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The Frail Agony of Grace: Story, Act, and Sacrament in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy

A dissertation presented

by

Matthew L. Potts

to

The Committee on the Study of Religion

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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in the subject of

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The Frail Agony of Grace: Story, Act, and Sacrament in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy

Abstract

Although scholars have widely acknowledged the prevalence of religious reference in the work of Cormac McCarthy, no studies have yet paid any adequate attention to the most pervasive religious trope in all his works: the image of sacrament, and in particular, of eucharist. I contend that a thorough and appropriately informed study of sacrament in the work of Cormac McCarthy can uniquely illuminate his whole body of writing and I undertake that study in this dissertation.

Two things are obvious in the work of Cormac McCarthy: that these novels attempt to establish some sort of moral system in light of metaphysical collapse, and that they are often adorned with sacramental imagery. My argument is that these two facts can and do intelligibly speak to one another, and that a particular theological understanding of sacrament demonstrates how. By reading McCarthy alongside postmodern accounts of action, identity, subjectivity, and narration, I show how he exploits Christian theology in order to locate the value of human acts and relations in a sacramentally immanent way. This is not to claim McCarthy for theology, but it is to assert that McCarthy generates an account of what goodness might look like in a death-ridden world through reference to the theological tradition of sacrament.

I begin by addressing the scope and source of McCarthy's violence. In *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* I read McCarthy as following Nietzsche in scorning an ascetic ideal that locates the value of life beyond life. The ideas of reason and fate in Nietzsche as they develop in Adorno and Arendt is then studied in these same novels. Arendtian ideas of action deeply influence my reading of *Suttree* next, and this lead into a study of storytelling in the three novels of the border

trilogy which is again deeply indebted to Arendtian notions of narration. Last, I look to contemporary theology and *The Road* for examples of sacrament that can cohere these various themes under a single sign and establish the grounds for a postmodern morality.

Acknowledgements

I have depended upon the counsel, support, and love of several persons in the preparation of this dissertation, and these spare words of thanks seem woefully insufficient. Nonetheless:

Professors Amy Hollywood, Stephanie Paulsell, and Charles Stang of Harvard University have offered insightful, wise, and careful – not to mention rapid – readings of the several drafts of this essay. Whatever here follows that proves of insight, wisdom, or care I owe to them. They have been valued mentors and teachers during my time at Harvard and I look forward to their remaining so in coming years.

When I realized I could not write this dissertation without Nietzsche and Arendt, Mara Willard took time and care to guide me into their thought. Her patience, skill, and knowledge of German philosophy has made this reading possible.

As I became increasingly derelict of my pastoral duties during the writing of this dissertation, St. Barnabas Memorial Church in Falmouth, Massachusetts – and its rector the Reverend Patricia Barrett – gave generously of time, understanding, and encouragement. To this church, and especially to Patti, I am most grateful.

From an early age, my parents Daniel and Miyoko Potts taught me to value education and to pursue my dreams. This dissertation represents the realization of one such dream, and so it has roots in my parents. More than this, though, my mother and father have also always shown me the value of a loving and supportive family. Their love and support during this writing has reinforced those old lessons, and for this I am most thankful.

If I had the patience, diligence, and grace of my wife Colette, I'd have finished this dissertation in half the time and with none of the moaning. Nonetheless, through all my groaning hours, Colette has been my surest support. She will not believe me when she reads this, but I could not have done this without her. And Millie and Sam, my children, each day teach me the joy and terror of loving deeply. They have therefore also taught me how to read Cormac McCarthy, and so I couldn't have done this without them, either.

Last, the late Professor Ronald Thiemann, who advised me throughout my Ph.D. program and who died in the early stages of this project, was a better teacher, guide, mentor, and friend than I ever could have anticipated. Though I wish he'd seen this work to its completion, I am thankful for all I received from him. I owe much of my intellectual and spiritual formation these last five years to Ron. It is to his memory therefore that I dedicate this dissertation.

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Introduction

The world about which Cormac McCarthy writes is unforgivingly brutal and unrelentingly dangerous; it is also inflected by an ambivalent regard for the religious. Christian scriptural and ritual references abound in every work and force the critic to reckon with religion. How might this bleak, broken world square with the religious? Although scholars acknowledge the prevalence of the religious, there is no critical consensus around the role of the religious in these works. Readings with nihilist, gnostic, and existentialist roots have all been advanced, and not without good cause: each tradition is referenced in this fiction. Some have proposed a dark biblical morality and these readings seem at least occasionally justified. But no interpretation seems entirely adequate. Those overtly religious readings do not adequately theorize McCarthy's clear ambivalence around religion; the anti-religious readers make an analogously reductive move, albeit in an opposite critical direction. The gnostic critics meanwhile seem too arcanely dogmatic in their readings. Surprisingly no scholarly study of Cormac McCarthy has yet paid adequate attention to the most pervasive religious trope in his work: the image of sacrament, and in particular, of eucharist. This is regrettable, on the one hand because such inattention I believe impoverishes interpretation, and on the other because it also withholds from Christian theology a potentially useful reminder of the sacraments' significance for the theological tradition.

