McCarthy manipulates our point of view. We are not confined to a singular point of view, but we are assigned various positions from which to look, like initiates into a way of reading that will ultimately require a commitment that we are not yet prepared to make. With each new testimony, the call to testify looms more and more prominently over the reader, whose private observations of Ballard supply stories, though not necessarily insight, to contribute to the public record. As readers, we are hardly free to watch him, as we do, wipe himself with a stick in an outhouse (13), half cook a slice of potato over an oil lamp (15), or masturbate behind the fender of a car wherein a couple is having sex (20), without wondering when we might be asked to share what no one else in the community seems to know. At the same time, we are given access to Ballard in his natural habitat, perhaps, not to report what we know to a public forum but to acknowledge the ignorance of that forum, the inherent ignorance of any such forum, in its attempt to account for one such as Ballard. The call to testify does not change in either case, but the focal point of the dilemma shifts away

from whether we should testify at all to whether our testimony might only fall on deaf ears and who our audience might be if our testimony is meant to be heard.

During the opening auction scene, McCarthy introduces a metaphor that anticipates the dilemma the reader faces as a potential participant in this public forum. During a pause in the auctioneer's sales pitch, the narrator describes the fading reverberation of his words as a dissipating sound: "Among the pines on the ridge the sound of the auctioneer's voice echoed muted, redundant. An illusion of multiple voices, a ghost chorus among old ruins" (5). This comparison suggests that his echoing words resemble the various voices of dead chorus members crisscrossing an ancient amphitheatre where tragedies once played out. The narrator thus calls attention to a mode of account that has become outdated. The various testimonies to follow are indeed born of multiple voices, but their ability to shed light on the events of a story as it unfolds is an illusion, a ghost-like *appearance* of explanation that the reader must set aside. Also misleading is the ominous tone with which McCarthy sets up *Child of God* to be the tragic story of a scapegoat whose fate is predicated on being cast out of a community whose health depends on purging an unclean member. If there is any connection between classical tragedy and the plot of this novel, we must say that the latter is a post-fall story that explores the aftermath following Lester's displacement. From this point of view, the chorus no longer plays a functional role for the protagonist, having been stripped of its unifying presence among the unified parts of a well-defined, clearly-structured, teleological plot. Indeed, the testimonies provided in the first part of this novel are delivered after the story has run its course, now scattered among the fragments of Ballard's search for a place to exist outside the community.[8] And while not cast out the way Ballard has been, the reader seems like a never-member of a now scattered chorus of impotent testifiers. Yet these vignettes,

dispersed among the episodes of our private observation of Ballard, speak to an ongoing impulse to account for the darkest corners of human experience. They cannot guide our assessment of Ballard as his nature is gradually exposed; rather, they disrupt the act of reading to make that act as much the center of our attention as Ballard is. The constant reminder that we stand far enough outside the community to see behaviors that otherwise remain secret points us finally in the direction of a private, self-reflective testimony about the intersection of reading and witness.

Displaying various degrees of familiarity with and connection to the events of the surrounding narrative, the six remaining vignettes dramatize, in monologue fashion, multiple points of view on the *public* life of Lester Ballard. These testimonies interrupt our private, more direct exposure to his character, inserted perhaps to shift our burden as audience from primary observer to secondary listener. Each vignette does provide some relief, despite the disorientation that accompanies a change in point of view, partly because that change brings with it the possibility of insight or explanation. Indeed, part of McCarthy's rhetorical strategy is to create a need for explanation and then set up an occasion when that need might be met. However, these testimonial vignettes only frustrate the attempt to find solid ground on which to begin to account for the degraded condition of our anti-hero. Although the monologues are more or less controlled responses to open-ended questions (we might imagine the kind posed by an investigative writer seeking out the root of his story: "What do you remember about Lester? What kind of man was he? How do you explain what happened here?"[9]), the answers never *explain* as much as they recount, revealing more about the mind of the speaker, in his *attempt* to explain, than the source or cause of Lester's nature.[10] For instance, the second vignette begins, "I remember one thing he done one time" (17). The speaker then tells a story

about a single occasion from Ballard's boyhood, testifying about a schoolyard fight that he witnessed:

> He lost a softball down off the road that rolled down into this field about . . . it was way down in a bunch of briers and stuff and he told this boy, this Finney boy, told him to go and get it. Finney was some bit younger'n him. Told him, said: Go get that softball. Finney boy wouldn't do it. Lester walked up to him and said: You better go get that ball. Finney boy said he wasn't about to do it and Lester told him one more time, said: You don't get off down in there and get me that ball I'm goin to bust you in the mouth. That Finney boy was scared but he faced up to him, told him he hadn't thowed it off down in there. Well, we was standin there, the way you will. Ballard could of let it go. He seen the boy wasn't goin to do what he ast him. He just stood there a minute and then he punched him in the face. Blood flew out the Finney boy's nose and he set down in the road. Just for a minute and then he got up. Somebody give him a kerchief and he put it to his nose. It was all swoll up and bleedin. The Finney boy just looked at Lester Ballard and went on up the road. (17-18)

The time frame for this vignette is more than likely identical to the first (i.e., after the events of the primary narrative have run their course); however, instead of shedding direct light on the fragments of action around it, this second account seems to offer (a) some precedent for Ballard's use of violence to resolve conflict and (b) an impression made by Ballard on the sensibility of a bystander who witnesses that violence. The details of the passage lend more credence to the latter, and because Lester has already made a similar impression on us, we embrace this telling like an extended hand of sympathy. At the same time, we are prompted to consider the greater depths of violence we might be shown in private.

In what might be an *attempt* to explain, the speaker ultimately justifies, and shares in, our mystification: “I felt, I felt . . . I don’t know what it was. We just felt real bad. I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that. He never done nothin to me” (18). The tone that brings the vignette to a close, a mixture of uncertainty, emotional surrender, and defensive confession, communicates the burden felt by the speaker. We sense that, by the end, he might rather not be speaking of such things, having offered his account only in deference to the one asking the questions. But this tone of vulnerability is a far cry from the confident voice with which the speaker introduces his story: “I remember one thing he done one time.” Though McCarthy provides no description of the man’s demeanor, we sense his desire to participate in an intriguing discussion. Indeed, we are inclined to wonder also who is listening to this story, just as we wonder what has prompted the telling of it. The speaker’s emphasis on the word “one” suggests the he has no complete picture to draw, only a memory distilled to relative clarity; his willingness to put words to it, to revisit the particulars to such a fine point, seems motivated by a desire to satisfy a curious audience, a group of talkers, perhaps, gathered outside a local store exchanging yarns about the now infamous Ballard, a morbid thread in the tapestry of Sevier County. In the act of retelling, however, the excitement of offering testimony to a jury of peers gives way to despondency and an admission of utter bewilderment. This dramatic turn shows how inseparable the act of testifying and questions of accountability really are; McCarthy seems to measure not only the extent to which any testimony can account for the action or character under consideration but also the extent to which any testifier is held accountable to his choice to testify. Even with no substantial explanation of Ballard’s behavior to offer, the speaker in this vignette wants to captivate an audience, but he eventually loses control over the story he has committed to tell.

The effect of telling it, in fact, turns out to be not that different from the effect of watching the events unfold first-hand. Reviving the burden of witness, the teller ultimately abandons his initial engagement with his audience, unable to address questions that have remained unanswered in his mind all these years: "I felt, I felt . . . I don't know what it was. We just felt real bad." His response to this burden is to assert that he dislikes Ballard, the proper orientation in that company, and to remind his listeners that he is also indifferent to him: "He never done nothin to me." We are permitted to sit down with the rest of that audience and listen to the story, seeking nothing more than superficial satisfaction and the comfort of truistic finality, but we are also invited to see the speaker's failure to meet the fundamental obligation of one faced with questions that need answers: either refrain from rest until the answer (or *an* answer) emerges or embrace the implications of a question that has no clear answer. The irony of the speaker's dismissal at the end of the vignette is that Ballard, on some level, has indeed done something to him, namely left an impression (the bystander's burden to carry) that affords him an occasion to speak but also compels him to inquire. At the end of the novel, Ballard has done "nothing" to us, as well, and the burden is heavy. By making us witness to this man's testimony, McCarthy anticipates the questions we will ask (and be asked) about *who* Ballard is as we stand by and watch, extending the dilemma dramatized in this vignette to the reading experience that lies ahead.

Only two pages of narrative action separate the second and third vignettes, but in that space, we watch Ballard in the early stages of his sexual perversion. The moment is doubtless uncomfortable, if not mortifying, for even the most guarded reader, mainly due to language that records the action in electric detail but with little sign of narratorial concern. We are made only to watch, forced to maintain distance and therefore granted voyeuristic freedom:

> Ballard had his ear to the quarterpanel. The car began to rock gently. He raised himself up and chanced one eye at the windowcorner. A pair of white legs sprawled embracing a shade, a dark incubus that humped in a dream of slaverous lust.
>
> It's a nigger, whispered Ballard.
>
> O Bobby, O god, said the girl.
>
> Ballard, unbottoned, spent himself on the fender.
>
> O shit, said the girl.
>
> On buckling knees the watcher watched. The mockingbird began.
>
> A nigger, said Ballard. (20)

As a theme and an activity, voyeurism is a prominent motif in this novel, primarily because Ballard is a powerless outcast who feels powerful once again when he watches. He is also an aggressive sexual predator. But in this episode, McCarthy, in a rather obvious meta-fictional move, extends the concept of voyeurism to the act of reading: we watch the watcher watch. He does so not to stimulate us sexually or to help us feel Ballard's obsession but to remind us that to witness (even for the reader, who is in no danger of being discovered) requires resolve that transcends the voyeuristic impulse to stay hidden.[11] Once discovered, Ballard runs, "a misplaced and loveless simian shape scuttling across the turnaround as he had come, over the clay and thin gravel and the flattened beercans and papers and rotting condoms" (20). The control he manages to gather dissipates quickly because he wants, above all, to be unseen and unbound. As readers *made* to watch, our experience in this episode is quite the opposite. By default unseen, we gather details of Ballard's perception, as we must. We watch him watch and watch what he watches, but we never feel in control, despite having the freedom of an unobserved observer. In the end, far from losing control we never had, we are meant to seek

answers to any questions that constrain our attention. Fixed on the transgression we have just witnessed, we wonder what must be going on in the dark corners of his mind.

Interestingly, we stay in that place long after Ballard has retreated, long enough for the couple to drive away: “The lights came on and swung around the circle and went down the road” (20). Calling attention to the headlights on the car is a clever way for McCarthy to reinforce how we are essentially left in the dark, so to speak, when hoping for insight. For the most part, this narrative is insight-resistant, especially regarding the heart, soul, or mind of Ballard. Even when the narrator exposes a level of bias (Ballard as “a misplaced and loveless simian shape,” for instance), we can hardly tell what the bias is with any certainty. At the same time, the extreme nature of the narrative action hardly permits us set aside questions that we have not managed to answer. As if to reinforce our frustration, the third vignette, immediately following our abandonment in darkness, begins, “I don’t know. They say he never was right after his daddy killed himself” (21). The speaker, we imagine, has probably been asked a question like “How did Lester end up so far beyond the pale?” But his response fits almost any question we could think to ask about Ballard’s motivation or the reason for his eventual descent into profound depravity:

> They was just the one boy. The mother had run off, I don’t know where to nor who with. Me and Cecil Edwards was the ones cut him down. He come in the store and told it like you’d tell it was rainin out. We went up there and walked in the barn and I seen his feet hangin. We just cut him down, let him fall in the floor. Just like cutting down meat. He stood there and watched, never said nothin. He was about nine or ten year old at the time. The old man’s eyes was run out on stems like a crawfish and his

> tongue blacker'n a chow dog's. I wisht if a man wanted to hang hisself he'd do it with poison or somethin so folks wouldn't have to see such a thing as that. (21)

This testimony is a vernacular spin on a typical psychological diagnosis. Ballard, an only child, is abandoned by his mother and traumatized by discovering his father's corpse hung from a rope. Preceding all that he says with "I don't know," the speaker has no explanation, so he offers the standard fare: childhood anxiety. His matter-of-fact tone, though not bereft of all concern, emphasizes that he is only recounting a prominent entry on Ballard's timeline and that he is powerless to do more. He seems under no delusion that painful events in a life *account* for subsequent behavior. However, they do provide an anchor to keep his mind from drifting continuously into the unknown. The problem seems to be the question itself (which we never actually hear) or the assumption that the question alone has the power to elicit answers that will dispel the mystery. Incapable or unwilling to supply the additional effort, the speaker quickly strays off the point, focusing his attention on the gruesome details of the corpse rather than the link between the experience and Ballard's psyche. His testimony then degrades into complaint as he issues a personal statement about propriety in suicide. The irony of the moment is clear: an explanation is worth nothing if it merely sets the question aside. From this point of view, the third vignette is a satire of psychological reasoning; his testimony might hold sway over some, who are relieved to say, "Oh, now I see," though no one can verify any of it. Exposing the absurdity of his answer, the speaker returns to what actually remains undeniable in his mind: the inescapable reality of the corpse.

In order to punctuate this moment further and help us focus on that which remains undeniable, McCarthy inserts another voice from the audience to comment on the opinions of the first speaker: "He didn't look so pretty hisself when Greer got done with him." His words

sound like a rhetorical challenge from a knowing acquaintance attempting to catch his friend in an inconsistency. The first speaker rejoins in kind: “No. But I don’t mind honest blood. I’d rather to see that than eyeballs hangin out and such” (22). The exchange is no real argument at all, serving instead to emphasize that another point of interest has displaced the original question. Both speakers reveal their fascination with the brutal transformations that a human body can undergo, some more dignified than others. Shedding more ironic light on this short dialogue is a reference to Lester’s final confrontation with the man he tries to kill for buying his land. Though easy to miss because it points to an event we have not yet read, the mere existence of the detail reinforces the remote connection of these vignettes to the experience we will undergo. In this case, we eventually see John Greer blow Ballard’s arm off:

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

The explosive amputation is indeed an example of “honest blood,” however brutal, but the men in the third vignette either do not know or fail to mention the transformation that Ballard has already undergone before his arm is removed by a shotgun blast: “Lester Ballard in frightwig and skirts stepped from behind the pumphouse and raised the rifle and cocked the hammer silently” (172). More detail emerges on the following page: John Greer “wobbled from the doorway with the shotgun and down the steps to examine this thing he’d shot. At

the foot of the steps he picked up what appeared to be a wig and saw that it was fashioned whole from a dried human scalp" (173). The poignant image of transvestic Ballard, cleverly anticipated by the cryptic words "He didn't look so pretty hisself," dwarfs any other indignity these men mention; the scalp wig alone epitomizes the undeniable yet inexplicable reality of Lester's depraved state. In the end, the speakers in the third vignette dodge the unanswered question for a lesser reason, especially the second man, who can only testify about Lester by ridiculing another man named Gresham: "he wasn't a patch on Lester Ballard for crazy" (22). He settles for a word that begs all question of accountability by its very definition, rendering his testimony even less germane than the one he interrupts. We have little to learn from these two speakers about Lester himself, but McCarthy seems to hold them up as poor examples of rigorous testimony. If we are committed to standing by what is undeniable in the Ballard we witness, we have to resist the temptation to adopt either of their dodgy maneuvers: (a) stock psychological reasoning or (b) ambiguous labeling that makes no attempt to reason at all.

The fourth vignette begins much like the second, adding another story about Lester to the mix: "I'll tell ye another thing he done one time" (35). By this point in the sequence, we can fairly say that the vignettes, taken separately from the rest of the narrative, take place in roughly chronological order within a relatively short span of time. The word "another" helps establish the impression that several stories have already been told, including the ones we have heard. More importantly, the word suggests that the marginal return of significance for each additional anecdote is decreasing, perhaps even that the crowd is turning restless. As if to revive the mood, the story told in the fourth vignette is more humorously disdainful:

> He had this old cow to balk on him, couldn't get her to do nothin. He pushed and pulled and beat on her till she'd wore him out. He went and borry'd Squire Helton's

> tractor and went back over there and thowed a rope over the old cow's head and took off on the tractor hard as he could go. When it took up the slack it like to of jerked her head plumb off. Broke her neck and killed her where she stood. Ast Floyd if he didn't. (35)

A specimen of morbid slapstick, this anecdote showcases Ballard's stupidity more than his derangement. We laugh just as we imagine the crowd does, but a pitiful undertone comes through as well that makes Ballard seem like a child incapable of growing up, unwittingly dangerous in his ignorant use of force. Whether the speaker means to ridicule and pity at the same time is hard to tell, but the mixed feeling makes Lester seem uncomfortably human, someone we should be able to embrace, and help along, rather than keep at a distance.

In the main narrative just before the fourth vignette, Lester takes out his frustration on a group of cattle who have muddied the creek where he meant to fish:

> You sons of bitches, croaked Ballard. The creek was thick red with mud. He brought the rifle up and leveled it and fired. The cattle veered and surged in the red water, their eyes white. One of them made its way to the bank holding its head at an odd angle. At the back it slipped and fell and rose again. Ballard watched it with his jaw knotted. Oh shit, he said. (34)

The humor in this episode anticipates the derisive anecdote on the next page, almost excusing it as a reasonable way of coping with an otherwise excessively disturbing character. In our private observations, we have multiple opportunities to chuckle at Lester's more ridiculous moments, even when they arise from his most mortifying. The speaker in the fourth vignette makes reference to one such moment: "I don't know what he had on Waldrop that Waldrop never would run him off. Even after he burnt his old place down he never said nothin to him

about it that I know of" (35). Lester is indeed the cause of that fire, but he is not trying to burn down Waldrop's place, just as he is not trying to break the neck of Waldrop's cow or kill any of Waldrop's cattle in the creek. Rather, Ballard is trying to thaw his female corpse, made frozen by the intractable winter. He stands in opposition to the cold and challenges it with a roaring fire well beyond the capacity of his cooking stove and the chimney that runs through the attic. When he sees through the ceiling boards "a hellish glow of hot orange," engulfing his corpse-lover in flames, he responds exactly the same way he does to killing Waldrop's cattle: "Oh shit, he said" (104). The moment is slapstick hilarious because he has so completely committed his efforts to controlling the cold that he unleashes another kind of fury. His ignorance is his own worst enemy, not his depravity, and for a moment we see the corpse in the attic as nothing more than the doll-object he has made of it. He escapes with some other possessions, but the one that matters most to him, and one that will indeed have to be replaced, is consumed by the fires of hell. He is at once a terrifying monster and bereft child, and our response to his frustration might very well take the form of the light-hearted anecdote we hear in the fourth vignette if we thought he were only unlucky with cows. But McCarthy reminds us that we know more; we see how little the public forum knows and how little concerned they are to tell stories of ridicule when they have exhausted all they have to say that acknowledges the problem of accountability.

When the fifth vignette makes no mention of Ballard, focused entirely on the central figure of law enforcement in the novel, Fate Turner, we should hardly be surprised. The topic of Ballard, losing momentum, gives way to a related but new question: "Who's this sheriff who arrested him?" The speaker has a story to tell like the rest, but his testimony has only cursory light to shed on our experience with Lester:

> Fate's all right. He's plainspoken but I like him. I've rode with him a lot of times. I remember one night up on the Frog Mountain at the turnaround there they was a car parked up there and Fate put the lights on em and walked on up there. The old boy in the car was all yessir and nosir. Had this girl with him. (44)

Lester has twice visited the Frog Mountain turnaround before we hear about Fate's habit of policing the same area. We later see Fate investigate the turnaround again, sometime between the two occasions we watch Ballard steal bodies from there, the first of which is dead when he finds it, the second of which he kills himself. The frequent mention of the place suggests that he collects all of his bodies here, adding them one by one to his underground collection. As an agent of the law and an investigator, Fate is an important figure, like the various testifiers, in McCarthy's central concern with the act of reading in *Child of God*. He looks for clues at the scene, applying forensic imagination, hoping enough facts will accumulate to tell a story that will hold sway in a court of law. He is noticeably absent from the gathering of storytellers in the vignettes because they essentially constitute a mock court, a public forum without any obligation or ability to validate their evidence.[12] These two approaches to (and reasons for) recollecting the past raise interesting questions about our obligations in reading this novel. We are granted various types of vision, the most prominent of which is not available to other characters in the novel, who are more or less concerned with Ballard's history, incarceration, or execution. The exclusive privilege we have in observing Ballard *in* the scene, up close and in private, would seem to permit an exclusive *concern* as well. Given our unique vision, we need to ask what we are meant to do with the data we collect.

By having a member of the community testify about an agent of law, this vignette reminds us that we are neither, that our knowledge of Lester has no social or juridical outlet.

The testimonies themselves, we remember, are fragments of a piecemeal narrative that is ungrounded in point of view. This structure imitates Lester's brokenness and dislocation. On some level, the scattered episodes that only we observe are portions of a character that we could expose, one at a time, to the public forum, but we gradually realize that this forum is not so much interested in (or capable of) accounting for Ballard as they are in putting him on stage like a carnival exhibit. On another level, we might consider McCarthy's shifty angles of vision the stylistic equivalent of an investigative imagination, permitting us to sift through details, like Fate Turner, gathering indisputable facts to assign responsibility beyond all reasonable doubt. But outside of these testimonies, we are eye-witnesses to Lester's various crimes, bystanders who cannot be called to the stand to enumerate all the evidence that Fate is seeking. Our investigation and subsequent ability to testify against Lester, then, reach one level higher, ethically speaking; instead of serving as outlets through which we might add to community lore or promote legal justice, they open an inlet to our own sense of judgment, what informs it and gives it shape. Accountability takes on new dimensions in the mind of a reader engaged, as we are, in scenes that test the limits of human depravity, which is of all things human most difficult to analyze or measure. Ballard has a disturbing and alluring complexity, not in the philosophical sense of character but in the material definition of animal, all the more disturbing because he is yet a man. We might turn to easier subjects of discussion, like the speaker in the fifth vignette, but Lester's instinct-driven aggression raises questions that are too urgent. *Child of God* invites the reader to enter a rigorous commitment of self-directed thought, not merely focus his eyes on the details placed in front of him.

One of Lester's signature, and more animalistic, characteristics is his eye for detail, along with impeccable depth perception and a steady hand when he sets aim with his rifle.

The sixth vignette, perhaps the most complimentary of the series, draws our focus to this instrument and Ballard's devotion to it:

> He had that rifle from when he was just almost a boy. He worked for old man Whaley settin fenceposts at eight cents a post to buy it. Told me he quit midmornin right in the middle of the field the day he got enough money. I don't remember what he give for it but I think it come to over seven hundred posts.
>
> I'll say one thing. He could by god shoot it. Hit anything he could see. I seen him shoot a spider out of a web in the top of a big redoak one time and we was far from the tree as from here to the road yonder.
>
> They run him off out at the fair one time. Wouldn't let him shoot no more. (57)

If the vignette ended there, this speaker would seem to be offering an apology for the way Ballard has been cast out. A few pages later, when we see him at the fair, he puts his best skill to use at the shooting gallery and wins grand prize three times, but he is refused even this small portion of glory: "When he had won two bears and a tiger and a small audience, the pitchman took the rifle away from him. That's it for you, buddy, he hissed" (64). The speaker seems to lament this treatment until he launches into tall-tale accounts of other fairs he has attended: "I remember back a number of years, talkin about fairs . . . That reminds me of this carnival they had up in Newport one time" (57-58). The vignette goes on for two more pages, much longer than any of the others, emphasizing his lack of interest in Ballard as a topic of discussion. The monologue is a tour de force showcasing McCarthy's ear for speech, but, in suspending our attention to Lester, it also demonstrates the mind of the community that has pushed him away. The only audience he has, apart from our hidden eye, is one that tolerates the unaccountable by putting it on a stage reserved for frightening spectacle.

The last vignette, though less compassionately than the third, attempts to trace some link between Ballard and other members of his family, as if his nature might have incubated in the blood of his descendants. The testimony directs our attention to questions of origin once again, Ballard himself being so far beyond the pale, apparently, that he cannot contain in his own person the explanation:

> They wasn't none of em any account that I ever heard of. I remember his grandaddy, name was Leland, he was gettin a war pension as a old man. Died back in the late twenties. Was supposed to of been in the Union Army. It was a known fact he didn't do nothin the whole war but scout the bushes. They come lookin for him two or three times. Hell, he never did go to war. Old man Cameron tells this and I don't know what cause he'd have to lie. Said they come out there to get Leland Ballard and while they was huntin him in the barn and smokehouse and all he slipped down out of the bushes to where their horse was at and cut the leather off the sergeant's saddle to halfsole his shoes with. (80)

The more obvious implication of this passage is that Lester, like all of his descendants, is meritless, a freeloading burden on his community. Indeed, having been stripped of nearly all of his possessions, he takes from his surroundings, initially setting up a make-shift residence in a run-down cabin and later dwelling in the caves of Sevier County with the many female corpses he extracts from the area. Less obvious, but more interesting, is the implication that Lester might have inherited some of his grandfather's elusiveness. At one point, Lester is forced to take a band of vigilantes to his stash of bodies in the cave, but he easily sneaks away, leaving them to find their own way back out the dark tunnels to the entrance. His resourcefulness far exceeds their force in numbers; he disappears into the dark ahead of their

torches and eventually finds another way out. He is equally resourceful in his ability to sustain his killing spree for as long as he does, systematically adding to his collection of companions under the earth. But Lester is elusive is less tangible ways, as well, and this speaker reminds us that he is not only of no account to the community that has rejected him but also *unaccountable*, beyond comprehension or figuring, from their remote position outside his life.

The last lines of this last vignette, constituting the last lines of the entire first section of the novel, anticipate our struggle with accountability as we grapple with Lester's elusive character (or nature) in the pages that follow:

> I'll say one thing about Lester though. You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn't outstrip em all.
>
> That's the god's truth.
>
> Talking about Lester . . .
>
> You all talk about him. I got supper waitin on me at the house. (81)

Marking at once the final retreat of the community from and the threshold of our imminent immersion into the life of Lester Ballard, this final exchange comes across as McCarthy's last warning shot to the reader. When the discussion dies of exhaustion, so does Part One come to a close, leaving us with a rather commanding invitation to turn the page and pick up the thread ("You all talk about him"). The beginning of Part Two is a turning point in several ways. The kind of behavior in which we see Lester engage drastically worsens. There are no more testimonial vignettes to break up the accumulating force of his descent so that we are essentially left to ourselves to process our own impressions.[13] We have the sense that the space between the sections is a terrifying threshold beyond which Sevier County citizens

cannot follow and would not if they could. Yet the reader can and must, if he has any hope of answering the questions that have gathered momentum from the opening pages of the novel. Here is where we ultimately commit (at least on the first read) to our role as witness, not yet certain what exactly we stand to see or to what end we will make use of the images and behaviors waiting for us on the other side.

As if to reinforce that we have crossed over in some way, Part Two begins like a new narrative, with a conventional opening that we might expect to read on the first page of a novel: "On a cold winter morning in the early part of December Ballard came down off Frog Mountain with a brace of squirrels hanging from his belt and emerged onto the Frog Mountain road" (85). What follows is one of the more extended episodes in *Child of God*, full of graphic images that painstakingly detail Ballard's first sexual union, a threshold and new beginning of its own kind. The scene recalls an earlier moment when he squats outside a car wherein a couple is engaged; his sexual outlet in that scene is to hide behind the fender and masturbate (19-20). We expect the same when he approaches the car this time, but unusual circumstances allow Ballard to look more closely:

> He made his way along by the roadside growth until he was within thirty feet of the car and there he stood watching. . . .
>
> There was no sign of anyone in the car. The windows were fogged but it didn't look like there was anyone in there.
>
> He came out of the bushes and walked down past the automobile. He was just a squirrelhunter going on down the road if it was anybody's business. When he passed the side of the automobile he looked in. The front seat was empty but in the back were two people half naked sprawled together. A bare thigh. An arm upflung. A

> hairy pair of buttocks. Ballard had kept on walking. Then he stopped. A pair of eyes staring with lidless fixity.
>
> He turned and came back. With eyes uneasy he peered down through the window. Out of the disarray of clothes and the contorted limbs another's eyes watched sightlessly from a bland white face. It was a young girl. (85-86)

McCarthy traces his slow approach to emphasize how our own building sense of tension is generated by his compulsive curiosity. Watching Lester negotiate risk and reward, we are in unfamiliar territory, a little frightened, for different reasons, by what he might find in the vehicle. When his lidless eyes meet the sightless eyes of the dead girl, a parody of romantic magnetism, he locks on an object of desire that, however lifeless, is more accessible to him than any he has encountered from his usual distance.

In turn, we are permitted to observe, in this scene and hereafter, deeds that at once actualize his potential for iniquity and demonstrate his strange mixture of helplessness and control. Shortly after Lester confirms that the couple is dead, the narrative records in painful objectivity what he can see, and what we can see:

> He could see one of the girl's breasts. Her blouse was open and her brassiere was pushed up around her neck. Ballard stared for a long time. Finally he reached across the dead man's back and touched the breast. It was soft and cool. He stroked the full brown nipple with the ball of his thumb. . . . Leaning over the seat he took hold of the man and tried to pull him off the girl. The body sprawled heavily, the head lolled. Ballard got him pulled sideways but he was jammed against the back of the front seat. He could see the girl better now. He reached and stroked her other breast.

He did this for a while and then he pushed her eyes shut with his thumb. She was young and very pretty. (87-88)

Whether our initiation in Part One has prepared all of us to read this passage productively is difficult to say. The graphic accuracy, the mindless description of Lester engaged in overtly sexual exploration of a corpse is at once exhilarating (not to say pleasurable) and off-putting. This mixed emotion indicates the potential here for the act of reading to transform into an act of indulgence.[14] On the one hand, we might yield to the rhetorical audacity of the language as a sign of the author's authenticity; on the other hand, we might yield to our own disgust that the author would set aside all standards of decency simply to make Lester more shocking or more disgusting. Either response, among many other instinctual responses, would dodge an opportunity to raise important questions about why we will (or should) keep reading anyway. After vigilantly double-checking for passersby, Lester returns to the car:

The girl lay with her eyes closed and her breasts peeking from her open blouse and her pale thighs spread. Ballard climbed over the seat.

The dead man was watching him from the floor of the car. Ballard kicked his feet out of the way and picked the girl's panties up from the floor and sniffed at them and put them in his pocket. He looked out the rear window and he listened. Kneeling there between the girl's legs he undid his buckle and lowered his trousers.

A crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she did not hear him? When he'd finished he raised up and looked out again. The windows were fogged. He took the hem of the girl's skirt with which to wipe himself. (88-89)

Perhaps at the moment McCarthy expects that most would look for him, the narrator steps in to distill a concept from the pool of unfiltered detail. In the throes of lust, Lester becomes "a crazed gymnast," a performer without design. Indeed, the narrative comment is an act of self-imposed censorship. We are permitted not to imagine his movements, fortunately. However, filling the space emptied of detail is a rhetorical question that involves the reader in another way: "Who could say she did not hear him?" On one level, the implication is that Lester needs only *believe* that his partner is emotionally present and it will be so; indeed, his longing for a companion includes but also exceeds mere physical contact. But the question also reminds us that Lester is in fact entirely alone in that vehicle, the same way he is alone in his house with his stuffed carnival prizes. She clearly cannot say she does not hear him, and the man on the floorboard cannot say she does not hear him. The narrative point of view directs the question our way, as well, inviting us to acknowledge the inherent strangeness in our ability to observe at all, let alone stand by and dismiss his attempt to reach out to another as another insane act.

After he loses the first corpse in the house fire, and is not fortunate enough to find another already dead, he resorts to the brutality we associate with sociopathic serial killers. Only twice in the novel do we actually see Lester kill a woman, though Sheriff Turner pulls seven bodies from his vault in the end. Both instances are sufficient, however, to frame the rest. After he fails to persuade her to expose herself to him, Lester kills the first time from outside the girl's house, unsure of himself but quite premeditated in his strategy:

> All right, he said. If that's the way you want it. He went to the door and opened it and went out and shut the door behind him. He heard her latch it. The night out there was clear and cold and the moon sat in a great ring in the sky. Ballard's breath rose

> whitely toward the dark of the heavens. He turned and looked back at the house. She was watching from the corner of the window. He went on down the broken driveway to the road and crossed the ditch and went along the edge of the yard and crossed back up to the house. . . . He could see the back of her head above the sofa. He watched her for a while and then raised the rifle and cocked it and laid the sights on her head. He had just done this when suddenly she rose from the sofa and turned facing the window. Ballard fired. (118)

Because she does not die instantly, the murder becomes an opportunity for the reader to see Lester's cruelty, not merely his task-oriented detachment. Once inside the house again, he is no longer an insecure voyeur but a violent monster:

> She was lying in the floor but she was not dead. She was moving. She seemed to be trying to get up. A thin stream of blood ran across the yellow linoleum rug and seeped away darkly in the wood of the floor. Ballard gripped the rifle and watched her. Die, goddamn you, he said. She did. (119)

Having lost his composure, he clumsily sets about to light the house on fire (with an idiot child still sitting inside) and remembers at the last moment to save his rifle. His frustration recalls the first fire, in which he accidentally destroys his first love, but the humor and pathos of that moment is not present here. Instead, his panic seems nothing more than insufficient consequence for crossing over into a dimension more distasteful and less forgiving than his sexual perversion.

The second time we watch him kill, on this occasion from point-blank range, he has gained an efficiency that only comes with practice. Indeed, some months have passed and we have crossed into the third section of the novel when the end of Lester's campaign begins. He

makes no attempt to hide himself on this visit to the turnaround. Whether he is no longer ashamed of his intentions or is no longer satisfied by fantasy alone is unclear; his confidence, however, is sure:

> When he got to the truck he opened the door and flicked the light on and trapped in its yellow beam the white faces of a boy and a girl in each other's arms.
>
> The girl was the first to speak. She said: He's got a gun.
>
> Ballard's head was numb. They seemed assembled there the three of them for some purpose other than his. He said: Let's see your driver's license. (149)

He does not even make an attempt to rape the girl after shooting the boy; rather, he restricts his involvement, orders her out the car, and arranges her for neat and tidy execution:

> Out. Come on out of there.
>
> What are you goin to do?
>
> That's for me to know and you to find out.
>
> The girl pushed the boy from her and slid across the seat and stepped out into the mud of the road.
>
> Turn around, Ballard said.
>
> What are you goin to do?
>
> Just turn around and never mind.
>
> I have to go to the bathroom, the girl said.
>
> You don't need to worry about that, said Ballard.
>
> Turning her by the shoulder he laid the muzzle of the rifle at the base of her skull and fired. (150-51)

Like the girl, who drops “as if the bones in her body had been liquefied,” Lester’s demeanor immediately buckles, as he tries desperately to outrun the quick, petrifying effects of death on a body: “He was breathing harshly and his eyeballs were wild and white. He laid her down in the woods not fifty feet from the road and threw himself on her, kissing the still warm mouth and feeling under her clothes” (151). His satisfaction is frustrated again by two unforeseeable circumstances: the girl has wet herself and the boy, miraculously still alive, drives away in the truck. The scene ends with Lester returning to the scene of his crime, more than an hour later because he has chased the truck down the mountain, to find his rifle and corpse of the girl “cold and wooden with death”:

> Ballard howled curses until he was choking and then he knelt and worked her around onto his shoulders and struggled up. Scuttling down the mountain with the thing on his back he looked like a man beset by some ghast succubus, the dead girl riding him with legs bowed akimbo like a monstrous frog. (152-53)

This final image is a stark foreshadowing of Lester’s inevitable doom and one of the few times when the narrator offers us some language of judgment. At this stage, he seems less like a man suffering from loneliness or rejection, and more like a man bending under the weight of his crimes, one victim of which becomes here a singular embodiment of an ancient plague visited upon the iniquitous.

Images like this one are partly responsible for the ambiguous tone of *Child of God*. The simile itself is precise enough, at least visually, but surrounded as it is by philosophically silent narration, we hear the reverberations of irony as easily as we might discover a new sense of direction. As difficult as our reading experience is when we are left alone with our eyes, the narrator as absent to us as we are to Lester, any relief from emotional distance is

met with confusion. If the image “monstrous frog” is meant to have punitive implications, we might wonder why a corpse is given this characteristic. Does McCarthy not dispel the notion of divine justice as soon as he conjures it by coupling an Old Testament figure of dread with a sexually playful image, “the dead girl riding him with legs bowed akimbo”? Are we not as free to laugh at the silliness of the comparison as to ponder how divine justice might still hold sway in a world inhabited by Lester Ballard or how we might participate in that justice? This question points to an important concern in assessing the moral position exhibited by a work of art, especially one that does not openly and consistently guide the reader to a particular conclusion. Given the incongruity of the simile and richness of the language, we are perhaps meant to hear what we want to hear. However, the shift in register also permits us to stop reading for a moment and consider how this passage does not seem to cohere with the rest. The narrative tone of voice at this moment might be ambiguous, but it has clearly shifted to one that signals narratorial presence. For a moment, we are not alone in our observations, and the confusion of that discovery (or reminder) gives us pause; instead of feeling that our guide has returned, we sense that we are being watched and have always been watched. In the span of that pause lies our ethical moment; we can think about what we want to hear, instead of simply listening for it, because someone else seems to care.

The identity of that “someone” is equally ambiguous; the line between narrator and author could be as thick or thin as we have a notion to believe, there being little to verify one way or another. By occasionally shifting to language that gives a greater impression of bias than his usual objective style, McCarthy might be exposing his own moral position through the voice of the narrator, or he might only be suggesting that assertions of judgment, however valid or necessary, are nothing more than momentary detours from the more demanding task

of explaining or understanding that which seems alien to us. Or he might be demonstrating that even the most disciplined and objective teller will or must eventually yield to the ease of subjective interest, much like the townspeople in the vignettes, because the burden of pure observation is too heavy to carry. Whatever the true reason, the narrator offers comments about Lester that suggest he is less than human, deficient in some human virtue, or something altogether inhuman. He is often compared to an animal: “a misplaced and loveless simian shape scuttling across the turnaround” (20), “his head tilted like a dog” (132), “scuttling down the mountain” (153), “scuttling with his ragged chattel down stone tunnels within the mountain” (154), peering “like a groundhog” (155), “gibbering, a sound not quite crying that echoed from the walls of the grotto like the mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes” (159), and “his bare toes gripping the rocks like an ape” (184). He resembles a fabled creature of dread, the fairy tale monster hidden in a cave: “some crazy winter gnome” (107), “a crazed mountain troll” (152), or “a part-time ghoul” (174). At times, he is rendered fully inanimate to exaggerate his separation: “lying there on his back with his mouth open like a dead man” (16), “constipated gargoyle” (46), “eyes dark and huge and vacant” (107), “his voice beneath the arches of the bridge came back hollow and alien” (132), “a gothic doll in illfit clothes, its carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape” (140), “a small thing brooding there” (154), and “this thing” (173). Even when the narrator seems to acknowledge Lester’s humanness, something is awry: “half crazy” (15), “his narroweyed and studied indifference” (28), “a man much for himself” (41), “a figure of wretched arrogance” (41), “sullen reprobate” (56), “a crazed gymnast” (88), “the rifle aloft in one arm now like some demented hero or bedraggled parody of a patriotic poster come aswamp” (156), his “shadow veering dark and mutant over the cupped stone walls” (159), “in a thin white gown in a thin

white room, false acolyte or antiseptic felon, a practitioner of ghastliness" (174), "the otherwise blank of his corroded mind" (175), and "a weedshaped onearmed human swaddled up in outsized overalls and covered all over with red mud" (192). All of these examples characterize Lester based on impressions of action and appearance, not through action and appearance itself; as a result, they indicate the presence of a mind, not merely an eye. Though they rarely emerge from beneath the surface of mere detail, they give us license, if not encouragement, to exercise our corresponding faculties. Filling the tenuous double role of objective observer and potential witness, we can safely say that (among other possibilities) McCarthy is asking us to think about the nature of judgment, the language of judgment, and how that language is tied to the nature of judgment itself. The act of declaring that Lester is an abomination or some inhuman creation might distill an idea we would like to believe is true, but the act of declaring the idea does not necessarily make it real or, more importantly, significant.

There are more sympathetic moments, as well, but they do not take the form of direct narratorial statement. Rather, we are permitted to observe Lester either *acting* human despite his social ineptness or mental derangement or *being* human despite our overwhelming desire to know that he could not possibly be. For instance, after laboring for hours to carry his first corpse back home, he builds a fire and rests, the way a husband might:

> Then he turned to the girl. He took off all her clothes and looked at her, inspecting her body carefully, as if he would see how she were made. He went outside and looked in through the window at her lying naked before the fire. When he came back in he unbuckled his trousers and stepped out of them and laid next to her. He pulled the blanket over them. (91-92)

Ending the chapter in which we witness the depth of Lester's sexual perversity, this passage raises the level of pathos so high in the opposite direction that we are careful not to forget that the woman he treats so tenderly is indeed deceased. Still, we notice something that resembles emotion in his actions. He is careful with her, idealizes her presence in the home he has opened to her, and lies close to her in the warmth of a fire and a blanket. The line "as if he would see how she were made" is of course ambiguous, but he *seems* here to have at least one metaphysical thought, beyond mere curiosity about her physical shape. Later he demonstrates a limited capacity for self-awareness when he sees his image in a pool of spring water: "Ballard leaned his face to the green water and drank and studied his dishing visage in the pool. He halfway put his hand to the water as if he would touch the face that watched there but then he rose and wiped his mouth" (127). Interestingly, he *studies* the image of his face but is not willing to make any contact. Unlike Narcissus, he does not fall in love with his own reflection; rather, he leaves it behind with another gesture of indifference. But he does show some sensitivity to the notion of self when he is confronted with a sign of his own existence. Looking up at the sky from inside his cave dwelling, Lester has another moment of reflection, this time without the tentative "as if" to cast any doubt: "he watched the hordes of cold stars sprawled across the smokehole and wondered what stuff they were made of, or himself" (141). For the first time in the novel, we are invited to see that Ballard is not the animal he otherwise seems to be. He unambiguously *wonders* about a profound question of origins and counts himself among the numbers of objects in the universe that seem to beg for an account. This moment appropriately ends Part Two of the novel and segues into the final third of the book, which primarily treats the investigation, capture, incarceration, and death of Lester Ballard.

Part Three of *Child of God* promotes an additional level of sympathy for Lester that complements the last stages and inevitable end of his murderous campaign. In the depths of his iniquity, he seems more and more aware of his own wretchedness. We learn, as he eyes two hawks engaged in the sky, that "he did not know how hawks mated but he knew that all things fought" (169). From his own stone perch, he seems to realize the pathetic truth of all his striving for connection and permanence: "He watched the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the gray fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees were spreading. Squatting there he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry" (170). Having stood by to watch all the destructive force of Lester's own "progress," we might dismiss these words as, at best, ironic sentimentality from a mocking narrator. However, we might also consider that Lester is moving toward a state of humility born of frustration, self-loathing, and self-pity. We cannot be sure that we are meant to sympathize with him, or that doing so will bring us to see the point of McCarthy's work, but Lester does seem to give up believing that he will, or can, find any way to make his life worthwhile, and he is ill-equipped from the beginning to cope with such a discovery.[15] His dream soon after this episode crystallizes this sense of futility:

> He dreamt that night that he rode through woods on a low ridge. Below him he could see deer in a meadow where the sun fell on the grass. The grass was still wet and the deer stood in it to their elbows. He could feel the spine of the mule rolling under him and he gripped the mule's barrel with his legs. Each leaf that brushed his face deepened his sadness and dread. Each leaf he passed he'd never pass again. They rode over his face like veils, already some yellow, their veins like slender bones where the sun shone through them. He had resolved himself to ride on for he could

not turn back and the world that day was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death. (170-71)

This dream looks ahead to the end, but Lester in his last days also looks back to his time as a child, again unable to make contact with that time or find any footing there: "Lying awake in the dark of the cave he thought he heard a whistling as he used to when he was a boy in his bed in the dark and he'd hear his father on the road coming home whistling, a lonely piper" (170). Later, after escaping the clutches of his would-be executioners and emerging once again from the caves below the earth, Lester sees a small boy in a bus with his face against the rear window: "There was nothing out there to see but he was looking anyway" (191). Unlike his earlier dismissal of his reflection in the spring, Lester cannot walk away from this vision: "He was trying to fix in his mind where he'd seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. This gave him the fidgets and though he tried to shake the image of the face in the glass it would not go." His inability to make it go signifies a new level of vulnerability, as if the container holding his emotions in check has cracked. Indeed, his body is so starved that his physical strength can no longer sustain his will. Seeping back to the surface, those emotions are the last remnant of the man Lester might have been and the only remaining promise that he could emerge on this side of his transgressive journey a renewed, if not redeemed, character.[16] He has come back into the light of day from the darkness beneath the earth, but he seems more at wit's end than at the beginning of a new life. When he turns himself in shortly afterwards, we are not prepared to feel a sense of justice or growth as much as relief that he has lost all power, at last: "I'm supposed to be here, he said" (192).

These extreme moments of vulnerability do restore some balance to our impressions of Lester forged by the extreme language of judgment used by the narrator at other times, but

our point of view does not reach equilibrium. We are no more equipped to pass judgment on his actions or categorize his life because Lester does not take on the roundness or depth of a complex character. The narrator's catalogue of epithets keeps Ballard at a distance, branding him an outsider so far beyond the pale that we cannot *know* him; and whether his judgments happen to agree with our own assessments at the time or seem at times too harsh, they do not expose that part of him that would explain his identity. The episodes in which Lester seems most human and sympathetic are equally limited in scope. Although we glimpse a more sensitive dimension of his personhood, one that the narrator seems less inclined to capture in stark terms like "sullen reprobate" or "demented hero," our view of Lester gains no insightful depth. Even at his peak times of reflection and sadness, we have little access to details we cannot actually see, only signs of the kind of complexity that would allow our intimacy with him to grow.[17] Whether we seek or dread such intimacy, our judgments without it, born either of disgust or sympathy, are useless gestures of self-assurance. And even if self-assurance were our goal (which it often is), the narrator only *seems* to offer a neatly packaged choice between two extreme points of view (or a clear picture that we can evaluate from a safe distance); this illusion eventually gives way to the unavoidable ambiguity that begins the novel: "A child of God much like yourself perhaps" (4). The word "perhaps" echoes in our reading mind when we see Lester trapped in the cave, beneath a thin crack of light in the rock ceiling: "this drowsing captive looked so inculcate in the fastness of his hollow stone you might have said he was half right who thought himself so grievous a case against the gods" (189). Offering no more guidance than it has all along,[18] the second-person pronoun here, coupled with the subjunctive tense, reminds us only that the narrator has no intention of

revealing the truth about Lester, or pretending that there is a truth about Lester that language is capable of holding.

The impenetrable phrase “you might have said he was half right” has, underneath its slippery surface, at least one definite implication: we can hardly rely on the narration of this novel to guide us toward a resolution. At this moment, we might expect the narrator to clarify what is in Lester’s mind, to elaborate on the validity of his self-assessment: “so grievous a case against the gods.” Instead, this abstract formulation creates its own ambiguity. As “a case against the gods,” Lester could be an insult to their creative power, a blemish on their otherwise magnificent work. From this point of view, he would seem to acknowledge his iniquity as an injustice that would rightly anger the gods. However, the word “case” also suggests that he might be an argument against their existence in the first place, an example to demonstrate that religious stories of origin or providence are incapable of accounting for the most despondent of creatures. From this point of view, he would still be acknowledging that his life has been wretched but that his wretchedness is a path the gods would never permit. The narrator makes either reading a possibility, however far apart those readings might be on the interpretive spectrum. Lester’s actual thought is obscured by a deliberately vague word; as a result, the moral implications of his transgression are, at the very moment they might have gained some definitive shape, left indeterminable. But our frustration does not end there; this ambiguity is shrouded by another layer of indirection: we “might have said” that Lester is “half right.” If we “might have said,” what condition presently determines that we do not say so? And if we do not say that Lester is “half right,” is he completely right, entirely off-track? Or is the formulation nothing more than a joke, an understatement designed to mock Ballard’s late recognition of such an obvious truth? We also might hear in the tone an

ironic nod to our own feelings of ridicule toward Lester, who only now, virtually buried alive, can admit that something might be wrong with him. The sheer number of possibilities is the problem; the more we stretch our minds to consider all the sensible interpretations, the less guided we feel and the less rewarding seems our effort to figure anything out at all. We even have cause to wonder whether McCarthy has created a passive narrator because he himself is ethically lazy and too quick to place all responsibility on our shoulders. Even worse, he might be ridiculing our impulse to seek explanation. To give the author benefit of the doubt, we could assume that he does not know any more than anyone could were he actually standing next to Lester in the same cavernous dark. But should he not know more, or know better, if he is willing to place a man like Lester at the center of our attention? Are we doomed, like Lester, to "cast about the stars for some kind of guidance" and find nothing we can trust (190)? Do we keep looking when there is "nothing out there to see" (191)?

These questions are pivotal in our ethical assessment of *Child of God*. From one point of view, our lack of guidance would seem symptomatic of an authorial negligence that runs counter to the rigorous commitment asked of the reader. However, McCarthy is exercising a high level of discipline when he withholds the narrator's guiding hand and a high degree of honesty when he has the narrator so shamelessly act as if he might extend it. He refrains from helping us see beneath the crude surface or pretending that the truth underneath *is* plain so that we will raise questions about authorial propriety and the value of unrewarded effort. In fact, McCarthy interrupts the story at one point to voice pressing questions that are usually neglected in the act of telling:

> He came up flailing and sputtering and began to thrash his way toward the line of willows that marked the submerged creek back. He could not swim, but how would

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

A stylistic echo of our introduction to Ballard at the beginning of the novel, this passage not only reflects McCarthy's interest in accounting for his authorial choices with respect to the fate of our protagonist but also points to subsequent questions that help the reader come to terms with his own frustration in the face of mystery. The flooded creek is an uncontainable force and an obvious threat to any man who would try to cross, so it seems appropriate that Lester might easily meet his end. But the rhetorical question "how would you drown him?" suggests that his life is sustained by a force even more powerful. In this case, "his wrath" might be sufficient, but the narrator suggests, instead, that "some halt in the way of things seems to work here." This concession is in some ways the most encouraging statement of the novel for the reader who has struggled to find a justification for Ballard's rampage. Though it provides no answer, it does acknowledge a "way of things" that would not tolerate Lester if it were given sway and so vindicates our inability to embrace him as "one of us." At the same time, we are not excused from *seeing* him; indeed, McCarthy has brought the *story* to a halt so that we think about what we have seen, perhaps again try to make sense of the man in our line of sight.[19]

The imperative “see him,” then, reminds us that we have to look before we can expect to comprehend, but it also invites us to turn our attention inward, where we can visualize the developing concept of Lester in the multi-dimensional space of our minds. Our attention is turned inward at the beginning of the novel as well, but here the inward turn is accompanied by direct questions related to our reasoning, not an offhand suggestion that we might share an origin with a dispossessed “child of God”; in other words, the narrator acknowledges that our conception of Lester has evolved since our introduction, and now that we have spent time watching him, he warns against using our observations to draw fraudulent pictures. So this time, instead of helping us zero in on Lester’s crude physical characteristics or demeanor, he proposes a line of thinking that we might already have begun to entertain: “You could say that he’s sustained by his fellow men, like you” (156). The grammatical structure of this statement is crucial to our reading it correctly, specifically the comma placement before the comparative term “like.” In the earlier comparative construction “like yourself perhaps,” this comma is missing, indicating that we are meant to compare ourselves to the immediately preceding term “a child of God.” In the later comparison, “like you” is immediately preceded by the term “fellow men,” but the dividing comma suggests that we are meant to compare ourselves not to these men, but to the entire preceding declaration. Indeed, rewording the sentence shows that the comma placement permits rearrangement without changing the meaning: “You could say that, *like you*, he’s sustained by his fellow men.” The significance of the comma, then, is to make sure we continue to test our identification with Lester, not with the “fellow men” who might sustain him. Following the initial proposal is a clarifying cascade of extensions, first of the verb, “has peopled the shore with them calling to him,” then of the object, “a race that gives suck to the maimed and crazed,” and finally of the

relative clause, “that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it.” By the end of this chain of fragments, if we have forgotten the conditional verb that frames the entire construction (“you could say”), we might say we have found the core idea of *Child of God*: that Lester stands center stage in this novel *because* he is a precious scapegoat, a depraved martyr who carries inside him the sins of the community. Our task of watching him, in this case, would be to visit an outcast who, like a quarantined leper, keeps the infectious disease at bay. This reading would be a convenient way to reconcile our disgust and our sympathy, but we must turn away from it like a temptation as soon as the narrator shifts direction: “But they want this man’s life.” In other words, we *cannot* say “that he’s sustained by his fellow men,” or that he “has peopled the shore with them calling to him.” Those fellow men are *not* a “race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed.” Rather, they pursue him in the night, and Lester knows they want to destroy him; he would not otherwise attempt to cross the flooded creek to find another dwelling.[20] In the interest of interpretive consistency, the narrator suspends his telling in order to steer us away from an erroneous course, but he does not give us the bearings of the right one. Instead, he asks the original question again, adding emphasis and clarification, as if the question itself carries more meaning than any potential answer: “How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him?” McCarthy does not go on to give us an answer, but we would be remiss to accuse him of not caring about our need for one. In fact, he shows extensive concern for our search by eliminating the one that would oversimplify our protagonist. In doing so, he renews our commitment to keep our minds oriented to what we *can* know and to testify rightly, to answer only the questions that have answers and even then to refrain from answers that do little more that set the questions aside.[21]

Yet if we remember that any testimony we could offer will never reach an ear inside the fictional world inhabited by Lester Ballard, does our commitment to testify doom our reading experience to some purgatorial futility? Do we stand to be tested when the questions we are asked have only rhetorical value? To some extent, *Child of God* leaves us stranded in a winter landscape, able to see no deeper than Lester can: "In the frozen roadside weeds were coiled ribbons of frost, you'd never figure how they came to be" (128). Instead of pondering their shape, he eats one and goes on his way. If our task of reading extends no further, if we can never figure how Lester has come to be, we might be inclined to dismiss the narrative as an outright waste of concern, or nothing beyond the assault on our sensibilities that it so often seems to be.[22] There is nothing to prevent this response except a lingering sense that we might exceed our jurisdiction as readers if we insisted on a clear path to comprehension, or on a level of understanding that is sometimes not to be had. Indeed, we will fail to appreciate the ethical value of this novel, let alone evaluate it sufficiently, if we do not entertain how we might benefit from cognitive deprivation. If in the face of mystery we resent our ignorance and the feelings of dissatisfaction that accompany it, then we will fail to discover how the act of reading, however frustrating or offensive, can have the same edifying influence that we associate with great acts of faith. Unlike Ballard in the cave, searching for a way out, we must not assume that cracks in the ceiling through which we might find exit will always have light behind them: "In the end he came to a small room with a thin shaft of actual daylight leaning in from the ceiling. It occurred to him only now that he might have passed other apertures to the upper world in the nighttime and not known it" (188). We can hardly blame him for not seeing those other openings, but one reason he misses them is that he never stops to wait. He is constantly on the move, driven by the same desperation, perhaps, that drives us

to find an explanation for his iniquity. He responds the same way to the "coiled ribbons of frost"; it never occurs to him that he should sit still for a time and ponder their origin before moving on again.

When Lester is lucky enough to discover an opening of daylight above him, he sets to work with the diligence of a man who is certain of his reward: "climbing up again he set to work, hammering now at actual stone, stratified layers of it that flaked off, Ballard using the larger chunks to pry and dig with. Before dark fell he raised his head up through the earth and looked out" (190). Light through a fissure in the rock shows him the way, but when he breaks through, he emerges into another darkness. We might take this image as an analogue for the kind of discovery that is available to us in reading this novel; groping from one kind of darkness, our descent into the world of Lester Ballard, to another, our ultimate lack of insight into his origins or his nature, we fail perhaps because we are too confident in our own methods of reasoning. Our final observation of Lester, after his death, is a case in point:

> His body was shipped to the state medical school at Memphis. There in a basement room he was preserved with formalin and wheeled forth to take his place with other deceased persons newly arrived. He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. At the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service. (194)

The question raised by this passage, albeit somewhat sarcastically, is "what do we have to learn from Lester Ballard?" On one level, the answer is simple. As one of many corpses, his anatomical structure can educate medical students. But we are meant to contemplate this question on a deeper level, especially given the incongruous comparison between the future doctors gathered around his dissected cadaver and "those haruspices of old," ancient priests who divined the future using signs found in the entrails of animals. As quickly as he seems to entertain it, McCarthy dismisses the idea that the key to Lester's nature might be found in his organs. In turn, the question we have been asking the entire time ("what can we learn *about* Lester Ballard?") is here associated with a superstition, an obsolete method of reasoning: the medical students "perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations." Even if we believe the superstition, all we learn is that Lester is indeed a monster and that he might not be the worst monster of all. In order to escape the banality of truistic assertion, we are better off pondering realities that have been left unexamined, *because* they are hidden from view, than trying to stretch too thin the possibility that our observations might lead to a satisfying level of understanding.

This act of submission, admitting ignorance in the face of mystery, also requires us to suspend our inclination either to judge or to sympathize with Lester. Doing so does not mean that we necessarily stand somewhere between; we are not forced into moral compromise or philosophical relativism. Rather, we are free to embrace, even with the knowledge we have gained, a fundamental and inescapable innocence, to confront questions that seem to have no answer, and to bear witness to our dissatisfaction with ambiguity. Our reflection in the space of that freedom is the ethical center of our reading experience. We might naturally lean more toward judgment or sympathy, according to our moral sensibilities, but the *ethical* value of

McCarthy's novel is the opportunity to explore the implications of adopting either position. Our dilemma is not whether to judge or to sympathize but whether and how to refrain from either response given our ignorance of the mind and heart beneath Lester's crude surface. On this level, we can identify with him; we are dispossessed of the power that would allow us to fulfill our promise to testify. In the place of bearing witness to Lester's moral responsibility or his claim on our compassion, we must bear witness to our own powerlessness to measure such things, however dissatisfying this admission might be philosophically. By showing us only signs of Lester's internal life, the narrator seems to demonstrate the true ignorance of the community, giving us the opportunity to see their limitations and, by extension, our own. We are given almost zero access to detail beneath the horrifying surface of this character so that we might see more clearly the dishonesty and distortion of the public forum in matters of morality and justice. Our dissatisfaction, then, is the rich product of our observations and the limited point of view that provides them. The energy we have expended to learn something about Lester, to assess the boundaries of our identification with him, has not been wasted. Indeed, the act of reading this novel has clarified the essential responsibility of any witness: to abstain from assertion without absolute confidence and to qualify statements born of uncertainty. Furthermore, by offering the burden of witness to the silent reader, who must direct his testimony inward, McCarthy has enriched the act of reading with a sacred value. We are not merely readers in relation to our dilemma with *Child of God*; our experience with this novel raises ethical questions about oath and discretion that extend to larger spheres of responsibility outside the act of reading.

Whether we should embrace the burden is a moral question left to each reader, but McCarthy has extended his invitation in most dramatic fashion, reinforcing his work with the

iron-strength of an ethical frame. He is like the blacksmith that Lester visits near the end of Part One when he needs an old stubby axehead sharpened. The blacksmith is quick to advise that "you cain't just grind a axe and grind it" (71). He sets to pounding out the metal, flaring the edge as wide as it will go and stay strong, explaining the reason for each blow. An artist to the core, the blacksmith sees the value in what he does and aims to teach those who will listen about his craft. Above all, his craft is a delicate process of concentration, foresight, and timing. But his goal, at least in repairing the ax, is to reconstitute its toughness, so he must exercise restraint: "Some people will poke around at somethin else and leave the tool they're heatin to perdition but the proper thing is to fetch her out the minute she shows the color of grace" (72). This statement can be read as another analogue for our reading experience, but this time we are not meant to identify with the character. McCarthy seems to speak directly through the voice of the blacksmith in this scene, articulating one tenet of his artistic creed. The need for restraint in rendering a blunt tool malleable aligns with McCarthy's narrative restraint in revealing too much about the inner life of Lester, despite his lack of restraint in showing us the surface.[23] He seems to be tempering us so that our ability to see will bear long use. Moreover, the revelation for which we hope is well-protected behind layers of obscurity that sharpness alone cannot penetrate.

Given permission to fall back on our prejudices or our sentimentality, we could testify quite easily, ignoring the obscurity, but our insight would be fraudulent, dulling our senses to the truth beyond our present way of looking. The blacksmith scene bears witness, then, to the artistic integrity of McCarthy, and his desire to pass that integrity on to us. "It's like a lot of things," the blacksmith tells Lester as he hands him the new blade. "Do the least part of it wrong and ye'd just as well to do it all wrong" (74). McCarthy uses an elliptical narrative

style to turn us into more reflective readers. Molding his story around the parts that are left out and then holding us accountable to those missing pieces, McCarthy instructs as he tells. Like the blacksmith to Ballard, he says to us, “Reckon you could do it now from watchin?” (74). If we respond the way Ballard does, “do what,” we are just like the townspeople who retreat when the most difficult questions are raised, or else fill in the gaps with their imagined truth to maintain their illusions of order. For Ballard, indeed, threatens that order. He creates gaps in comprehension and gaps in the social structure, just as easily as he removes female bodies from the community or cans of food from a grocery shelf, “picking and choosing among the goods, the cans all marshaled with their labels to the front, wrenching holes in their ordered rows and stacking them on the counter” (124). McCarthy mimics this threat to order in the way he exposes us to Lester and his effect on the community of Sevier County. We look for ways, especially on our first read, to make all the pieces of Lester cohere into a recognizable subject for our assessment, but McCarthy withholds some of those pieces (if he has them at all) so that we can see first and foremost the gaps in *our* comprehension. He lets images pass through our field of vision, as “wasps pass through the laddered light from the barnslats in a succession of strobic moments” (4). But as we learn from the cracks in a cave ceiling when the sun is up or the decaying “shake roof” of Ballard’s cabin in “crazy jigsaw against the winter sky” (95), the gaps are openings through which light can enter. The last thing we should look for, unless we prefer to remain in full darkness, is the pretense of order where confusion has a stronghold.

Notes

[1] Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God* (New York: Vintage International, 1973), p. 51. All further page references to this edition will be made parenthetically.

[2] I do not mean to suggest that the reader now has the freedom to make of this narrative segment whatever he will. McCarthy has indeed given us a final product, but the unpolished surface of the narrative invites us to think about the intersection between perception and narration, between witnessing an event and reading a scene. Other critics have emphasized the fractured surface of *Child of God*. Holloway referred to a "skeletal aesthetic" and "perforated syntax" and claimed that "the constituent elements of the novel remain fragmentary and deracinated, a condition exacerbated by the alarming tendency to switch narrators without warning throughout the book" (87).

[3] See Bartlett for an extended discussion of "the rhetorics of visibility, ways of *seeing*" in this novel: "The aesthetic power of *Child of God* results from McCarthy's superb regulation of narrative distance and perspective, his command of four degrees of proximity to Ballard, four kinds of narrative position with differing visions: the voyeuristic, the oblivious, the blind (blinded by darkness), and—most inventive—the archaeological" (4). The archaeological mode of vision is the basis for McCarthy's fragmented structure and discourse of uncertainty. Extended to the reader, this mode of vision reflects (though leaves unfulfilled) our need to look beneath the surface of literal detail for explanation and meaning.

[4] This reference to warring factions in Medieval Britain, and later, suggests that Ballard, and some of us perhaps, are the product of irreconcilable conflict and so the proverbial battlegrounds of incongruous impulses.

[5] According to Giles, "McCarthy's narrative strategy here is clear: the reader, at this point not really knowing Lester and certainly not having encountered him as murderer and necrophiliac, is not likely to resist such identification" (38). The notion that McCarthy is tricking us into identification is troublesome to me, but it is a possibility among several others born of what I would call an *ambiguous* narrative strategy.

[6] The word "unclean" has an olfactory purpose in this passage, but it also anticipates the perversion that characterizes Ballard's sexual behavior as the novel goes on. By emphasizing the excretory function of Ballard's penis here at the start, McCarthy sets up the focal point of Ballard's voyeuristic and necrophilic lust later.

[7] William Schafer raises the following question: "If Ballard can be accepted as 'a child of God much like yourself perhaps,' how are *we* to understand his actions?" (116). But some readers are simply unwilling to look, thinking by mistake that identification is the central challenge facing the reader. For Richard Brickner, the question of identifying with Lester is moot because *Child of God* is "so lacking in human momentum or point" (7). He claims that "Lester is not demonstrably connected to the rest of us in a way reached without straining" and that the novel is "too self-contained for significant effectiveness on any level, Lester too stupid and Lester's peculiarity too limited. . . . but even if we did care about Lester, it is very unlikely that our concern would be enhanced by watching him dressing and undressing dead girls and getting on top of them" (7). Apparently, this reviewer found the strain on his moral sensibility too much to bear. In contrast, Jarrett acknowledges the ethical value of our ambivalent response to Lester:

> Like his village contemporaries, our desire as readers initially is to distance ourselves from Lester and Lester's deeds by coming to a final, authoritative view of him, his

> actions, and his motives, categorically naming and dismissing him as murderer or necrophile. Yet the title's ambiguity, the authorial voice's moral reticence, and the narrative's matter-of-fact scrutiny of the details of Lester's life frustrate our desire for such an easily achieved interpretive distance. McCarthy's title places his readers in a quandary: to deny Lester's humanity—his status as a "child of God"—jeopardizes not only our egalitarian ideology but our notions of our own humanity. (36-37)

[8] In addition to his spatial displacement, Grammer argues that Lester "casts himself as a reactionary, still hoping to resist the tides of history." The collection of bodies is "Lester's mad protest against history itself, against the passing of time. Among his corpses, there is a timeless order, immunity to change" (27).

[9] According to Bartlett, "the subtext would almost imply the unacknowledged presence of an inquirer who has arrived in Sevier County asking questions about Ballard, perhaps an aspect of the narrator's curiosity" (6). If we further entertain the meta-fictional possibilities in McCarthy's narrative strategy in *Child of God*, the unidentified source of these implied questions might be the reader in search of resolution. In this case, through the act of reading, we are given responses to questions that we need to ask. Also possible is that the responses, by implying the questions, invite us to consider how we might answer, having become witnesses ourselves. Both alternatives underscore accountability as a theme and an aesthetic principle in the novel.

[10] Arnold claims that McCarthy spends the first third of *Child of God* "setting up the *reasons* for Lester's otherwise unimaginable actions, creating a world in which such actions have a cause"; at the same time, "in his growing madness, Lester has no hold on his own identity" (39). Indeed, his identity becomes our greater concern the more elusive it seems.

The reasoning in the first third of the book is ultimately insufficient to shed light on the less accountable *nature* of Lester, that part of him that external causes could actually influence. For a theory of the unconscious political forces at work beneath the surface of the narrative, see Holloway (125-33).

[11] I do not mean that this scene could not possibly serve the interests of a reader seeking the same satisfaction as Ballard. But I would defend McCarthy against accusations of immorality that were based on little more than the possibility his work might be used for pornographic ends. His work might be misunderstood in this way because he does not give clear evidence that his writing *does not* have pornographic potential. Instead, he places great responsibility on the reader to distinguish for himself the several motivations for reading that might coexist at any moment in his mind. The questionable content is, from this ethical point of view, an indispensable element of his fictional world.

[12] The Latin root of "forensic" is *forensis*, meaning "public, of a forum." Making Fate one topic of discussion among the members of Sevier County, McCarthy clearly indicates the link between the legally sanctioned forum we know as the court system and the unofficial forums that arise from community and often have their own methods for enacting public opinion.

[13] Leiter regretted the discontinuation of these vignettes because they allowed him to see a "corresponding reality against which to pit Lester's violent world" (92). Their disappearance is a "detriment" because "we are left with only incisive images strung along a thin plot line, the why and wherefore unexplained." Leiter's dissatisfaction is understandable and common, but it does not justify his criticism. McCarthy is not abandoning a device; he is silencing the community, cutting us off the way Ballard has been cut off.

[14] Referring to one of many "objectionable" scenes in the novel, Giles claims that "*Child of God* is devoted to exploring the boundary between the human and the animal, the spiritual and the material, the rational and the excessive. McCarthy is deliberately assaulting the reader; his aesthetic is inherently transgressive in nature" (34).

[15] A common mistake made by readers is to praise McCarthy (or hold him responsible) for their feelings of sympathy for Lester. Broyard admits that he hesitates to call Lester "evil" because the character seems "so real" to him: "He murders, rapes, vandalizes corpses, sets fires and steals—yet Mr. McCarthy has convinced me that his crimes originated in a reaching for love" (45). Yardley claims that "what makes *Child of God* an unusual and remarkable book is that McCarthy succeeds in making Ballard a sympathetic character. . . . his is a story about a man who loses everything yet carries on, hanging on to life" (1). In a more extended discussion of narrative design and the creation of sympathy, Lang argues that readers are challenged by McCarthy to see Ballard's "underlying humanity" and therefore pity his "moral darkness" (111, 110). All three critics bear witness to reader involvement and to McCarthy's interest in ethical questions, but they seem to make an interpretive leap from their own feelings to the author's design, too quick to answer those questions positively. And if we tried to demonstrate what McCarthy's feelings might be, we would run up against the ambiguity of the narrative voice and the multiple points of view, which leave plenty of room for ironic distance. In the end, sympathy tends to be my response to Ballard as well, but I also know that I can sympathize (or reject) when others, including McCarthy, might not.

[16] According to Schafer, "Ballard realizes his predicament. He is not a mindless animal or an android-like killing machine. He is in deep despair, unable to break out of the net of self, to establish communication with anything beyond" (117). Bell argues that despite being a

"berserk version of fundamental aspects of ourselves," he "retains to the end, by some kind of incomprehensible courage—overcoming more abasement than most humans could imagine, much less bear—the capacity to judge himself" (55).

[17] Giles suggests that "by denying himself narrative access to Lester's consciousness, McCarthy forces the reader to impose his or her own understanding of abnormal psychology on the text" (40). I have two disagreements with this claim. One is that McCarthy does not entirely deny himself access to Lester's thoughts or impressions. The other is that our limited access to Lester's mind does not require us to impose our own assumptions. In fact, we should carefully consider whether McCarthy limits access to the psychological dimension because it fails to answer the questions we are invited to ask about Lester. "In order for McCarthy to commend Lester Ballard to our attention and sympathy," according to Bell,

> it is necessary that he present Lester's story primarily from Lester's own point of view and that he show that his needs and behavior have at least vague affinities with our own. But paradoxically Lester must also remain unanalyzed in order to retain his aspect of mystery, to seem driven finally not by wholly explicable motives but by unknowable chthonic powers; otherwise it becomes too easy to file him away—to incarcerate him, so to speak—in the ordered categories of thought. (65)

[18] There are more than twenty instances in which the narrator either uses the second-person pronoun or addresses the reader with a question. Most of the time, the word "you" precedes a sensory verb such as "see" or "hear"; these shifts in point of view intensify our involvement by letting us experience certain details the way Ballard might: "you could see her drawers" (28), "you could see among the faces a young girl" (65), or "you could hear the old riven oak shakes exploding into flame" (105). These statements, among several others, occur during

heightened states of emotional energy in Lester. Other times, we are addressed as "you" to emphasize that we stand outside of Ballard, watching *him*: "you can see the eyeballs moving, watching" (4). Most importantly, the second-person point of view allows the narrator to address his audience philosophically: "a child of God much like yourself perhaps" (4), "who could say she did not hear him?" (88), "you'd never figure how they came to be" (128), or "you could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you" (156). These shifts punctuate the narrative with a fairly even frequency, but they occur rarely enough to make each one stand out as a reminder that readers of *Child of God* are not left alone nor expected to hide.

[19] One reviewer claims that this passage is an "apostrophe to fate" that "belongs in somebody else's book" (Broyard 45). He is primarily criticizing the shift in style (indicating his stylistic preferences), but I think this criticism is born of a misreading. The use of second person here could be the narrator's way of addressing fate, but this interpretation ignores the various other instances of "you" in the narrative, the first of which clearly asks the *reader* to consider how he might be a child of God like Lester.

[20] This passage is typically misunderstood by critics because they either ignore the comma before "like you" or fail to address the shift in logic that follows the suggestive conditional. For example, Giles cites the passage with the comma left out ("You could say he's sustained by his fellow men like you.") and elides the logical shift ("But they want this man's life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with lanterns and cries of execration."). He then reaches the following conclusion: "'Fellow men like you' belong to a human race that gives birth 'to the maimed and the crazed'; the legacy of such beings is both monstrous and definitively human. Through this dialogical approach, McCarthy is insisting that the reader acknowledge a shared humanness with 'the maimed and the crazed'" (39). But we are never

lumped with the fellow men, and we are eventually told that those fellow men are not, in fact, sustaining Lester at all. Ciuba uses the same passage to support his idea that the reader is both sustainer and victimizer of Lester; we nourish "his desire by providing sustenance for his own fierce resistance" and then become part of the collective desire to destroy him (98-99). A similar mistake is made by Guinn: "McCarthy points out that Ballard comes from a 'race that gives suck to the maimed and crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it'" (100). From here, he concludes that "Ballard's status as a 'child of God much like yourself perhaps' is rendered ironic, and it also ensnares the reader in the same category—into a human race not merely fallen from grace but permanently barred from transcendence by the limits of the physical world and its own insatiable hunger for blood" (100). In this case, the misreading leads to an extreme position about McCarthy's anti-humanism, an ideology that clearly surfaces in the characters and actions of this novel and others but that cannot clearly be assigned to McCarthy, especially, as I argue, if we look at his tactics of accountability and the ethical dilemmas associated with the act of reading.

[21] In his review of *Child of God*, Robert Coles addresses McCarthy's restraint in a similar way: "The author is not indifferent to our curiosity; he simply cannot, for reasons of his own as a novelist, oblige us" (88). But those reasons are not entirely hidden from us: "It is as if the author thinks his character is beyond scrutiny—possessed of a nature and a destiny that lead to the impersonal collisions of the *Oresteia*" (89). As I have tried to lay out in elaborate detail, McCarthy's task is "ambitious and enormously difficult—to tell his readers that we are not as knowing or in control of our lives as we assume" (90). Though we are permitted to watch Lester, "we never come close to understanding him" (Grumbach 28).

[22] Walter Sullivan vehemently criticizes *Child of God* on this level: “In spite of all the effective writing and the generation of dramatic tension, it is not a consummated work of art but an affront to decency on every level” (*Requiem* 71). Winchell writes that it is “calculated to produce revulsion on nearly every page” but acknowledges that “critics are inclined to give [McCarthy] the benefit of the doubt and assume that some higher seriousness redeems his gross sensationalism” (300). Both accusations seem to address McCarthy’s subject matter more than his pictorial description, but neither seems to consider that the author might be just as disgusted as the reader by the images he is willing to conjure.

[23] According to Asrelsky, restraint is also a quality of McCarthy’s “pictorial” prose, which helps distance “the novel’s shocking violence and sexuality” (153). I agree that McCarthy uses a distant tone in order to encourage us to remain objective, but that objectivity is always threatened by how *close* we are to the surface. His detail is the most forceful aspect of the narrative. His restraint is more noticeable in the way he limits his exposure to things seen. Asrelsky argues that “McCarthy ruthlessly unfolds his story, comprehending all in the cold and clear light of his eye, but never penetrating his well-made surface” (53). In actuality, McCarthy does penetrate that surface on several occasions, but he does not allow us to see very clearly what is hidden there.

CHAPTER 5

THE READER AS PILGRIM: THE "TERRIBLE COVENANT" OF *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

> Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.[1]

This excerpt demonstrates, as many other contemplative moments in *Blood Meridian* do, that the narrator is mindful of philosophical questions underpinning the story he tells. The arcane, pensive style of the passage overshadows the minimalist detail of nearby sentences: "By the time he is mended he has no money to pay her and he leaves in the night and sleeps on the riverbank until he can find a boat that will take him on. The boat is going to Texas" (4). The child has left his home in Tennessee, fed his early "taste for mindless violence" (3), and survived a near-fatal gunshot wound. The boat ride to Texas would be another in a series of haphazard events if the teller did not break into the stream of detail to offer a metaphysical interpretation. In the eyes of the narrator, these experiences are significant not because they establish an impression of the character of the child but because they reset his character: "The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent" (4).

Beneath distinct features that would otherwise signify initiation into manhood or mark his disillusionment, the child becomes a tabula rasa. The ordering effects of time are nullified, his identity emptied of definition. According to the narrator, his origins and his destiny, the temporal poles of being, lie beyond his comprehension. But this assertion is not merely a philosophical curiosity; the narrative point of view is menacing enough to make the reader stop and reflect. The phrase "only now is the child finally divested" suggests that the child himself has *achieved* the liberating detachment that comes with anonymity, discovering along the way that his life, which is miraculously spared, is the required cost. He has, in a sense, died and been reborn. At the same time, the narrator seems to address the reader, anticipating that our initial assessment of the child will be wrong: that he is divested of "all that he has been" when he leaves home and "wanders west" (4). To be sure that we make no such mistake, the narrator reveals more to us than the child can see himself: that he is poised to undergo another kind of initiation, one invested with deeply metaphysical, if not religious, implications related to free will, divine control, and transformation.

Indeed, the tone of this announcement is both authoritative and ominous; in addition to controlling the trajectory of the narrative, the narrator sounds as if he has seen the end of history itself and can bear witness to the unrepeatable extremities of a particular span of time: "not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous."[2] The point of view behind this assertion is not objective or speculative but infused with judgment and special knowledge. The finality of "not again" reminds us that the present-day American reader is situated in a world many rotations beyond a time in history when nearly half of the territory within today's U.S. borders was indeed nothing more than territory, not yet marked with boundaries sanctioned by official membership in the republic. We are, therefore, cut off

from a time of historical transition and identity formation. This distance is to some extent comforting because it frees us from contemplating how our relatively unified structure today was not an inevitable outcome. But this sense of stability is the narrator's rhetorical target. He must clarify what has happened to the child and what is in store for him because our distance from "terrains so wild and barbarous" renders us ill-prepared to grasp, at least at first, the forging of new identity from the raw "stuff of creation" (5). The announcement then has a double-edged message: we have perhaps progressed in civility, but our progress has obscured the cost; we are fortunate to have missed the violent aftermath of a massive and disorganized territorial shift, so we are blind to an essential element of our national growth. If we are to recover some vision and render an accounting for our holdings, we must revisit, through the child, the barbarous terrain split between a new American frontier and a newly shorn Mexico left defenseless in the wake of the Mexican-American war.[3]

The child's eventual entry into that wilderness and subsequent identity rebirth is an analogue for our experience reading *Blood Meridian*. His initiation is our chance to shed identities into which we have been born and witness an uncelebrated aggression, to become initiates into a world of violence so inchoate that we can now only apprehend it through the machinations of a text. In this way, the act of reading *Blood Meridian* is a conscious choice "to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (5). In terms of reading, the "stuff of creation" is an immense and terrifying orchestration of words that resembles the landscape traversed by the kid. At times, the narrative has a "neuter austerity" (247) that mimics the vast openness of a "bonestrewn waste" (272); at other times, the narrator spatters the page with brutal images of massacre and contests of blood, momentarily drawing attention to one thing more than another. These

raw materials are the elements of a world in which we become immersed once we choose to read this novel, just as the kid launches himself into the unknown frontier west of his broken home in Tennessee. To the extent that the kid resembles an archetypal pioneer (though his reasons for setting out remain unknown), we can read the overture of *Blood Meridian* as a threshold to a journey that promises only two things: (a) to take us away from what we know and (b) to test the nature of human freedom. The reader, like humanity itself given dominion over the rest of creation, is faced with a philosophical quandary. We are permitted to extend a fundamental question to the act of reading a text: "are we part of and therefore subject to the creation over which we have dominion, or are we by license of will empowered to impose our own creative influence on it?" These two extremes, which are more than likely both true to some extent, constitute a philosophical framework that bridges our distinct relationships to the natural world and to works of imagination. McCarthy has provided a text on which to test how those extremes can coexist in the mind of a reader and goes to great lengths in the opening pages of *Blood Meridian*, through the metaphysical reflection of his narrator, to make sure we are conscious of the link between the child's departure from "all that he has been" and our encounter with textual forces that will help us discover, or at least reinterpret, our own remote origins, both as readers and citizens. On the boat to Texas, the child "sleeps on the deck, a pilgrim among others" (5). Inasmuch as this metaphor usually implies a purposeful journey toward a place of sacred import or the pursuit of a morally significant goal, the child is only a pilgrim in the loosest sense of the word, for he has no destination. Yet the word prompts us to consider how the child's journey might be a pilgrimage and the various ways in which our path through the terrain of his narrative might resemble a religious experience. Indeed, if we are meant to shed our identities and, like the child, be launched into

the violence of a world recently reborn, like the "issue of the incarnate dam of war herself" (55),[4] then the narrative of *Blood Meridian* provides a space in which we might reorient ourselves to encounter an unfamiliar and threatening truth. Such an encounter is the prelude to any meaningful conversion experience.

The importance of focusing on the kid is established in the first line of the novel, where the narrator delivers a deceptively simple but altogether menacing imperative: "See the child" (3). Echoing the similar phrase "see him" in *Child of God*, this opening is both an invitation and a command. The narrator at once announces his presence and acknowledges our own, verifying that we are not passive members of an audience, mere listeners, but active participants in a rhetorical exchange.[5] We learn that vision matters most but also that the act of reading *Blood Meridian* requires concentrated attention and the will to keep our eyes open. Like the first three chords of an overture, this command has a concussive effect; as far as we venture into the narrative, it reverberates in the background. Our initial response to such a statement, however, depends on what we take the operative word, *see*, to mean. In the most basic sense, the word refers to the optical function of the eyes. The subsequent pictorial diction reinforces this interpretation: "He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire" (3). However, even on this basic level, to see is to look with metaphorical eyes at images generated by words (i.e., *pale*, *thin*, *ragged*, *stokes*, etc.), unless we limit our understanding of sight to the physical act of tracing the form and sequence of letters and words. The command is not "see the text" but "see the child." At the same time, the verb *see* garners significant attention from us partly because it is a strange, ambiguous way to launch a narrative. The first three words direct our eyes toward the child *before* we see him at all; as a result, we do to some extent see the text first, invited by virtue of the

opening imperative to recognize the rhetorical dimension of the narrative before us. In *Child of God*, we have already done a fair amount of looking at Lester Ballard when we are asked to "see him"; as a result, the word extends our attention past Lester to the implications of looking and the ways in which reading is an act of witness. But *Blood Meridian* begins with the word; we become anchored, like the novel itself, to a statement that directs how we might read and makes us conscious that we are reading. From this double point of view, to "see the child" is to read the words that constitute the image, and concept, of a child, not merely to behold the child as a projected image in our minds. In effect, "the child" we are meant to see is something like the very text that asks us to picture him, a composition through which we might learn to see the raw materials of our own already composed identities.

Underpinning this rhetorical complexity is a more basic function; the opening line also frames the plot and highlights the thematic center of the novel. The itinerant life of this unnamed character, "the child" who later becomes "the kid" and ultimately dies as "the man," traces the primary arc of the story. Although his visibility in the narrative modulates and there are a few scenes in the novel from which he is totally absent, the chronology of events roughly follows his path, and the terminals of his life nearly enclose the narrative.[6] Furthermore, the will of the kid gives rise to the main conflict of the novel; his double-minded conscience becomes the site of a philosophical contest between two incompatible notions: war and clemency. Judge Holden, who is certainly the central antagonist in the book, cannot tolerate the kid's uncertainty; as a result, the conflict that exists within the kid, what the judge calls "a flawed place in the fabric of your heart" (299), generates an unrelenting hostility between the two. By enjoining the reader to keep his eyes on the kid, McCarthy stresses this connection between inner and outer conflict, effectively using the kid's

interaction with the judge to dramatize analogically how the discord between clashing principles can as easily lead to violence as to debate. Given its rhetorical, structural, and thematic prominence, "see the child" reads like a variation on the epic tradition of invoking the muse. Absent the heroic archetype that would justify an appeal to divine power for creative inspiration, the narrator instead invites the reader to confront the crude reality of a low creature, an anti-hero who is all but anonymous. Nevertheless, the narrator infuses this child with a level of philosophical significance that elevates the word "see" to even loftier conceptions: "He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man" (3).[7] The child is not merely a physical specimen, nor will this novel be merely an exploration of physical brutality. Indeed, he embarks on a meaningful and grandiose journey at the center of which is a crisis of identity, and his life, however indistinct next to Achilles or Odysseus, will yield pressing questions. By revising the epic mode, McCarthy draws attention to the various ways in which *Blood Meridian* is an immense vision that requires the eyes of willing participants, not the voice a muse, to have any existence at all. Furthermore, the call to "see the child," and by implication to read the narrative, is a call to become philosophically sensitive. "To see" is not simply to keep our eyes open to the brutality at the heart of our national growth but to remain receptive to those uncertainties that reside in the heart of one who cannot fully give himself over to that brutality. Consequently, McCarthy's opening imperative suggests that our response to the kid's experience, and to the brutality and conflicts that give rise to that experience, has literary, philosophical, and ethical dimensions.

As many readers attest, the brutality of *Blood Meridian* is difficult to stomach, let alone assess as an ethically-charged rhetorical element. Indeed, the violence brought before

our eyes is at times so rigorously painted that the voice behind the words seems bent on offending our sensibilities. The narrator makes no apparent attempt to soften or elide the most grotesque details of an image or a scene if it is in fact brutal enough to warrant description in the first place. The early confrontation between the kid and Toadvine is a relatively tame example of this fidelity; they meet on a narrow plank across a muddied lot, and Toadvine says, “You better get out of my way”:

> The kid wasn’t going to do that and he saw no use in discussing it. He kicked the man in the jaw. The man went down and got up again. He said: I’m goin to kill you.
>
> He swung with the bottle and the kid ducked and he swung again and the kid stepped back. When the kid hit him the man shattered the bottle against the side of his head. He went off the boards into the mud and the man lunged after him with the jagged bottleneck and tried to stick it in his eye. The kid was fending with his hands and they were slick with blood. He kept trying to reach into his boot for his knife.
>
> Kill your ass, the man said. They slogged about in the dark of the lot, coming out of their boots. The kid had his knife now and they circled crabwise and when the man lurched at him he cut the man’s shirt open. The man threw down the bottleneck and unsheathed an immense bowieknife from behind his neck. His hat had come off and his black and ropy locks swung about his head and he had codified his threats to the one word kill like a crazed chant.
>
> That’ns cut, said one of several men standing along the walkway watching.
>
> Kill kill slobbered the man wading forward. (9)

This excerpt establishes a few norms of the violence that erupts between men in the world of *Blood Meridian*. For one, it puts the lives of the men involved at stake; nothing is halfway, even if the disagreement does not warrant such a wager—in this case, neither is willing to step aside to let the other pass. Nevertheless, the mutual assault seems perfectly natural told through the dispassionate voice of the narrator—he seems no more concerned about the fight than the bystanders who watch. The actions of the principals involved unfold as if guided by an instinct to use force before persuasion, and the narrator simply records their actions as if they were reasonable and inevitable. At the same time, drawing attention to the theme of spectatorship, the narrator is a rhetorician interested in the effect of his telling, not merely a detached observer. The last two lines of this excerpt create a startling juxtaposition between the aloof curiosity of the men watching and the delirious fury of Toadvine slobbering his death chant. The effect is almost comic, despite the terrifying image of a man consumed by rage. Instead of simply reporting the "crazed chant" in sequence with the rest of the contest, the narrator cuts away to the point of view of one who seems utterly desensitized; we are meant to read "That'ns cut" as a disproportionate response to Toadvine's ferocity, the magnitude of which is implied by the word "codified." This word, which refers to both reduction and organization, suggests that the onslaught of Toadvine is inherently a complex and chaotic phenomenon, one whose true nature is concealed as soon as one tries to make sense of it. But there is not much ambiguity in "kill kill," and the double utterance, in this case, doubles the nature of violence, now codified by language. Toadvine is babbling like one possessed, but he is also charged with intention; his impulse is channeled. The narrator emphasizes this linguistic codification to suggest that the violent eruption is worthy of careful attention, not just idle spectatorship. Furthermore, he comments on his own

representation of violence through language, acknowledging that words have a reductive element but can also reveal a comprehensible, irreducible truth. This moment also sets the stage for the more harrowing, because less codified, accounts of violence that come later.

At the other end of the spectrum from the codified "kill kill" of a single man is the terrifyingly ornamental account of the Comanche attack on Captain White and his filibusters. Crossing a kind of linguistic threshold, the narrator unleashes a fierce current of words that mimic more than describe the barbarity and gore of this encounter. The narrator's lack of restraint for these three pages is appropriate to the sheer number of participants and the magnitude of fear and bloodshed that accumulates among them. But it is also a performance done exclusively for the reader, who is permitted to experience, as close to first-hand as possible, the overwhelming panic of the doomed company in which the kid is a brand new recruit. As the company gradually recognizes that the Comanches are a war party, the narrator directly addresses us, as if we shared in their membership:

> Already you could see through the dust on the ponies' hides the painted chevron and the hands and rising suns and birds and fish of every device like the shade of old work through sizing on a canvas and now too you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones. (52)

When they come into full view, the fate of the filibusters is sealed, as is our involvement. To channel the dread that quickly builds in them, the narrator launches into a higher register of diction, trance-like, and assaults us with an equally dreadful sentence whose size and richness matches the immensity of their approaching enemy:

> A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery

> and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses' ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools. (52-53)

The motley appearance of the Comanches, especially in contrast to the uniformity of Captain White's company, is a mark of their barbarity, but it also suggests that they are themselves the default historical record of their victories. Beyond practitioners of war, they have become a symbol of warfare and its consuming influence. The filibusters, when juxtaposed to these "horribles," seem more like representatives of historical naïveté than enlightened conquerors or ambassadors of liberation, as some of them claim to be. Their march into the Mexican desert is motivated by the promise of land and Captain White's ideological fantasy,[8] but they

are ill-prepared to face the ungovernable forces that stand in their way. The three-word response of the sergeant is an overdue recognition of ignorance and doom, and he seems to speak for the entire group: “Oh my god” (53). His surprise demonstrates that he has until now not really understood what is at stake in his crusade.

This admission marks a line that we cross as well, in our experience as *readers* of this novel, from naïveté to discovery. Like a reaction shot in cinema, the cut-away to the sergeant shifts the point of view and signals a transition from one state of mind to another. The line offers a brief visual interruption from the surrounding imagery, but it is in some ways more frightening. Both anticipating our likely response to what we have just read and directing our attention to what we will read next, the narrator seems to announce that we are on the brink of experiencing, not merely contemplating, the philosophical challenge at the heart of *Blood Meridian*: “to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (5). Our identification with the kid comes back into play here as well. Instead of shifting to the second person to tell us what we can see, the narrator foregrounds the kid’s perspective: “he saw that the man wore another arrow in his breast to the fletching. . . . he saw men kneeling who tilted and clasped their shadows on the ground and he saw men lanced and caught up by the hair and scalped standing” (53). The repetition of “he saw” echoes the earlier repetition of “you could see”; not unlike the reader, the kid seems unaccustomed to this level of violence, so much so that he looks around more than he engages the enemy. What follows is another trance-like literary montage:

> Among the wounded some seemed dumb and without understanding and some were pale through the masks of dust and some had fouled themselves or tottered brokenly onto the spears of the savages. Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with

> eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of boneflutes and dropping down off the sides of their mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandylegged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (53-54)

The cinematic quality of this passage, one cut after another to an increasingly graphic image, does suggest that the violence of battle has little more to offer than spectacle, perhaps even that McCarthy is interested in little more than shock and awe. We are therefore tempted to respond in ways that are likely to cancel out the rhetorical promise that the narrator shows earlier in the novel. His discourse devolves into a form of brutality itself, no longer merely a tool for describing the brutality of a gruesome battle ethic. The narrator seems to abandon his contemplative capacity and let the cruelty of the war party speak for itself, placing himself, the kid, and us in a position to experience the absolute terror of “death hilarious.” But as

traumatic as this sequence might be for some readers and as sensationalized as it might seem even to those readers who remain detached, the excessively graphic nature of the narrator's discourse retains a persuasive quality. By enacting the chaos of the moment through words, or letting that chaos act on him, the narrator demonstrates that he is unable to constrain a force so formidable as war. Apart from a few metaphorical expressions, he makes no attempt to idealize or abstract, and he does not, unlike the encounter between the kid and Toadvine, maintain enough distance to package the scene in a way that would make it at least tolerable or safe for the reader to watch. On this level, we have become initiates into a higher register of violence, made vulnerable by our choice to read in the first place. We are made to feel surrounded and consumed so that we will undergo a kind of trial of the mind, the text itself taking on the qualities of a barbarous terrain to test whether the "stuff of creation" might be made subject to our forces of intellect or moral discretion. The quickest route to escape is to close the book and acknowledge that our commitment was ill-conceived; we might also try to counter the effects of our exposure with outrage. But the point of the excess is to show us that we have, albeit in a different dimension, put as much at risk as the kid in reading *Blood Meridian*: our identity, and by extension our security, is at stake. The narrator is clearly not only retelling an event, but offering a linguistic analogue for the kid's journey into a previously unknown region of terror. Likewise, McCarthy is not merely pushing the limits of his vocabulary or indulging is some twisted fantasy of slaughter; rather, he has made our survival of this onslaught a prerequisite to keep reading.[9]

If we do continue, we find ourselves, in the relative calm of the aftermath, alone with the kid once again, given a moment to ponder what has just transpired. The kid miraculously survives, and to tell us so, the narrator quickly shifts to a highly figurative register at the start

of the next chapter: “With darkness one soul rose wondrously from among the new slain dead and stole away in the moonlight. The ground where he’d lain was soaked with blood and with urine from the voided bladders of the animals and he went forth stained and stinking like some reeking issue of the incarnate dam of war herself” (55). In a strange juxtaposition, the narrator combines a glorious image of resurrection with a vile image of birth to describe the kid’s emergence from the carnage. The literal end of his membership in Captain White’s company marks another shift in his social identity, but the mixed figure used by the narrator suggests that his transfiguration has spiritual implications. His escape is not mere survival but is likened to heavenly restoration. Figuratively speaking, he has died a transient death only to rise again “wondrously”; at the same time, he has passed through the trauma of yet another rebirth, this time from the womb of mother war, a fertile incarnate beast made pregnant by the power lust of men. Essentially, the kid rises up out of the gore of his own bloody birth scene, having fallen into it by his decision to take up arms against a nameless enemy. He has sired a new part of himself, living out that cryptic phrase on the opening page of the novel: “the child the father of the man” (3). He is not a man yet, but neither will his earlier “taste for mindless violence” be enough to account for, let alone validate, the human brutality through which he has just lived. The spiritual discourse used to describe his departure from the scene of battle suggests that the kid undergoes a shift toward awareness, that he leaves an older self behind when he walks away; on some level, perhaps, he has become mindful of violence for the first time, the beginnings of a transformation of conscience that will later make room for genuine mercy. The rhetorical value of the Comanche attack passage becomes clearer, then, if we consider how the kid’s “living through” is an analogue for our “reading through.” The extent to which the reader emerges from this slaughter with a mind reborn or restored, or a

mind closer to that threshold of transformation that will counteract historical blindness, needs to be our central concern, not whether McCarthy has violated standards of decency or turned a blind eye to the emotional welfare of his reader. Those of us who lack a taste for violence are not being asked to develop one, nor are we being asked to desensitize ourselves. Rather, the discursive immensity of the Comanche attack is designed to redirect our sensitivity to and our distaste for violence, especially displays of violence in art, away from the typical escapist assertion ("Obscene!" or "Vulgar spectacle!") toward a more refined ethical inquiry ("Why do I feel offended?" or "How does this pictorial style reinforce or undo the rhetorical agenda behind it?"). The problem is that this redirection fails if we are unwilling to feel unsafe, and this feeling is impossible for an author to encourage without running the risk of alienating the part of his audience who most need to hear his voice. So in true rhetorical fashion, McCarthy puts his credibility at stake when he needs it most so that we might put our sense of security at stake when we need it the most. The interplay between these wills, the ethical reflection it engenders, is what makes the Comanche attack a rite of passage for the reader, who is now, if not yet prepared to accept, at least made fully aware of the risk incurred by witnessing an unromanticized depiction of war and its consumption of life.[10]

Between the two extreme registers of violence, codified and experiential, employed by the narrator to this point lies another that combines the controlled precision of the first and the graphic abundance of the second. At various times, our eyes are turned either to watch an act of violence occur or to investigate the aftermath of its occurrence. These scenes, in all of their color and texture, stand out from the surrounding narrative so starkly in part because they are in fact fascinating specimens of violent writing and skillful representations of real violence. But these scenes also stand out because they are rhetorically interesting. The

narrator does not flinch in the face of these realities, but he also cannot resist commenting on the images placed before us. Consequently, his accounts resemble the occasional parables delivered by a spiritual guide. Like disciples, we are called to a way of looking, if not understanding, that will increase the strength of our witness. One of the more harrowing pictures painted for us is a bush "hung with dead babies" that the kid and Sproule, a wounded survivor of the Comanche attack, come across:

> They stopped side by side, reeling in the heat. These small victims, seven, eight of them, had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being. The castaways hobbled past, they looked back. Nothing moved. (57)

This gruesome passage is a top nominee for most disturbing in the novel, mainly because it calls to mind the methodical steps that the perpetrators must have taken to create such an intricate monstrosity. It is work of art, crafted to communicate a message to those who might pass by.[11] If the narrator were not equally startled by the image, we might feel incapable of going on. His sensitivity to the horror comes through when he cannot even tell us the exact number of "small victims" in the bush. More importantly, he communicates the significance of this deed, acknowledging its inherent symbolic value, but assigning an alternative meaning to it. More than an inventive form of savagery, it is "larval to some unreckonable being," the identity of which is no doubt more terrifying than its embryonic precursor. This suggestion is a judgment on the original deed, the brutality of which, the narrator suggests, will ultimately bear another kind of rotten fruit. The narrator's concern, and his vision of consequence, is a sign that he is far from desensitized to the violence he describes and that he has maintained a

stance that permits contemplation. If he were emotionally detached or merely fascinated by the brutality, he would be disinclined to reflect at all or to ask us to do so. Later, Sproule and the kid stumble onto another scene of carnage in the church of a recently decimated village:

> There were no pews in the church and the stone floor was heaped with the scalped and naked and partly eaten bodies of some forty souls who'd barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen. The savages had hacked holes in the roof and shot them down from above and the floor was littered with arrowshafts where they'd snapped them off to get the clothes from the bodies. . . .
>
> The murdered lay in a great pool of their communal blood. It had set up into a sort of pudding crossed everywhere with the tracks of wolves or dogs and along the edges it had dried and cracked into a burgundy ceramic. Blood lay in dark tongues on the floor and blood grouted the flagstones and ran in the vestibule where the stones were cupped from the feet of the faithful and their fathers before them and it had threaded its way down the steps and dripped from the stones among the dark red tracks of the scavengers. (60)

The spilled blood of these "souls" becomes the spilled blood of the church itself; it runs from the bodies of innocents who have suffered a brutal death in their sanctuary all the way down the steps at the entrance. As the eyes of the kid and Sproule probably do, our eyes follow the path of blood from its source to it last drying edge; the narrator dwells on it so that we will consider whether bloodshed does in fact have a spiritual dimension to it, some mysterious value, or whether blood is merely a fluid that, once spilled, only thickens until it dries. The symbolic intent of this massacre and mock funeral is not lost on the narrator; he punctuates his account with faith-driven language, "house of God," "communal blood," and "feet of the

faithful," phrases that would be superfluous commentary if he were only recording a scene of violence for us. Instead, he prompts us to contemplate not only his but our own religious sympathies in the face of such violation. And whether the narrator expresses an authentic regret about the destruction of this church and or merely points out that even the strongest faith in providence offers no immunity from the barbaric force of war, we are meant to look at this display as a religious message, a sign of apocalyptic importance.

One other scene of ritualistic sacrifice is worth mentioning here because it offers a variation on the first two; the kid is present as before but has been riding with the Glanton gang for some time when they find their "lost scouts hanging head downward from the limbs of a fireblack paloverde tree" (226). The point of view is much more detached to reflect the kid's lukewarm partisanship in that company. His individual presence is rarely acknowledged in the narrative once he joins the gang because he, like the narrator, cannot fully give himself over to the ethic of war. At the same time, in the company he has chosen to keep, he is not inclined to reflect much at all (or at least reveal that he might be doing so), even as witness to a harrowing display of human cruelty:

> They were skewered through the cords of their heels with sharpened shuttles of green wood and they hung gray and naked about the dead ashes of the coals where they'd been roasted until their heads had charred and the brains bubbled in the skulls and steam sang from their noseholes. Their tongues were drawn out and held with sharpened sticks thrust through them and they had been docked of their ears and their torsos were sliced open with flints until the entrails hung down on their chests. Some of the men pushed forward with their knives and cut the bodies down and they left them there in the ashes. The two darker forms were the last of the Delawares and the

> other two were the Vandiemenlander and a man from the east named Gilchrist. Among their barbarous hosts they had met with neither favor nor discrimination but had suffered and died impartially. (226-27)

Even here, when the kid is not only typically reticent but also emotionally disengaged, the narrator finds a way to invest his portrayal of brutality with rhetorical purpose. The last sentence in the passage elevates an otherwise pragmatic and unflinching account that we might expect from a disinterested party. As a result, we end up rechanneling the entire description through a single thought, because it is a thought, of one looking desperately for some *reason* to look. Sympathy is not as readily available to the narrator at it is when he describes the bush hung with dead babies or the innocents slaughtered in the sanctuary. The victims this time are ex-members of the Glanton gang, and the treatment they receive is in keeping with the treatment they have given. The phrase "among their barbarous hosts," then, has an ironic ring to it. To be met with "neither favor nor discrimination" is on one level to be treated as something of little value, something that merits neither consideration; this status is conferred on them by the perpetrators of their torture, "barbarous hosts" who fail to see anything in their victims that arouses human emotion. But the corpses hanging upside down from this tree are not the martyred faithful. On their scalp-hunting expeditions, they have conferred a similar worthlessness on the personhood of their victims, many of whom are the very Mexicans they are contracted to protect; their scalps are receipts for money, and their *human* value is a negligible cost. We might even say that they reap what they have sown, but the narrator seems to suggest that the men hanging in the tree die a death that is meaningless in terms of justice and consequence. In this context, "impartial" does not seem to mean "fair" or "equal" as much as "detached" or "neutral." At the same time, this word certainly evokes

the idea of justice, reinforcing the phrase “neither favor nor discrimination” as an essential requirement in its application. The narrator refers to these qualities of justice, perhaps, to assert her universal presence; in order to restore balance, she will even make agents of men who skirt all concerns of fairness. Indeed, by adopting the even-tempered voice of justice herself, impartial and exacting, the narrator would seem to endorse the workings of justice at the same time that he seems not to care at all that these men have suffered or why. Ending this passage as he does with a quietly sardonic jab, the narrator creates the illusion that he partakes in the same impartiality that (a) makes justice possible and (b) gives rise to the very cruelty that justice is designed to counterbalance, but the comment alone indicates that he is not impartial; rather, he isolates this particular scene as an example of “impartiality” so that we can reflect on human significance and on the various ethical intersections between the value of justice and the problem of inhumane treatment.

The narrator is capable of reflecting on the philosophical and ethical implications of various scenes after he paints them, perhaps, because the violence has already occurred. His point of view noticeably becomes less involved, more withdrawn when describing violence in action. His attention to detail remains, but he tends to let the detail speak for itself, as if he has lost some of his capacity to make sense out of it. At times, his matter-of-fact tone sounds cruel and uncaring; his lack of commentary seems to indicate a cold disregard more befitting the men who actually commit the violence. But whether he exercises more restraint or is simply less inclined or less able to reflect on what he makes us watch is difficult to know. If we read these passages in view of the narrator’s discursive habits elsewhere, we can assume that his narration is still charged with rhetorical purpose. It might be harder to discern, but there remains a concept or attitude he is trying to explore through his telling that depends on

the specific method he uses to articulate the scene for the reader. In one such scene, shortly after the kid is recruited by Captain Glanton and the judge, Glanton executes an old woman with his pistol:

> Watch yourself there.
>
> Several of the men stepped back.
>
> The woman looked up. Neither courage nor heartsink in those old eyes. He pointed with his left hand and she turned to follow his hand with her gaze and he put the pistol to her head and fired.
>
> The explosion filled all that sad little park. Some of the horses shied and stepped. A fistsized hole erupted out of the far side of the woman's head in a great vomit of gore and she pitched over and lay slain in her blood without remedy. (98)

Glanton then commands one of his company to scalp the old woman, his tone of disregard even more chilling in light of the considerate warning he has given his soldiers to step back and avoid the blood splatter:

> Get that receipt for us.
>
> He took a skinning knife from his belt and stepped to where the old woman lay and took up her hair and twisted it about his wrist and passed the blade of the knife about her skull and ripped away the scalp. (98)

Although we have no access to his inner thoughts to verify, Glanton seems motivated to kill the woman as an exhibition for the new recruits. Indeed, nearly everyone in the immediate area is riveted. Once the scalp is removed, he looks at his men to see their reactions; some are staring at the old woman or remounting their horses, but "only the recruits were watching Glanton" (98). This detail is significant because it tells us where the kid has placed his eyes

and suggests that, indeed, Glanton and his gun have made an impression. In principle, scalps claimed are supposed to come from the heads of Native American war parties, not unarmed, elderly women. But the captain redefines that principle for the new recruits, demonstrating the policies of their membership. In turn, we have an explanation for the narrator's reticence in this scene. With the exception of "neither courage nor heartsink in those old eyes" and "without remedy," the narrator captures in language the tone of Glanton's *actions*. Like the recruits, we are left to sit amazed and assaulted by a new principle, an unfamiliar ethic that we must somehow bring into the fold of our consciousness. We are not forced to embrace this ethic (later we will learn that the new recruits do not give themselves over to it), but we are asked to confront its practical consequences. The narrator refrains from offering any remedy to Glanton's will, only reinforcing its strange code when he describes him turning the scalp in the sun "the way a man might qualify the pelt of an animal" (99).

Two other scenes of murder, one in which the black Jackson kills the white Jackson over an insult and one in which a Delaware scout slaughters two infants during a raid, further show how the narrator does not flinch from extreme brutality even when he is nearly reticent as an interpreter. In the first of these two scenes, the narrator is more than a passive observer, but the account is almost exclusively pictorial. Seconds before removing white Jackson's head, the black Jackson steps "out of the darkness bearing the bowieknife in both hands like some instrument of ceremony" (107). This simile sets the stage for thinking about the violence to follow in ritualistic terms:

> Two thick ropes of dark blood and two slender rose like snakes from the stump of his neck and arched hissing into the fire. The head rolled to the left and came to rest at the expriest's feet where it lay with eyes aghast. Tobin jerked his foot away

> and rose and stepped back. The fire steamed and blackened and a gray cloud of smoke rose and the columnar arches of blood slowly subsided until just the neck bubbled gently like a stew and then that too was stilled. He was sat as before save headless, drenched in blood, the cigarillo still between his fingers, leaning toward the dark and smoking grotto in the flames where his life had gone. (107)

Save two similes to help us visualize images that we have probably never actually seen in the flesh, the very last phrase is the only sign of the narrator's interpretive presence once the deed is done. Blood and fire dominate the scene up to that point, but the words "where his life had gone" are strangely metaphysical in the company of otherwise graphic diction. The narrator could simply be reiterating that Jackson's blood has arched into the fire and burned up, implying that life is little more than the coursing blood in a body; but the word "life" also carries connotations of worth, definition, and purpose. Furthermore, the headless Jackson leans "toward the dark and smoking grotto in the flames where his life had gone." His blood has literally made a dark spot where it has been consumed by the flames, but the narrator imagines this spot to be an opening to a cavern underground. We are permitted to entertain on several levels, as a result, the religious notions of the soul and apocalyptic punishment. Befitting this shift to a highly metaphorical register, there is also a tone of lament in the closing phrase; the narrator seems to acknowledge that Jackson's life, a thing of spiritual value forever extinguished in the flames, has been wasted. In the other scene, there is no sign of emotional response, unless we project our own sense of shock and anger on the narrator, who is speechless save for the graphic details of the attack on the Gileños camp:

> When Glanton and his chiefs swung back through the village people were running out under the horses' hooves and the horses were plunging and some of the

> men were moving on foot among the huts and torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy. There were in the camp a number of Mexican slaves and these ran forth calling out in spanish and were brained or shot and one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives and a young woman ran up and embraced the bloodied forefeet of Glanton's warhorse. (156)

The image of infant slaughter in this passage is perhaps even more disturbing than the bush "hung with dead babies" because the narrator cannot stop to reflect. The pace with which the details accumulate is meant to capture the panic of the victims and the mindlessness of the gang members in their pursuit of scalp receipts. But the reader who has been attentive to the narrator's willingness to shed light on the darkest of images will not be quick to dismiss this particular scene as twisted or indulgent simply because the narrator is emotionally reticent. Indeed, we have an opportunity to reflect on the brutality we are made to witness without any commentary to guide us. Are we to remain speechless as well? Have we come far enough that a more direct experience of human brutality will test, rather than develop, our fitness as readers of *Blood Meridian*? This scene demonstrates, above all, that the treatment of violence in a novel that, at its heart, is about the nature of violence and its role in the formation of character must at some point let it surface fresh and unprocessed. Only then can we say that we have at the very least come to know it the way the kid does, and perhaps not even then,

sitting as we read in the comfort of our arm chairs instead of the sweat-soaked saddle of a war horse. If we take our cue from the narrator in this scene as we have in previous ones, we will let the violence into our consciousness, its color and texture, its lack of discretion, so that we know something about naked vulnerability. We can be sure that the narrator has not given himself over to the violence he describes, and that we have been encouraged not to do so either, but neither can we insist on safe distance unless we want to turn the act of reading this novel into an academic exercise. The narrator continues "to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" so that we continue to discover the role that violence has played, and still plays, in forging our sense of security. In as much as the history of America is a history of conquest, and brutality in the open, ungoverned space born of such conquest, our endurance of such vivid depictions has the ethical benefit of making us question the grounds for violence in any form.

We are more likely to recognize this ethical benefit if we examine the various other ways in which the narrator enriches his act of telling with rhetorical energy. On numerous occasions, he suspends the forward momentum of narrative events, amplifies his discourse for a time, and ruminates on an invisible, often frightening, dimension of physical reality that the characters themselves, including the kid, have no capacity to perceive. These linguistic surges resemble the dramatic asides of a hyper-reflective character on stage. The narrator is not so involved that he participates in the story he tells, but he does seize the moments and images that stir him up; he holds them firmly in place for us to behold and speaks of them as if they were revelations of his own prophetic vision. Our access to this metaphysical domain not only confirms that we stand at a privileged distance from the war-torn Southwest of the 1850s but also secures our status as disciples to a way of seeing and a way of reflecting that

will helps us overcome the limitations of that privilege. The narrator guides us through this world on more than one level, but he places most emphasis on the dreadful to make the act of reading *Blood Meridian* a continual awakening to inexorable forces. Two passages leading up to the Comanche attack, for instance, demonstrate how, through the voice of the narrator, astrological, geological, and atmospheric phenomena align to give the landscape an ominous, almost wrathful, quality:

> They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them. The shadows of the smallest stones lay like pencil lines across the sand and the shapes of the men and their mounts advanced elongate before them like strands of the night from which they'd ridden, like tentacles to bind them to the darkness yet to come. (44-45)

The desert floor becomes a canvas on which a malevolent, masculine star inscribes their progress toward death, essentially binding them to an inevitable future. "The darkness yet to come" refers to the imminent attack, so their "elongate" shadows on the sand before them, metaphors of doom, complement the narrator's choice to foretell the slaughter that awaits them. The intersection here between prophecy (seeing) and narrative technique (writing) is substantiated by the thin shadows that, "like pencil lines," are cast about them by inanimate stones. And behind them is a tide of blood above the horizon into which the sun penetrates, as if the sky were a womb from which all things fearsome issue. The narrator makes use of fertility metaphors quite often, and this one prefigures two images to come that reinforce the

malevolent dimension that he sees in the sun's life-giving energy. After the Comanche attack, the kid rises from the blood-soaked ground "like some reeking issue of the incarnate dam of war herself" (55), and the bush "hung with dead babies" that he comes across is described as "larval to some unreckonable being" (57). These figurative visions of human brutality issue forth from the narrator's ominous description of the rising sun. Like the sun rising into a blood-colored sky, the narrator penetrates the surface of a brutal reality to reveal a more essential horror. He brings into sharp relief not only the thing itself but also his judgment so that we are encouraged to contemplate, not merely observe. In this way, the narrator also illuminates his rhetorical strategy, which is to demonstrate a way of looking that will help us question the romanticized view of conquest or warfare driving the filibusters to their doom. In the second passage, light of another sort lends a nightmarish aspect to the desert landscape that further complements a frightening metaphysical perspective:

> All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream. (47)

In keeping with the illumination effects of lightning, the similes in this passage are quick and discontinuous. Instead of long shadows that stretch across the ground, tethering the riders to their end, we are shown open space that extends in every direction, leaving them exposed not

only to the elements but also to their dread of unseen threats. Both the mountains in the distance, “like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear,” and the desert around them, “like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land,” are alien terrains flashed into existence intermittently. Their sublime aspect, however, is partly due to the fact that their appearance is fleeting, materializing and vanishing at the haphazard will of atmospheric discharge. In order to engage our insecurities, the narrator takes on this perspective, emphasizing that the landscape these riders are crossing is home to inhospitable forces and, by extension, is inhospitable to their dream of order and stability. Shown a dimension of this region that is apparently only visible in quick bursts of light, we should recall Captain White’s promise to the kid: “We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land” (34). The narrator undermines that enthusiasm by showing the riders enshrouded and overwhelmed by real darkness and fear; they bring no light at all, but are illuminated with everything else in the darkness of which they have become a part. This judgment is not a moral lesson that we draw from watching these riders venture out of their element, as if we could simply adopt the right mindset in a flash of insight and avoid their fate. Rather, his strategy illuminates momentarily an alien or sublime dimension of his own narrative. Like flashes of lightening in the darkness, he reveals the distant edges of the text that we are reading through, reminding us that we *have* ventured into an unknown region that will at least challenge, if not dismantle, the ideologies we have brought to it.

Nearly all of the narrator’s more ruminative moments indicate his self-awareness as a narrator and encourage a comparable self-awareness in the reader, but there are passages in *Blood Meridian* in which he almost completely withdraws from the act of telling to ponder an idea about narration itself. These reflexive moments heighten our attention to an event or

image in the story being told by paradoxically drawing our attention away from the story to the mechanisms governing the production and reception of a text. Although these rhetorical assertions still arise from the action, they bring the presence of the narrator and our role as readers into sharper relief. The philosophical ideas that emerge are grand and ponderable abstractions that demand an even higher order of thought to process than the more graphic figures used elsewhere. We are asked not merely to look at an image through a different lens but to think about the cognitive structures that direct *how* we see and help us understand *what* we see. To this end, our eyes are temporarily drawn away from the narrative action so that we contemplate the philosophical or aesthetic principle underlying our experience of it. One of these moments occurs when a confrontation between the Glanton gang and a company of Chiricahuas escalates toward and then halts at the brink of violence:

> The leader of these jackal warriors was a small dark man in cast-off Mexican military attire and he carried a sword and he carried in a torn and gaudy baldric one of the Whitneyville Colts that had belonged to the scouts. He sat his horse before Glanton and assessed the position of the other riders and then asked in good spanish where were they bound. He'd no sooner spoken than Glanton's horse leaned its jaw forward and seized the man's horse by the ear. Blood flew. The horse screamed and reared and the Apache struggled to keep his seat and drew his sword and found himself staring into the black leminscate that was the paired bores of Glanton's doublerifle. Glanton slapped the muzzle of his horse twice hard and it tossed its head with one eye blinking and blood dripping from its mouth. The Apache wrenched his pony's head around and when Glanton spun to look at his men he found them frozen in deadlock with the savages, they and their arms wired into a construction taut and

> fragile as those puzzles wherein the placement of each piece is predicated upon every other and they in turn so that none can move for bringing down the structure entire. (228-29)

In their immediate context, the words "construction," "puzzles," and "structure" underscore an irreducible complexity in the cumulative aggression of the warriors. Each member of each party is a node in a network of opposing forces. Their arrangement is so delicately balanced, the explosive potential in each provocation held in check by the equally explosive potential of every other, that each constituent would have no significance, and would suffer utter annihilation, were he not an integrated part of a whole. But as much as the simile at the end of this excerpt mirrors the architectural unity of the preceding image, the narrator has already generated the sensation of being locked in a "construction taut and fragile" before he offers the comparison. In lifting us out of a steady stream of narrative action, he is not setting aside time to explain the concept but asking us to contemplate, through his cryptic philosophical expression, how resistant that concept is to explanation: "as those puzzles wherein the placement of each piece is predicated upon every other and they in turn so that none can move for bringing down the structure entire." Indeed, the arrangement of this phrase mimics the idea we are meant to ponder, but the words themselves lack definitive referential value.

The vagueness of "those puzzles," for instance, is even more confounding than the riddle-like circularity of the syntax. The narrator refers to them in an offhand manner as if they are commonly known objects, as if the conditions of their existence are as rudimentary as simple arithmetic. But we are struck by various questions: Are these puzzles the kind we would solve or the kind we would construct? Are they intricately arranged phenomena that are difficult to comprehend, or are they games we play to test our problem-solving ability?[12]

How many manifestations of these puzzles are we expected to recall? We are challenged, furthermore, to find a reason for offering such an abstract riddle to reinforce the "perilous architecture" of the warriors (229). Are their combined acts of aggression so complex that they constitute an incalculable phenomenon? Are we to look beyond the men themselves to find some irresistible force orchestrating their choices? Capturing our attention the way a perplexing thought experiment might, his comparison enslaves us to another irresistible force: the hope for an explanation. The circular logic sucks us inward. If predication has no starting place, if each piece depends on the placement of *every* other piece, the puzzle cannot exist in any form prior to its finished form. Likewise, a puzzle that would collapse on itself were any one piece dislodged from its structure could never be assembled in the first place, unless each piece were positioned in its proper relation to the others at the same time. Given these conditions, the sort of puzzle we are supposed to imagine (a) might not actually exist or (b) might be any complex phenomenon (e.g., the cosmos, the human being, history itself) that no one has ever been able to chart entirely. Perhaps their momentary truce is an image of history's grand stalemate, a local illustration of the vast tapestry of conflict and conquest that has left no man the ultimate victor. Perhaps we are supposed to read "those puzzles" as our selves, yet another reminder that we are blind to various "raw materials" that have formed our identities, which might include the delicately balanced impulses toward aggression and self-preservation.

Indeed, we will see more and more possibilities the longer we stare at the passage. And this extension of our speculative capacity is the point the narrator is trying to make, it seems. Even the phrasing opens a window to another aesthetic idea, echoing a famous excerpt from Aristotle's *Poetics*:

> As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, *the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed.* For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole. (53, italics mine)[13]

Aristotle's standard of a properly imitative tragic plot is not the key to parsing the communal force binding those warriors to each other, but it can help us contemplate the general idea of artistic unity and, in turn, begin to see why the narrator might be inclined to use such an idea in connection with such an image. The difficulty involved in watching a tragic plot unfold, for Aristotle, is not a puzzling arrangement of events but the vicarious experience of a clear, almost predictable, sequence of events and their outcome, especially when those events arise from the mysterious interplay of human choice and some cosmic idea of predetermination. As the puzzle simile reinforces, the narrative we are reading is not an imitation of only one action but a cluster of interrelated actions (its scope is more apocalyptic than tragic); at the same time, it does more or less follow the path of the kid, exploring another kind of determinism: the extent to which his will rises up against or is swallowed up by the wills of other men. He is, for instance, resistant to but nevertheless bound by the will of Judge Holden, particularly his idea that any path a man follows, and its intersections with other paths, is pre-orchestrated, bound up in the wills that determine those paths: "Any man who could discover his own fate and elect therefore some opposite course could only come at last to that selfsame reckoning at the same appointed time, for each man's destiny is as large as the world he inhabits and contains within it all opposites as well" (330). Though the kid tries,

he cannot refute the assertion; it is endlessly tautological and, therefore, designed only to confound. The narrator has a similar intention, though not as sinister as the judge, to confound us with the concept of infinite predication. The kid would be just as riddled as we are by the phrase "the placement of each piece is predicated upon every other and they in turn" (229) and would probably respond the same way he does to the judge: "I don't like craziness" (330). Coming from the mouth of the judge, it might actually be craziness, if not malevolence, but from the mouth of the narrator, such statements quietly urge us to reflect on deep mysteries at the core of historical thinking: How have we come to be where we are? Is the past something we can know? Is the mind but another piece in an endless stream of predication and, therefore, incapable of interpreting it? Are reality and perception as inextricable as the judge insists they must be: "the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others" (245)? Such questions are further evidence that reading *Blood Meridian* is way of exposing to scrutiny many of the assumptions on which we have built, and daily reinforce, our sense of order and certainty, not only as we assess the world we actually inhabit but also as we assess narratives that dramatize worlds we have never known.

The narrator revisits the idea of predication from a different angle when describing the "optical democracy" of the landscape a few pages later. Used in association with the deadlocked warriors, predication is a theory of structural coherence; their interdependence is so extensive and complete that they form a self-reinforced architecture that is both rigid and unstable. Used in association with the southwestern landscape, predication becomes a theory of *perceptual* coherence; it refers to the cognitive process through which the riders (and the

reader) make sense of a visual field based on various discrete features. In the famous "optical democracy" passage, the narrator challenges us again to investigate *how* we see and to contemplate how we reach an understanding of *what* we see:

> 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 of 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. (247)

The abstract language of this passage suggests that the narrator is as visually handicapped as he claims we would be if we were actually crossing such a vast, open, and leveled terrain. In other instances, the narrator redirects our thinking away from his stark depiction of an image to emphasize its spiritual or philosophical implications, but here his abstract register is used in place of concrete description. To emphasize the democratizing effect of the desert, the narrator first calls attention to the relative minuteness of the earth itself moving through the immense vacuum of outer space. It is a sublime notion to ponder because the phenomenon is for the most part unobservable, the forces at play so large that we have no perspective with which to make them familiar. If the planet they stand on is only one object among others, exposed and vulnerable despite its colossal size, then the stature of these riders crossing one of its thousand hostile terrains seems infinitesimal. The difference made by their presence or

absence here is negligible because their human complexity is obscured or subsumed by all that is not human around them. “Bequeathed a strange equality” with all the other features of the landscape, they have and can make no “claim to precedence.” In turn, their ability to make distinctions between one thing and another is paralyzed. Because the objects in their field of vision are in such sharp focus, none of them is recognizable according to prevailing categories of differentiation; all seem alien. To involve the reader in this visual quandary, the narrator withholds pictorial detail, announces that a spider, stone, and blade of grass no longer have unique properties, and then offers, in the sound and sense of a riddle, an abstract account for this perceptual leveling effect. The answer, if we can call it an answer, lies in the nature of the eye and the way that a mind processes visual stimuli: “the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another.” Extended to the reader, this notion recalls the numerous other times in this novel we have, through language, been made to picture an unpleasant image and then contemplate our response to the resultant vision. One kind of eye feeds data to another kind of eye so that reading a text, when understood as a way of looking (“See the child” continually reverberating), resembles the layered process of making sense of the world. But in this passage, which is one of the more perplexing terrains in *Blood Meridian*, “all preference is made whimsical,” and things otherwise distinct in the hierarchy of being “become endowed with unguessed kinships.” The narrator is far from asserting that humankind is no more significant than a rock, or that a rock contains in its nature a complexity that rivals humankind. Rather, he implies that distinctions between a man and a rock exist independently of perception, regardless of whether the eye can tell one from the other. Emphasizing the visual trickery of certain conditions of space and light, he reminds us that *views* of reality are largely a matter of perspective and can shift but

that reality does not therefore shift along with them. The concept of "optical democracy," as a result, points to the more general interplay between truth and illusion that connects our immediate reading experience to larger concerns of existential and historical interpretation.

At the same time, "optical democracy" is not an aesthetic principle underpinning the overall narrative style of *Blood Meridian*; it does not exclusively govern the way we read or account for the varieties of response we inevitably have as we read. If it did, there would be no stylistic surges or ruminative flushes diverting our attention away from the blunt surface detail that otherwise dominates. Instead, the narrator does shift from one register to another, from one level of emphasis to another, in order to direct our attention to particular images or scenes that stand out to him and, presumably, should stand out to us. These sudden blooms of thought are numerous, and although they are surrounded on every side by details and events that have been filtered and leveled by an effect we can accurately call "optical democracy," they open fresh interpretive possibilities, rising up from and casting noticeable shadows on the expansive flatness around them. The style alone of passages like the one described above is evidence that some moments are more luminous than others in *Blood Meridian* and some more enshadowed. "Optical democracy" is a strange articulation. The physical phenomenon to which it refers is familiar, that light equally distributed over an open terrain can play tricks on the eye, but in finding an uncommon way to express this idea, the narrator points to less tangible implications. The juxtaposition of scientific discourse with political discourse, for instance, is startling because we have a hard time at first imagining how there might be "democracy" of the "optical" sort. Generally, "optical" is a technical term related to the behavior of light and the way it is reflected or refracted by objects, whereas "democracy" refers to a system of government that emphasizes, among other things, equality and self-rule

of the many. Combined they raise greater questions of vision and order: Is there a way of looking that obscures all distinction? Is equality nothing more than an illusion? Is vision of any kind governed only by the principles of the one looking? The fact that concepts like "optical democracy" do stand out as luminous points of reflection is further demonstrated by their repeated appearance in critical studies of this novel. Confronted by such perplexing or striking passages, we should rather say that "the eye predicates the whole on some feature of part" and "here *were some things* more luminous *than others*." Yet some critics have used this very passage to demonstrate that the narrator does have a leveling effect on his subject, that he is utterly disinterested, empty of consciousness even, that the narration of *Blood Meridian* does not arise from an entity or mind at all, but is the detached voice of history itself, something akin to the forces at play in history's unfolding.[14] This interpretation is, of course, partially correct in that the narrator does at times take on an authoritative tone that we might associate with the inexorable momentum of time. But it does not account for the various times when the narrator is a highly conscious mind, deliberating and communicating with his audience. These luminous moments are not mere turning points in a story that will reach its inevitable end; rather, they guide us through the narrative by shedding light on the path we are following, prodding us to pay attention to what we are reading and to the fact that we are reading. This rhetorical function is integral to the development of our own consciousness, not only as readers of this pseudo-historical narrative about national origins but also as recipients of the meta-historical vision transmitted by the narrator. We both witness the less celebrated images of our political legacy and contemplate the benefits and costs of doing so.

The importance of contemplation in the act of reading, perhaps because it opens the inward door to self-assessment, is one of the most important ethical questions to emerge from reading *Blood Meridian*, especially those passages where the narrator reveals his conscious mind. The narrator ruminates about surface phenomenon, the mysteries of deep subterranean activity and geological cataclysm, and the infinite dimensions of space around the planet; he reflects on his own role as teller, speculates about the unseen, shares impressions, looks ahead and backward, and philosophizes. His linguistic range also bears witness to an active consciousness; the prose style is baroque—tightly constructed but extremely ornate, shaped by pattern but garnished by pictorial embellishment. Altogether, his presence in the narrative is extensive, lending immensity to his subject: war and the force of human will in history. At the same time, he seems hesitant to access the mind of any character. With the exception of Glanton, the internal lives of the gang members can only be inferred through their speech and action.[15] Even the mind of the kid, whose path we more or less follow through the novel and whose development we are primarily interested in understanding, remains a mystery to us.[16] The most out-spoken character and, therefore, the one who *seems* the most knowable is Judge Holden; he overshadows the rest like an all-powerful deity, more than willing to vocalize his beliefs, if they can be called beliefs, to anyone who is naive enough to listen. But we cannot see inside his head either; through the last line of the narrative—"He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (335)—he remains a riddle, like the unaccountable force of history itself. In terms of rhetorical complexity, he is the character equivalent of the narrator when he speaks: perplexing, grandiose, and provocative. In fact, during his more ruminative moments, the narrator seems to have adopted the philosophical register of the judge as a model for his own declarations, however more trustworthy those

declarations are. The judge is also the most luminous and ponderable *physical* object in the textual landscape of *Blood Meridian*; by virtue of his shape and size, he takes up more space, both on the page and in our minds, than any other character. This immensity, in both word and flesh, is a measure of the influence he exerts on those in his vicinity, especially the kid and, by extension, the reader. Although the judge does not himself seem answerable to any ethical standard, when he holds the kid accountable to his double-minded allegiance to both war and clemency, the central ethical conflict in the novel comes into sharp relief. The pure will of the judge cannot tolerate the divided conscience of the kid, and the kid will not yield to the absolute authority to which the judge makes claim. Their incompatible natures clash like mismatched armies in our minds, and we are left ultimately with an image of the judge dancing his immortal dance. From the time we first meet him through to this triumphant finale, he dominates our field of vision, so much so that the kid, who nevertheless remains our central *concern* throughout, is overshadowed. In this way, the presence of the judge is a constant reminder that the will to power threatens to swallow up all ethical scrutiny.

Our first encounter with the judge is also the kid's first encounter; we see all of his size and power in the span of a few pages, but a mystery looms over the narrative from that point on. His sheer size and rhetorical skill are riveting, and we learn that he can effortlessly turn a revivalist crowd of unthinking zealots from one allegiance to its extreme opposite. The judge's physical appearance is a hyperbolic mixture of the gigantic and the infantile, his manner an unnerving mixture of arrogance and humility:

> An enormous man dressed in an oilcloth slicker had entered the tent and removed his hat. He was bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height and he stood smoking

> a cigar even in this nomadic house of God and he seemed to have removed his hat only to chase the rain from it for now he put it on again.
>
> The reverend had stopped his sermon altogether. There was no sound in the tent. All watched the man. He adjusted the hat and then pushed his way forward as far as the crateboard pulpit where the reverend stood and there he turned to address the reverend's congregation. His face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small. He held them out. (6)

This last gesture is the beginning of a deception; his small hands and serenely hairless face are tokens of innocence. We should recall here that the kid has already been described in similar terms: "The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent." At the same time, "He is not big but he has big wrists, big hands. His shoulders are set close" (4). The discrepancies between the kid and the judge, especially because they both seem capable of preserving something childlike in their being (both are described at different times as if they have just been born), foreshadow their conflict later in the novel.[17] At this early stage, however, the kid stands watching like everyone else as the judge delivers his own sermon. The words that come out of his mouth carry the sound of truth to all who have ears to listen:

> Ladies and gentlemen I feel it my duty to inform you that the man holding this revival is an imposter. He holds no papers of divinity from any institution recognized or improvised. He is altogether devoid of the least qualification to the office he has usurped and has only committed to memory a few passages from the good book for the purpose of lending to his fraudulent sermons some faint flavor of the piety he despises. In truth, the gentleman standing here before you posing as a minister of the

> Lord is not only totally illiterate but is also wanted by the law in the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas. . . . On a variety of charges the most recent of which involved a girl of eleven years—I said eleven—who had come to him in trust and whom he was surprised in the act of violating while actually clothed in the livery of his God. (6-7)

The rhetorical manipulation with which the judge attempts to sway the crowd is obvious to the reader, but there seems little reason to imagine that anyone present would doubt him; he *sounds* convincing, and he has no apparent motivation to lie about such a thing; in fact, he appears to have an ethical agenda, claiming as he does that he is bound by a sense of duty to expose the Reverend Green as an imposter. Whether he is actually doing so remains unclear, for he might only be trying to incite violence by creating the illusion that the crowd has been duped. Once general gunfire does erupt within the tent, the kid retreats to the bar, where several men, forming a posse to run down the preacher, ask the judge how he knows so much about him. He promptly tells them that he actually knows nothing about the Reverend Green: "I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him" (8). This declaration could be false as well.[18] Both in the tent and in the bar, the judge successfully *turns* his audience away from one belief to embrace another; he causes a shift in allegiance in order to demonstrate, if only to himself, his power to make men do what he wants them to do. His motivation, then, appears to be neither to tell the truth nor to deceive; rather, he wants to manipulate the wills of others insofar as he is capable.

To this end, words in the mouth of the judge take on a power that exceeds the domain of rhetoric, the art of persuasion. His voice becomes a weapon of force through which he can channel his power to subjugate his audience. At one point, while investigating rock samples

and claiming “to read news about the earth’s origins,” Holden turns his fellow scalphunters against their own assumptions and then ridicules them for being turned:

> A few would quote him scripture to confound his ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings. The judge smiled.
>
> Books lie, he said.
>
> God dont lie.
>
> No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.
>
> He held up a chunk of rock.
>
> He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.
>
> The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools. (116)

Strangely enough, he is not concerned with being right or proving that the men are wrong; his authority exceeds those categories. His only concern is to expose their vulnerability and their lack of resolve. If he adheres to any value above and beyond himself alone, it must be the value of commitment, which for Holden is not a question of mindset but completely a matter of exercising the will freely. Like the rocks, the will does not lie; it is absolute and can be none other than what it is. At the same time, its influence can be obscured by extraneous considerations. The judge can play puppeteer with this audience because they have elevated belief above the attempt to know and control what lies before them. Judge Holden’s resolve to subjugate those who can be turned is a function of his desire to rule over all and extends beyond his use of words: “Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my

knowledge exists without my consent" (198). However, when Toadvine asks the judge why he must sketch birds into his ledger and the judge testifies to his ambition to be suzerain of the earth, we see an example of resistance:

> What's a suzerain?
>
> A keeper. A keeper or overlord.
>
> Why not say keeper then?
>
> Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgements.
>
> Toadvine spat.
>
> The judge placed his hands on the ground. He looked at this inquisitor. This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation.
>
> Toadvine sat with his boots crossed before the fire. No man can acquaint himself with everthing on this earth, he said.
>
> The judge tilted his great head. The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (198-99)

Toadvine is not so easily turned; in fact, his skepticism reveals a limitation in the judge's rhetorical power. To the extent that Toadvine exercises philosophical autonomy, even if his

rejoinder is to spit, the judge is powerless to ensnare him using only words. There is the mind that will not succumb to his voice or to his notions. In the end, of course, his naysayers have no influence over him either; the judge is perfectly complete in himself, it seems, as if his existence and his ideas together have the same undeniable reality as war itself.

The judge's outspoken thoughts on war draw attention to the most compelling ethical dimension of *Blood Meridian* because they foreground, in the uncompromising voice of one absolute Übermensch, the central doctrine at the heart of the kid's conflicted conscience. As the narrator's depictions of violence indicate, war creates and is sustained by the "terrains so wild and barbarous" in this novel, not only the "immense and bloodslaked waste" (177) that the kid travels but also the vast textual landscape that we read. For the kid, war is an activity in which to engage in order to collect some bounty or defend his life, but it is not an idea that he can wholeheartedly embrace as its own justification. For the judge, war is more than an alternative method of ending conflict or claiming a prize; it is the ideal condition to which all men aspire, and the only ideal that sufficiently raises man to his fullest potential. He claims that "War is god" not because he is subservient to it but because it is the ultimate source of his existence and the ultimate expression of his nature, a power that asserts itself through agents willing or unwilling (249):

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

Like a divine proclamation, the judge's words carry the tone of undeniability. They reinforce his authoritative posturing, but they also clearly show that his mind is not bound by ethical

considerations, however much he might appear to be promoting a code or principle by which men should live their lives. War is an absolute and eternal fact, not a consequence of human choice and not, therefore, more or less valuable depending on the discretion of those who partake in it. By extension, the human will aspires to the condition of war not because war is sometimes the preferable alternative or a moral imperative; rather, the will of a man naturally gravitates toward its ultimate expression:

> Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. . . . But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all. . . . Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them

> is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (249)

This account requires no ethical validation because it admits no preference; it is by definition "the way things are"—the judge is not promoting a way of life as much as he is testifying to a fundamental truth; it is the premise on which he builds his philosophy, not an outcome of ethical reasoning. At the same time, this passage is ethically significant to us because we have, leading up to this moment, been made to witness, through the eyes of the narrator, the brutality and carnage that war leaves in its path. Here we listen to words that might as well be coming from the mouth of war itself; the judge speaks of it as if it were a universal constant, acknowledging for all present, especially those who would doubt the legitimacy of his words, that war cannot but be upheld if man is to exist at all.

As "the truest form of divination," war is an accountability measure, even for those individuals who count themselves outside the scope of its influence. In this scenario, his disputant is David Brown, who can only resort to a juvenile *ad hominem* attack to discredit what the judge is saying: "You're crazy Holden. Crazy at last" (249). Doc Irving, on the other hand, seems capable of holding a notion of his own and speaking up to challenge the judge on a fundamental issue: "Might does not make right, said Irving. The man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally" (250). But he misunderstands the judge. Engaged as we have been in the narrator's depiction of human brutality, we are perhaps relieved that an ethical rejoinder has emerged in actual dialogue to counter the absolutism of Judge Holden, as if McCarthy were finally allowing another character to expose an underlying inconsistency in his arguments; however, Irving fails to address the warrant of the original claim, which is, ironically, that the significance of ethical disagreement is negligible:

> Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a new and broader view. The willingness of the principals to forgo further argument as the triviality which it in fact is and to petition directly the chambers of the historical absolute clearly indicates of how little moment are the opinions and of what great moment the divergences thereof. For the argument is indeed trivial, but not so the separate wills thereby made manifest. Man's vanity may well approach the infinite in capacity but his knowledge remains imperfect and however much he comes to value his judgements ultimately he must submit them before a higher court. Here there can be no special pleading. Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void and without warrant and here are the views of the litigants despised. Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all questions of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural. (250)

This proclamation establishes the judge as a barbaric philosopher. His words are the epitome of civilized discourse, but they formalize, in the language of higher thought, ideas that, when taken to their logical conclusion, undermine the necessity for higher thought. They represent, in fact, the essence of barbarism. In challenging the validity of moral codes, he codifies an alternative set of values, albeit one that is essentially amoral. The powerlessness of moral law in the mind of the judge gives free reign to the power of will so that his discourse seems little more than a rhetorical performance, the exercise of power masquerading as philosophical

insight. At the same time, the resistance of his disputants *is* a sign of ethical thought, and although they cannot articulate their disapproval in a way that undermines the confidence or authority of the judge, we are invited to entertain the possibility that his sophisticated register is in fact nothing other than an elaborate disguise. But he *is* a skillful producer of texts. The fact that his rhetorical purpose is underhanded does not diminish his power in the narrative; hearing him speak in the presence of other skeptical listeners permits us to reflect further on the power of language and the reception of texts, those that are shams and those that, like the one transmitted directly to us by the narrator, are genuine attempts to persuade.

The kid does not trust the judge's learned exterior either, although we do not discover the extent of his skepticism until, years later, he has become "the man" and happens upon the judge in a bar in Fort Griffin, Texas. In response to a lecture on the agency of death and the orchestration of history, he tells the judge, "I don't like craziness" (328). Like David Brown, the kid seems incapable of articulating his disapproval in a register that might disarm the judge; rather, he can only deflect the words of the judge with a defensive maneuver. But this powerlessness is grounded in a well-established pattern of interaction between them. On two previous occasions, the judge exceeds his usual capacity as rhetorical hoodwinker to take on a role more befitting his title. He accuses the kid of having violated the code of war, which, by virtue of his voluntary membership in the gang, he committed to uphold. After failing to kill the naked and defenseless judge when he has the chance in the desert, the kid resorts to killing his horses once the judge reappears clothed and armed. The judge calls out for the kid to come out from behind his hiding place: "No assassin. . . . And no partisan either. There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (299).

Later, when the kid is jailed based on the judge's false testimony about his role in the Yuma massacre, the judge reiterates his earlier accusation:

> The judge smiled. He spoke softly into the dim mud cubicle. You came forward, he said, to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. Hear me, man. I spoke in the desert for you and you only and you turned a deaf ear to me. If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay. Even the cretin acted in good faith according to his parts. For it was required of no man to give more than he possessed nor was any man's share compared to another's. Only each was called upon to empty out his heart into the common and one did not. Can you tell me who that one was? (307)

Even here, twenty-eight years before their final confrontation in Fort Griffin, the kid says to the judge, "You're the one that's crazy" (306), because he is in fact incapable of mounting an offensive against the words of his accuser. On one level, he knows what the judge says is true; his own ethical reservations prevented him from giving himself over to the ethic of war. In the end, however, he simply lacks the intellect to defend himself. Judge Holden easily penetrates the psyche of the kid by asserting that they have an intimate connection: "Dont you know that I'd have loved you like a son? . . . Look at me. Our animosities were formed and waiting before ever we two met. Yet even so you could have changed it all" (307). This notion is too abstract for the kid to comprehend; he cannot reason out the metaphysical ideas put forth by the judge. At the same time, his words leave an impression on the kid that later resurfaces in the form of a nightmare. Etherized on a surgical table a few days later so that

the arrow wound in his thigh can be treated, the kid is revisited by the judge in a troubled dream:

> In that sleep and in sleeps to follow the judge did visit. Who would come other? A great shambling mutant, silent and serene. Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. In the white and empty room he stood in his bespoken suit with his hat in his hand and he peered down with his small and lashless pig's eyes wherein this child just sixteen years on earth could read whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the courts of men and he saw his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps. (309-10)

Here the narrator has access to the kid's internal experience, presumably, because, in his unconscious state, he can no longer guard his mind. We might even say that the judge is not merely a nightmarish specter in the kid's mind, but a real presence, even in this remote place of hiding. In the mind of the kid, he is the "unreckonable being" hatched by the brutality of a tree hung with dead babies: "Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without

terminus or origin." He is an eternal and ubiquitous force that, like a god, has the ability to move through the intangible reaches of existence. Whether dreamed or actual, his haunting presence suggests that he has conquered yet another specimen of "autonomous life," exerting his influence this time so deeply that the kid experiences an epiphany without even knowing it: "he saw his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished." The kid seems to become self-aware precisely because his defenses are down; the judge need not even speak for the kid to recognize his own name is the book of books. This moment should give us long pause as readers if we remember that the kid is actually illiterate. The fact that he gains the ability to read once asleep suggests that this ability has lain dormant to this point, not that it emerges as a result of unconsciousness. Temporarily dead to his impulse to self-preservation, he can no longer hide behind his silent, rugged exterior; rather, his mind is fully exposed to the only one who can hold him to account. Furthermore, given our association with the kid and the narrator's linguistic connection with the judge, this dream sequence helps clarify the various ways in which our ability to read *Blood Meridian* is dependent more on our vulnerability to than our consciousness of the forces at work in the narrative. Only by shedding a protective layer of our present consciousness and subjecting ourselves to the rhetorical presence of the narrator can we become literate enough to undergo a transformation similar to the awakening of the kid in the presence of the judge.

Whether we can make ourselves accountable in this way is largely dependent on how much of our sense of security we are willing to put at risk. If we take the kid as our reference point on this note as well, we will see the difficulty of remaining vulnerable. When he meets the judge twenty-eight years later in Fort Griffin, he is once again fully on guard and seems

no more capable of facing his nemesis than he ever has been. The judge has not a changed at all, it seems, so easily does he slide back into their previous confrontation at the jail. First, he reiterates the nature and extent of their hostility: “Was it always your idea, he said, that if you did not speak you would not be recognized? . . . I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me. Then and now. Even so at the last I find you here with me” (328). When he resumes his role as ambassador to war, he continues his appeal to the man as if he were still a promising disciple:

> A ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals which fail in this requirement are but mock rituals. Here every man knows the false at once. Never doubt it. That feeling in the breast that evokes a child’s memory of loneliness such as when the others have gone and only the game is left with its solitary participant. A solitary game, without opponent. Where only the rules are at hazard. Dont look away. We are not speaking in mysteries. You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness and the despair. It is that which we take arms against, is it not? . . . Pick a man, any man. That man there. See him. That man hatless. You know his opinion of the world. You can read it in his face, in his stance. Yet his complaint that a man’s life is no bargain masks the actual case with him. Which is that men will not do as he wishes them to. Have never done, never will do. That’s the way of things with him and his life is so balked about by difficulty and become so altered of its intended architecture that he is little more than a walking hovel hardly fit to house the human spirit at all. . . . I tell you this. As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior’s right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance

> and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be? . . . Only that man who has offered himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance. (329-31)

This last question is an interesting echo of the one he addresses to the kid through the bars of his jail cell. On both occasions, the question is rhetorical and has an obvious answer. In the first case, the judge is accusing the kid of violating the covenant into which he enters when he joins the gang. The second time, he is referring to himself as the one immortal dancer who will survive the dishonoring of war and so preserve its nobility. Indeed, he survives because he is able to make men do what he wishes them to do. Yet the man standing next to him will not budge. His final response to the judge is intractably dismissive: "Even a dumb animal can dance." To some extent, the judge *is* disarmed by his resistance; his sets down his drink and concludes his lecture with an ultimatum: "Hear me, man, he said. There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone. All others are destined for a night that is eternal and without name" (331). This statement foreshadows the execution to follow. The judge must resort to physical violence in order to demonstrate the validity of his views. As a self-anointed agent of war, he in effect validates his own position without having to justify it any further to his most stubborn opponent; as a result, the man's death is at once a fulfillment of Holden's view and a sign that that view cannot bear scrutiny. When learned speech fails to persuade, bestial violence is the only way for the judge to demonstrate the truth of his claims.

The scene of the man's death is one of the most disgusting and terrifying moments in the history of violence in literature, primarily because so much is left to the imagination of

the reader. Given the level of detail devoted to so many images of violence in the narrative up to this point, we are perhaps surprised not to be made privy to the exact nature of the man's demise. At the same time, the narrator offers a much more harrowing account through the power of suggestion:

> He went down the walkboard toward the jakes. He stood outside listening to the voices fading away and he looked again at the silent tracks of the stars where they died over the darkened hills. Then he opened the rough board door of the jakes and stepped in.
>
> The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him. (333)

We never see what happens behind that latched door, but we do know that the judge, having assumed the role of executioner, embodies the most brutal horror of war.[19] His "immense and terrible flesh" is the unspeakable manifestation of humanity's power to destroy and consume, the full-grown monster that has at last gathered "itself out of its terrible incubation in the house of the sun" (300). This image is prefigured by several descriptions of the judge as a barbaric creature, some unaccountable mixture of the inhuman and post-human. We see him around a fire "naked to the waist, himself like some great pale deity" (92). He at times sits "naked atop the walls, immense and pale in the revelations of lightning, striding the perimeter up there and declaiming in the old epic mode" (118). At the public baths, he is both celestial and bestial:

> Citizens of both sexes withdrew along the walls and watched the water turn into a thin gruel of blood and filth and none could take their eyes from the judge who had

> disrobed last of all and now walked the perimeter of the baths with a cigar in his mouth and a regal air, testing the waters with one toe, surprisingly petite. He shone like the moon so pale he was and not a hair to be seen anywhere upon that vast corpus, not in any crevice nor in the great bores of his nose and not upon his chest nor in the ears nor any tuft at all above his eyes nor to the lids thereof. The immense and gleaming dome of his naked skull looked like a cap for bathing pulled down to the otherwise darkened skin of his face and neck. As that great bulk lowered itself into the bath the waters rose perceptibly and when he had submerged himself to the eyes he looked about with considerable pleasure, the eyes slightly crinkled, as if he were smiling under the water like some pale and bloated manatee. (167)

And as if all of these descriptions somehow failed to impress upon us the massive challenge to human decency that the judge represents, the narrator at one point refers to him as a "vast abhorrence" (243). He is brutality incarnate, and when he exercises the uncompromising will of that brutality on the man at the end of the novel, we are invited to contemplate not only his physical domination of the man but also his ability to envelop anyone who denies the power of will over conscience. Their final confrontation in the water closet, therefore, leads to an apocalyptic, rather than tragic, end to the man; his doom is cosmically prefigured in the very person of the judge. Furthermore, the lack of pictorial detail in the scene draws our attention to the more figurative significance of his death. The triumph of the judge suggests that any attempt to resist the destructive force of war, and the ethical restraint implied in that attempt, is both futile and meaningless.

When the man is destroyed, so is the inclination to mercy that he displays many years earlier during his proverbial transition from his mindless and withdrawn existence as the kid.

Long after he has parted ways with the gang and the judge, the kid watches a “troubled sect” of penitents laboring across the rocky floor of the plain:

> They were all of them barefoot and they left a trail of blood across the rocks and they were followed by a rude carreta in which sat a carved wooden skeleton who rattled along stiffly holding before him a bow and arrow. He shared his cart with a load of stones and they went trundling over the rocks drawn by ropes tied to the heads and ankles of the bearers. . . . wailing and piping and clanging they passed between the granite walls in the upper valley and disappeared in the coming darkness like heralds of some unspeakable calamity leaving only bloody footprints on the stone. (314)

These pilgrims are described, perhaps in the words that reflect the awakening consciousness of the kid, as people “who seem unable to abide the silence of the world” (313). Only a day later, he discovers that they have been slaughtered:

> The company of penitents lay hacked and butchered among the stones in every attitude. Many lay about the fallen cross and some were mutilated and some were without heads. Perhaps they’d gathered under the cross for shelter but the hole into which it had been set and the cairn of rocks about its base showed how it had been pushed over and how the hooded alterchrist had been cut down and disemboweled who now lay with the scraps of rope by which he had been bound still tied about his wrists and ankles. (315)

He responds to this scene of brutality the same way he has throughout the novel, with silent observation, but when he spots “an old woman kneeling” in a space between the rocks, he goes to her and, “in a low voice,” utters words that indicate not only his capacity but also his desire for human contact. He acknowledges his identity and offers help to one in need:

> He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die.
>
> He knelt on one knee, resting the rifle before him like a staff. Abuelita, he said. No puedes escúcharme? (315)

No other scene in the novel approaches the level of pathos achieved here: "Grandmother, can you not hear me?" We have heard the kid speak before this moment, but never with so much tenderness. He seems, in a moment of self-discovery and confession, to see another human being, and likewise himself, as a fragile vessel of meaningful existence. Above all, he seems to know who he is: an American, far away from his origins, orphaned, war-torn. These signs of awareness suggest that he has achieved a higher plain of consciousness than the judge, in all of his rhetorical mastery, and that he himself has arrived to this place a pilgrim like the rest. This scene ends, however, on a less uplifting note. On the brink of a hopeful outcome, we are reminded that the vision of this novel is intractably bleak. His final gesture of mercy leads to a disturbing discovery that threatens to undermine what might otherwise have been a profound conversion experience. When the woman shows no sign of responding to him, he reaches out to touch her arm: "She moved slightly, her whole body, light and rigid. She weighed nothing. She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years" (315). The chapter ends here; we are shown no sign of the kid's reaction nor given any other indication of how we might be expected to respond to such a stark reversal in tone. The dead woman seems to be nothing more than another pilgrim who never reaches her destination.

Despite the disappointment that we imagine the kid must feel, and the disappointment that we perhaps feel along with him, in that moment of promise turned sour, the narrator does reinforce our identification with the kid as a "pilgrim among others" (5).[20] The kid's eventual slaughter seventeen years later in the "terrible flesh" of the judge, a singular manifestation of the "unspeakable calamity" that butchers the pilgrims, marks the end of our shared trial on the "wild and barbarous" terrain of this novel. Just as the man meets his demise at the hands of a force much more powerful than he can withstand, so must we contend with a text that threatens to annihilate our hope for a favorable resolution. Unlike the man, however, we are permitted to resume our progress toward the goal set before us at the outset of the novel. On one level, McCarthy makes this continuation difficult by ending the final chapter with an image of the judge dancing his dance of victory and immortality: "He says that he will never die" (335). Without a resolution of conflict in favor of the man instead of the judge, will we not suffer a similar fate? Is our own potential for transformation not rendered void if we have no reason to hope that war might actually meet an end, that we might discover some path that leads away from the philosophy of the judge toward the power of mercy that the kid seems capable of exercising? Has the narrator led us through this textual rite of passage only to undermine the growth in consciousness of our national identity that we experience?[21] The emphatic answer to all of these questions will be a resounding "yes" if we are expecting *Blood Meridian* to settle our fears and so perpetuate the historical blindness that has sheltered us from seeing the role that bloodshed has played in forging the American definition of order that persists today. However, if we are willing to interpret our reading experience as a kind of pilgrimage to the past that terminates in the realization that the forces of war continue to exist in the life blood of our national selfhood, then we stand to gain at least an awareness of the

covenant of war that the judge so eloquently and convincingly underwrites, obscured now by various competing forces of denial and false idealism.

To the extent that the judge rightly testifies to the self-sustaining power of war and holds himself an eternal agent of that power, he will, despite his dubious claim that he is not bound by death like the rest of us, live forever. His claim to absolute authority is our key to historical vision precisely because he represents our greatest threat. The reality of this threat is what we must recognize if the death of the man is to serve as another promising beginning instead of a hopeless ending. The narrator, being much more present to us in *Blood Meridian* than the narrator in either of its predecessors, has demonstrated that reading this novel is a way of participating in a ritual bloodletting, at the center of which is the life of the kid and his eventual sacrifice to the god of war. Like the voice of history itself, he orchestrates the events of that life and death in such a way that we are invited to take on a new visage, a new identity, that when reflected in the mirror of the narrative we have read will make *all* history present to us, not merely the version of history we might prefer to see. Alongside the kid, we undergo a trial of consciousness that terminates in a death through which the proverbial child fathers a new man; in short, we are invited to mature, if only as readers, by confronting that which we dread most to confront: our vulnerability to forces that threaten our security. Is there life on the other side of this death? McCarthy suggests that there might be. By placing the words "The End" immediately below our final image of the naked judge as an "enormous infant," perpetually reborn, it seems, through the game of war, he indicates that we are at the end of the narrative that leads us there. Indeed, if the novel ended at the same place as the narrative proper, we would have good reason to believe that reading *Blood Meridian* is an elaborate game in which the stakes are at best merely the rules of the game, play for the sake

of play, and at worst the lifeblood of the very mind involved in the act of the reading. If we in fact died the *same* death as the kid, we would be left with the impression that a mind such as the one in the "great dome" of the judge can annihilate all minds that run counter to his own, especially those that are capable of and predisposed to ethical reflection.

However, the novel does not actually come to a close until the next page, suggesting that there is life beyond the end of our trial. Although the terminals of the kid's life mark the edges of the narrative proper, the novel as a whole is framed by an epigraph and an epilogue that contextualize our reading experience with larger ethical concerns than even the narrator can address. The epigraph, like an inscription on a monument, consists of three excerpts from other texts that define the philosophical scope of *Blood Meridian*: fear of blood, the life of darkness, and historical cyclicality. Together, they establish McCarthy's rhetorical presence behind the narrative to follow, provide clues about his own critique of western values, and justify a way of reading that revolves around ethical inquiry. Extending the reach of his philosophical concern with the reader, the epilogue is a dramatized commentary on the problematic notion of progress that has dominated Western thought:

> *In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes he is making in the ground. . . . On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality*. (337)

These holes quite literally prefigure the boundaries on which we rely to impose a civilized order on our lives. But this passage seems to suggest that the will to order is little more than an alternative manifestation of the will to power. Both enslave human beings to mechanisms that run counter to the development of an inner reality that might otherwise allow them to break free of the bondage of time. Rather, McCarthy seems to encourage a renewed sense of progress that is not "monitored with escapement and pallet" but truly prudent and born of reflective choice. In this way, the act of reading *Blood Meridian* is a rhetorical rite of passage that prepares us to live a life of ethical significance, not by denying the force of war at the root of our efforts to civilize ourselves but by recognizing our desire to obscure that force in the name of comfort. The sooner we cease to be passive participants in "the verification of a principle," the sooner we can begin to pursue some genuine "continuance." McCarthy seems to suggest that the act of reading, properly cultivated as a means of confronting what is most dreadful in ourselves and in our history, is a good place to begin such a pilgrimage.

Notes

[1] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (New York: Vintage International, 1985), pp. 4-5. All further page references to this edition will be made parenthetically.

[2] The child "wanders west" sometime after his fourteenth birthday in November 1847, no more than two months before the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. Marking the end of the Mexican-American War, the treaty also transferred national ownership of the land that now constitutes the Southwestern United States. The "wild and barbarous" terrain of *Blood Meridian*, however, also includes the Mexican territory west of Texas, an area left relatively ungoverned and vulnerable to contesting parties, including

bounty hunters, filibusters, and war parties, in the few years following the Mexican-American War. For more description of the historical context of *Blood Meridian*, see John Sepich.

[3] Edwin Arnold acknowledges that such a pilgrimage will be arduous: "I suspect that the Kid's journey to self-knowledge is not one most will want to make, for in many ways this is as alienating a book as one is likely to encounter. Its ideas are too often lost in the welter of gore. But it is a serious novel, as are all of McCarthy's works, and for the determined reader it will offer its own rewards" (Rev., *Appalachian* 104). Answering this challenge, Parrish and Spiller examine in detail how McCarthy manipulates our identification with the kid in order to expose us to the imperial violence at the heart of American growth.

[4] This metaphor is actually used to describe the kid rising out the carnage following the famous Comanche attack. But the connection between the kid and the foreign land to which he travels is significant. His "rebirth" in that scene emphasizes an important shift in his identity. Like the land itself, he survives and is changed by the brutality of the encounter.

[5] For a discussion on the extensive rhetorical presence of the narrator in *Blood Meridian*, see Bernard Schopen.

[6] I have compiled a basic timeline of the novel to demonstrate the framing effect of the kid's life. All actions refer to the kid, and all temporal references in the text are marked with page numbers:

→ Born Nov. 12 or 13, 1833 (Leonid meteor shower occurs before sunrise Nov. 13).

→ pp. 3-4 (Fall 1847–Winter 1848). The kid is 14.

→ Goes west to Memphis, Tennessee.

→ pp. 4-5 (Fall 1848–Spring 1849). The kid is 15.

→ Goes to St. Louis, in New Orleans, shot, “divested of all that he has been” (thru p. 4).

→ Goes to Texas and ultimately Nacogdoches (thru p. 5).

→ Sees Judge Holden the first time, fights and befriends Toadvine, set adrift, baptizes himself (thru p. 27).

→ Recruited by Captain White, miraculously survives Comanche massacre (thru p. 54).

→ Set adrift with Sproule, incarcerated, recruited by Captain Glanton (thru p. 80).

→ p. 165 (July 21, 1849)

→ p. 171 (Aug. 15, 1849)

→ p. 199 (Dec. 2, 1849). The kid is 16.

→ p. 204 (Dec. 5, 1849)

→ p. 262 (Mar. 31, 1850)

→ p. 264 (Apr. 2, 1850)

→ Participates in several bounty-hunting campaigns, survives Yuma massacre (thru p. 276).

→ Set adrift with Toadvine, meets the naked judge in the desert (thru p. 287).

→ Set adrift with Tobin, meets the judge reconstituted, hides, fails to kill him (thru p. 300).

→ Incarcerated, visited by the judge, undergoes surgery, recovers (thru p. 310).

→ p. 311 (June 1850)

→ p. 313 (Spring 1861). The kid, now “the man,” is 27.

→ Set adrift, sees a massacre of pilgrims, confesses to dead woman (thru p. 315).

→ p. 316 (Winter 1878). The man is 44.

→ Kills an orphan, goes to Fort Griffin, Texas, happens upon the judge, killed by the judge (thru p. 335).

When the novel begins, the child is already born and when the novel ends, the man has just been destroyed by the judge, who goes on dancing forever. Other framing elements, such as the opening epigraphs and the closing epilogue, are significant rhetorical elements, but they reside outside the narrative proper.

[7] What kinds of seeing are integral to the act of reading? In light of numerous definitions of *see* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the imperative statement "see the child" yields interpretations beyond the physical process of visual detection, "To perceive with the eyes," or the cognitive process of mental detection, "To perceive mentally; to apprehend by thought, to recognize the force of. Often with reference to metaphorical light or eyes." The word can mean "to understand (a person)" or "to see (something) coming: to foresee or anticipate." In this light, "see the child" is a direct reference to reading itself: assessment of character and involvement in narrative. Related uses include the narrative convention "'we have seen,' 'we shall see,' 'the reader has now seen,' etc.," which refers "to what has been or is to be narrated or proved in the book," and the more idiomatic usage "to learn by reading" (i.e., to see "that something has happened"). Other usages of the word *see* emphasize spectatorship—"To direct the sight (literal or metaphorical) intentionally to; to look at, contemplate, examine, inspect, or scrutinize; to visit (a place); to attend (a play, etc.) as a spectator" or "to look at, read (a book, document, etc.)"—or personal witness—"to know by observation (ocular and other), to witness; to meet with in the course of one's experience; to have personal knowledge of, to be a contemporary of and present at the scene of (an event)" (*OED*). If we

apply such interpretive flexibility to "see the child," we can reflect on the various ways in which the act of reading intersects with vision: perception, understanding, and witness.

[8] Attempting to recruit the kid, Captain White appeals to racist and nationalist sentiment: "What we are dealing with, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them." He later adds a religious appeal: "Son, said the captain. We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land" (34).

[9] This passage epitomizes the slaughter that makes the novel so difficult for some, at least at first, to process. Harold Bloom writes, in his book *How to Read and Why*, "My concern being the reader, I will begin by confessing that my first two attempts to read through *Blood Meridian* failed, because I flinched from the overwhelming carnage that McCarthy portrays" (255). In an interview with Peter Josyph, Bloom elaborated: "I read about half of it and although I was very impressed, I couldn't go on because I started to have nightmares. I began it a second time, and *again* I didn't get through it because I started to dread the slaughter too much. But then the third time it all came together" (7-8). The Comanche attack, for Bloom, is "one of the most astonishing things in the book" (19).

[10] As widely different as their opinions can be, reviewers and critics of the novel are quick to focus on its depiction of violence because it leads to such mixed impressions of the artistic motivations of McCarthy. Walter Sullivan claims that McCarthy "comprehends evil in all its dimensions, and this makes him a prophet. Visit his blasted landscapes, read the dark hearts of his people, and get a view of the world in which we live" (653). According to Edwin

Arnold, "*Blood Meridian* is not an enjoyable book to read, patterned as it is on successive acts of horror. . . . McCarthy presents the worst outrages without obvious moral condemnation. . . . There is, however, an intense moral concern in this. . . . It is not nihilistic. It insists that we face the worst within us, not to embrace it, as the judge encourages, but to confront and challenge—at whatever price" (Rev., *Magill's* 70).

[11] Later, the narrator reveals that "heathen" savages are not the exclusive perpetrators of such ritualistic murder: "The tracks of the murderers bore on to the west but they were white men who preyed on travelers in that wilderness and disguised their work to be that of the savages" (153). Their work, which displays the same intricacy as the bush of dead babies is described in full here:

> Five wagons smoldered in the desert floor and the riders dismounted and moved among the bodies of the dead argonauts in silence, those right pilgrims nameless among the stones with their terrible wounds, the viscera spilled from their sides and the naked torsos bristling with arrowshafts. Some by their beards were men but yet wore strange menstrual wounds between their legs and no man's parts for these had been cut away and hung dark and strange from out their grinning mouths. In their wigs of dried blood they lay gazing up with ape's eyes at brother sun now rising in the east. (152-53)

[12] Given the reference to the placement and movement of pieces, we might visualize an unlikely configuration of chessmen in which neither side is willing to initiate a checkmate sequence for fear of sacrificing even a single rank from its defense. In this case, the puzzle is not so much an incalculable arrangement as an impossible dilemma. The impulse to move

any piece is stifled by a fear of retaliation, yet the possibility of stalemate offers little more promise than outright surrender.

[13] This particular translation happens to use similar terminology, strengthening the link. But even though other translations use different words, the syntax reflecting Aristotle's logic tends to echo McCarthy's riddle. Ingram Bywater translates the passage in the following way:

> The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, *with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole*. For that which makes no perceptible difference by it presence or absence is no real part of the whole. (234, italics mine)

[14] See Dana Phillips and Steven Shaviro for examples.

[15] Two passages in particular reveal the internal life of Captain Glanton. One indicates his capacity to respond to natural beauty: "The leaves shifted in a million spangles down the pale corridors and Glanton took one and turned it like a tiny fan by its stem and held it and let it fall and its perfection was not lost on him" (136). The other reveals his self-awareness: "That night Glanton stared long into the embers of the fire. All about him his men were sleeping but much was changed. So many gone, defected or dead. The Delawares all slain. 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" (243). Although these two passages are unique in the novel, they are evidence enough that the characters in *Blood Meridian* are not reduced forms of men. The narrator clearly has access to the thoughts and motivations of arguably the most brutal and inhumane of the gang members, second only to the judge himself. He stays outside the minds of the other characters not because they act on instinct or lack all human feeling. Rather, we find ourselves speculating and contemplating what they must be thinking all the time. This kind of mystery keeps the ethical focus on the reader.

[16] When an old hermit asks the kid whether he has lost his way, the narrator indicates the presence of thought: "The kid pondered this" (18). But we have no idea what he might be pondering.

[17] When the kid meets him the second time, the judge is riding with the Glanton gang: "Foremost among them, outsized and childlike with his naked face, rode the judge" (79). After the Yuma massacre, the kid sees the judge in the desert: "The three at the well watched mutely this transit out of the breaking day and even though there was no longer any question as to what it was that approached yet none would name it. They lumbered on, the judge a pale pink beneath his talc of dust like something newly born, the imbecile much the darker" (282). When the judge approaches the man in Fort Griffin, he is described in terms that suggest he is on the verge of another rebirth: "The great pale dome of his skull shone like an enormous phosphorescent egg in the lamplight" (327). And finally, after he destroys the man,

he is described as a newborn: “towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant” (335). Spread over the timeline of the novel, these images suggest that the judge is an eternal entity, not subject to the aging effects of time on the body and apparently incapable of change on any level.

[18] Both testimonies could be false at the same time, actually. He might have laid eyes on the Reverend Green in Fort Smith and still made up stories about him to tell in the revival tent. A more frightening possibility is that both testimonies are true. There is evidence later in the book that the judge has an uncanny ability to know things he is not present to witness. On the night he kills the kid, the judge asks him a series of rhetorical questions that make him seem more godlike than human: “Where is yesterday? Where is Glanton and Brown and where is the priest? He leaned closer. Where is Shelby, whom you left to the mercies of Elias in the desert, and where is Tate whom you abandoned in the mountains?” (331).

[19] Shaw suggests that McCarthy gives “strong circumstantial evidence to support the premise that the ultimate encounter between the kid and the judge is sexual” (151). In his interview with Peter Josyph, Bloom offered a similar interpretation: “There’s that horrible implication, which is very hard to evade and has got to be taken as deeply hinted, that the Judge, who opens those great arms to embrace the Kid, violates him and then smothers him in the muck” (10).

[20] According to Parrish and Spiller, the kid would only identify himself as an American “if he means to associate his prior actions with Americanness. The kid’s gesture invites the contemporary reader to identify with him, because at this moment he craves to make restitution for what he has done ‘wrong’” (475).

[21] One reviewer, Larry Johnson, suggests that by the time the kid is destroyed by the judge, "the reader is genuinely yet gratefully exhausted by the novelist's art and gladly surrenders to the apocalyptic finale" (38). I would suggest instead that our job of assessing the significance of this novel has only begun when we arrive at this finale, however arduous the act of reading has been.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

> So in this time of repentance may Thou give the courage once again to will one thing. True, it is an interruption of our ordinary tasks; we do lay down our work as though it were a day of rest, when the penitent . . . is alone before Thee in self-accusation. This is indeed an interruption. But it is an interruption that searches back to its very beginnings that it might bind up anew that which sin has separated, that in its grief it might atone for lost time, that in its anxiety it might bring to completion that which lies before it. (Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart* 31-32)

As was his custom in his theological treatises, Kierkegaard opens this discussion of the office of confession with a prayer to God, much in the way a poet might invoke the Muse to sing through him the lines he is about to write. Kierkegaard's appeal to his divine Father is based on the humility of one who desires realignment, to be placed again on the original path and resume travel toward his initial destination. This repentant moment necessitates, above all, an interruption that will distract him from his "ordinary tasks" so that he can rediscover the singular root of his devotion. At the same time, the interruption does not release him from work; it only redirects his effort, in cooperation again with his creator, toward recovering that

which has been separated, lost, and left unfinished in their relationship. Indeed, the work ahead of him is the more difficult task of changing direction altogether, of letting go "as though it *were* a day of rest," and returning to his origin. To will one thing once again, in this sense, is to stop what he is doing, to turn back on his present course, and retrace his steps back to the spot where he went astray. An active search "back to its very beginnings," not a restful or passive relinquishment of will, lies ahead of the penitent. To be interrupted in this way is to begin again, to acknowledge the grief and anxiety of his failure and recommit to the purity of heart that will reconstitute his fractured will.

If I might be permitted to apply Kierkegaard's theological idea metaphorically to the secular field of literary study, my intention in this work has been to interrupt the "ordinary tasks" of literary criticism in the academy today in order to explore the ethical dimension of reading itself. What constitutes good reading? Based on what standards do we decide to read in one way instead of another? What obligations is a reader of a novel compelled to fulfill? How might a particular approach to reading that novel fall short of these obligations? And how does one determine the best approach to fulfilling them? In raising these fundamental questions, I have resisted trying to swim against the torrential current of critical thought that, in many ways, has turned our field into a career-obsessed market of competing theoretical schools. Saving my strength for a more fruitful, but no less arduous, task, I have decided to stand firmly on the shore and walk upstream to quieter waters, casting my proverbial line of rescue along the way to anyone who might want to join me. I do not mean to say that I wish, or am able, to change the direction of flow in literary scholarship. Rather, I hope that my study has exemplified a way of reading that teachers and critics who are unwittingly caught up in that current will recognize as a more edifying intellectual activity. My approach in this

study, therefore, has been to abstain, to the best of my ability, from adopting a pre-defined critical approach at all, at least in the way that that concept has been defined by the academy in recent years. Instead, I have tried to reflect on my role as a reader, *as I read*, in order to examine how a narrative, according to its linguistic and rhetorical design, raises questions that help me discover how I am meant to read it. Each of my readings in the three previous chapters is a testimony, a confessional account, of my attempt. Far from being a theological treatise or an appeal for a specifically Christian sort of repentance, my critical assessment of McCarthy's novels in the preceding chapters has been motivated by a desire to turn back to my own origins as a reader, to discover how the act of reading might best be understood as an act of obedience, and to adopt a "purity of heart" that might realign my interpretive will to a fundamental and singular obligation that lies at the heart of my decision to experience any work of narrative art. At the same time, I have composed my own readings of McCarthy in order to demonstrate for critics and teachers of literature the ethical benefits of reflecting on the act of reading as such, both as an occupational task that defines our profession and as a rhetorical encounter that allows us to grapple with ethical problems related to our reception and experience of fiction.

I propose now to examine the critical and pedagogical implications of my approach. This conclusion, then, is another kind of interruption. My readings of *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* are far from over; indeed, where I have left off in writing, I hope to continue in thought and in speech for the remainder of my career as a teacher and scholar. In order to think about the implications of what I have already written and the method I used, I must suspend my attempts not only to interpret the narrative style of McCarthy's novels but also to measure their influence on the way I read them. Facing now in the second direction

that Miller describes in *The Ethics of Reading*, when "the ethical moment in reading . . . enters into the social, institutional, political realms, for example in what the teacher says to the class or in what the critic writes" (4), I need to raise a different set of questions. Are my interpretive measures for McCarthy applicable to all novels, or even the rest of his? Have I demonstrated a method of reading that other critics would do well to emulate? Is my mindset and method for interpreting narrative universally appropriate? Is the measure of ethical value that I have discovered in McCarthy's work a measure that should be applied to other authors? These questions are irreducibly complex, and I do not presume to answer them conclusively. Rather, I hope that raising them will confirm that my readings do not constitute a prescriptive model of responsible criticism. In his most recent discussion of the ethics of reading, "How to Be 'In Tune with the Right' in *The Golden Bowl*," Miller concludes that

> The reader must act on his or her own, on the basis of a reading that has no fully prescribed basis, though that reading must try to follow as closely as possible the tracks James has made in the snow. The reader-critic must then take responsibility for what results from that act of retracing, in this case, the essay you have just been reading. I hereby take that responsibility. (283-84)

The work I have done as a reader-critic in this study is the testimony for which I am willing to take responsibility, but I also intend to pick up where Miller left off at the end of his essay. My readings have ethical implications that extend far beyond the fact that they are my own. Indeed, they are not acts of criticism that other readers must approve or emulate, but they are meant to demonstrate that any interpretive act is answerable to ethical pressures from within and without. Accordingly, I now take on the equally burdensome work of extending my act of reading outward to other tasks that reading these novels has equipped me to fulfill. My

work as a critic in this study, in other words, is not an end in itself, a trophy of achievement with which to decorate the mantle of my career. In my several attempts "to will one thing," I have tried to set aside all concerns that are external to the act of reading as such, not in order to prescribe a superior approach to interpretation and criticism but only to remain honest with the work in front of me and to demonstrate how one particular novelist excels in his ability to engage the ethical sensibility of his audience. On this side of my attempt, however, "to will one thing" takes on a different meaning. If my way of reading is valid, I must acknowledge to others, and stand by, what else might result from it besides a finished work of criticism. However difficult my work of reading Cormac McCarthy has been, identifying the value of the testimony I have to offer as a result is much more daunting.

These three novels are challenging to read on the basis of their linguistic complexity alone, but each one takes on a much higher level of difficulty if, and only *if*, I agree to take part in the rhetorical exchange initiated by its highly conscious narrator. And here I find what is really at stake in my decision to will one thing as a reader. The narrators in these novels, as different as they are, have one thing in common; they require me to subordinate my interests as a reader to their own designs. Instead of approaching the works with a pre-defined agenda that will lead me to discover only what I want to find, I am invited to adopt a way of looking that brings me face to face with scenarios and characters that are morally repulsive to me, at least on the surface. Furthermore, once I adopt the kind of vision that that narrator needs me to have in order to make these scenarios and characters real to me, once I submit to *his* vision and *his* judgments, I find that I am immersed in a trial of accountability, that I am placed in a position to identify with characters whom I would more than likely refuse to associate with outside the boundaries of fiction. My inclination to retreat back to the safety of a moral high

ground conflicts with my decision to read in the first place. I can set the book down and be done with it, but then I am refusing to be a reader at all, though this refusal might be justified by moral considerations. Alternatively, I can defend myself from its rhetorical intrusiveness. I can take up one of the various hermeneutical tools at my disposal in order to manufacture the kind of significance I would prefer the work to have, based on my ethical discretion or my professional needs, but then I will be too busy to notice what the words are saying to me. Equipping *myself* in this way will certainly cause the difficulty to vanish because the rhetorical gestures embedded in the narrative will reach no audience. But if I persevere in reading the work on its own terms, despite its troubling assault on my sensibilities and my moral confidence, I can work through the dilemma that my act of reading engenders. Instead of shielding myself or disarming the narrative, I can submit to an arduous trial of self-acknowledgement and self-accusation that each narrator coordinates for me using one of the rhetorical strategies examined in this study: the fugitive effect in *Outer Dark*, the witness effect in *Child of God*, and the disciple effect in *Blood Meridian*. Each of these effects is the product of an *encounter* between reader and narrator; consequently, the ethical significance of each novel depends on my honest attempt to participate. Along the way, my reading eye is fixated on the external facts of a violent and depraved world, as if I were meant to indulge in my own disgust or simply be shocked by obscenity. But McCarthy manages to counter these initial impressions by shifting my attention inward, so that I am invited to contemplate my identification with the protagonists: Culla and his flight from retribution, Lester and his descent into animalistic perversion, and the kid and his journey into the heart of warfare. Through my act of reading, each narrative encounter complements the story being told by the

narrator so that my resistance gradually gives way to a process of discovery, an investigation of extreme moral turpitude that sharpens the image of my face in the mirror.

For this reason, I emerge from these narrative trials with the belief that McCarthy is an author of high ethical intelligence. As I hope my readings have demonstrated, these novels offer much more than the pornography of sensationalized violence or the indulgent bleakness of nihilism. The intricate orchestration of *Outer Dark* and the philosophical commentary of the narrators in *Child of God* and *Blood Meridian* attest to a serious, often religious vision of a world in which human depravity exacts a great cost. At the same time, they do not depict a simplistic image of mankind that the reader can easily digest. We are rarely granted access to the internal lives of the characters in these novels, and the narrators tend to avoid explanation in favor of description. When they do suspend the act of telling to offer interpretations of the action, we are left with more unanswered questions, and the mystery tends to deepen. But mystery seems to be the primary value of these novels because it requires us to be patient, to keep reading, and to wait for the kind of understanding that pure knowledge cannot provide. That McCarthy does not know the answers himself does not detract from his ethical value as an author; on the contrary, his ability to acknowledge the unknown, despite the superficial exactitude of his imagery and characterization, and his willingness to make us do the same make him all the more important as a novelist of our time. At the end of his 1963 essay "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," Saul Bellow disparaged the direction in which his contemporary novelists had taken fiction:

> As for the future, it cannot possibly shock us since we have already done everything possible to scandalize ourselves. We have so completely debunked the old ideas of the Self that we can hardly continue in the same way. Perhaps some power within us

> will tell us what we are, now that old misconceptions have been laid low. Undeniably the human being is not what he commonly thought a century ago. The question nevertheless remains. He is something. What is he?
>
> And this question, it seems to me, modern writers have answered poorly. They have told us, indignantly or nihilistically or comically, how great our error is, but for the rest they have offered us thin fare. The fact is that modern writers sin when they suppose that they *know*, as they conceive that physics *knows* or that history *knows*. The subject of the novelist is not knowable in any such way. The mystery increases, it does not grow less as types of literature wear out. It is, however, Symbolism or Realism or Sensibility wearing out, and not the mystery of mankind. (173-74)

I regret that we do not have extensive commentary by Saul Bellow on McCarthy's work, for he might have shed light on whether McCarthy has redeemed the modern writer from the sin of authorial arrogance and restored to fiction a haunting respect for the mystery of mankind. As a member of the committee that awarded him a MacArthur fellowship in December 1981, Saul Bellow praised him for his "absolutely overpowering use of language, his life-giving and death-dealing sentences" (quoted in Woodward), suggesting that McCarthy had at least made the act of reading an intensely human experience again. Ironically, Bellow had not read *Blood Meridian* when he made that statement, and I wonder if he would have considered the force of that narrative *too* overpowering. Based on my own experiences reading McCarthy, I think Bellow might have considered *Blood Meridian* a crowning achievement in an ongoing attempt not only to show us the errors of mankind but also to hold us accountable to the cost of correcting them. McCarthy does not limit our knowledge of man by emphasizing his crude exterior, nor does he position us to look at this exterior so that we are blind to the mystery of

mankind. He does not suppose to explain man by his exterior, as if he lacked a mind or soul, nor does he suggest that what he shows us is all there is to know. Although we rarely see the inner lives of his characters, McCarthy has not disregarded the Self. Instead, he hints at the heart of mystery, shows us flashes of mind or consciousness in the crudest of men, in whom we would least expect to find humanity. We do not have to live inside their minds to see that they have them, nor would our experience of identification be as intense if we had extensive access. Rather than expose in fiction what is hidden in the reality *outside* fiction, McCarthy manipulates the narrative point of view to reflect our vision and our hunger for understanding back upon ourselves; he permits us, through the act of reading, inside the intensified reality *of* fiction, to do what we are already free to do—to recognize and examine ourselves. Culla Holme, Lester Ballard, and the unnamed kid must all encounter themselves in some way in the end, and each is held accountable to his actions or his nature by an unreckonable force, from within or without, that exacts the cost of recognition. The Self takes a sudden breath in these encounters, and the reader who has kept his eyes open wide and long enough will see in this flickering light of consciousness a renewed sense of mystery. We can recognize this light because the narrator, through his own rhetorical mindfulness, has made his narrative a place where we can encounter ourselves. The Self has remained alive and alert in the mind of the reader because McCarthy works under the assumption that the Self is still a living concept.

Novelists who exert influence over the act of reading invite a confessional criticism that could revitalize scholarship and teaching in the academy. *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* are promising on this level because their violent imagery and philosophical complexity appeal to deep mainsprings in the reader. According to Flannery O'Connor,

> There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration. When he reads a novel, he wants either his senses tormented or his spirits raised. He wants to be transported, instantly, either to mock damnation or mock innocence. (48-49)

The reader who only wants his "senses tormented" might not be disappointed in these novels, but the reader who is willing to work through a trial that recognizes "the price of restoration" is the only one who will see their value. This second kind of reader sees his act of reading as a preliminary stage in the *process* of understanding, a process that continues when he shares his encounter as a reader with other scholars or with his students. In both cases, he is free to engage in another kind of storytelling: the testimony of his experience. We might categorize this testimony as *ethical criticism* in the sense that it emerges from a rhetorical encounter and concerns itself with the cost and benefit of his reading act; it is *ethical* because it addresses the ethical dimension of literary experience. Or we might categorize it as *ethical criticism* in the sense that it strives to be responsible; it is *ethical* because it is criticism done with a view to excellence and accountability. Either way, this type of criticism is not teachable in the way so many theoretical approaches have become teachable in university classrooms. It does not in itself constitute a finished artifact of knowledge or add to the catalogue of interpretations that fill our libraries. But it is indispensable to the study of literature, especially writers of rare ethical intelligence like McCarthy, if the academy hopes to preserve its humanizing role. If reader-critics and reader-teachers were willing to forgo the quick and easy conclusions of

one or another systematic approach to reading, scholarship and teaching might once again be cooperative and sympathetic, rather than competitive and mechanistic.

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