The Christian theology of sacrament, especially as read by the Reformation, insists that the holy stands in the midst of life. As Rowan Williams writes, Christian sacramental theology asserts that we do not "encounter God in the *displacement* of the world we live in, [in] the suspension of our bodily and historical nature."[1] God encounters us *in* those historical bodies, not in*stead* of them. Theology makes this claim through an analogical reference to the divinity of the crucified, through what Luther called a *theologia crucis*. By this account, the broken body and the broken loaf both fully

[1] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 207.

bear the holy. That body and that bread need not be erased or effaced to bear the divine; rather, they remain wholly present even in their brokenness while entirely presenting the holy. Based upon this understanding of sacrament, and following key philosophical themes of agency, identity, and narration in McCarthy's fiction, I therefore intend to demonstrate that McCarthy's routine and extensive use of sacramental imagery means to deploy precisely this "cruciform" logic towards the development of a distinct moral vision.

McCarthy and his readers

My interest in McCarthy concerns the role of the religious in his fiction, and the nature of this role has been of consistent significance in the critical conversation around his work. The first major critical study of Cormac McCarthy, by Vereen Bell, sets the tone and terms for much later conversation. When Bell somewhat glibly notes in his first article that McCarthy's novels are "as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot," he establishes a nihilist assumption that has colored most of the criticism around McCarthy.[2] Yet strictly speaking, almost no critic – significantly and emphatically, not even Vereen Bell – reads McCarthy as absolutely nihilistic.[3] Though most see little possibility for metaphysics and little foundation for morals in these fictions, nearly all understand McCarthy to be manipulating religious imagery and to be attempting to situate some stable moral system against the reality of a violently burdensome world. How critics interpret McCarthy's manipulations of religious imagery and themes, and what moral conclusions they believe he comes to, distinguish the various schools of thought around McCarthy. I delineate three dominant approaches to his work: existentialist, aestheticist, and gnostic.

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[2] Vereen Bell, "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy," *Southern Literary Journal* 15.2 (Spring 1983): 31.

[3] "Nihilism" can cover a manner of meanings, and although there are ways of interpreting the term to include all sort of epistemological or ethical nonfoundationalism, since such forms of nonfoundationalism can cohere with any number of meaning systems, I take nihilism to refer to a much more absolute position.

Once again, Bell initiates the critical discussion around McCarthy, and although he employs the term "nihilist," in his early work, by the time *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* is published in 1988 as the first book-length treatment of McCarthy, Bell has abandoned that term for more careful ones. For Bell, it is not "meaning itself but the traditional idea of meaning" that is "made obsolete" by McCarthy's writing.[4] In a Nietzchean turn that Bell acknowledges but perhaps does not sufficiently theorize, the turn away from tradition and transcendence is not a turn towards nothingness but away from it, towards the world. The "antimetaphysical bias" that is implicit in "his prose style . . . binds us to the phenomenal world . . . In McCarthy's novels, in other words, the world itself is mysterious enough without involving ideas or transcendence of it."[5] And this mystery presses humans towards meaning and (perhaps even) meaningfulness:

> This gives us McCarthy's metaphysic summarized: none, in effect – no first principles, no foundational truth, Heraclitus without Logos. In each of these novels existence not only precedes but precludes essence. But if essence has been precluded, the human dream of it has not, so the pressure of meaningfulness remains even where meaning will not separate out.[6]

Furthermore, the priority of existence and the pressure towards meaning leads to practical, even ethical, considerations. If "human feeling and the necessary physical action of getting up and going on, putting one step in front of the other, are prior to thought and ideas," then the reader of McCarthy is reminded "how it is that most people in the world . . . have other things to worry over first," like "how to keep in touch with what is left of their kin and keep them from continuing to fall away – how to live."[7] In other words, Bell notes in McCarthy an absolute commitment to the immanently real against the transcendent ideal – coded in Bell's own terminology here by the phrase "existence precedes essence" – and Bell attributes the modest ethical scheme that arises in McCarthy's work to this commitment.

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[4] Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 2.
[5] Ibid., 2-3.
[6] Ibid., 9.
[7] Ibid., 114.

Bell's thesis – that, for McCarthy, existence precedes essence – leads me to include Bell among that group of critics who read McCarthy in a way that broadly inherits an existentialist philosophical approach.[8] Some of these readings are explicit and quite literal. Frank Shelton closely aligns McCarthy with Camus and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, while William Prather extends this analysis with further exploration of the absurd and the impulse towards revolt in McCarthy's fiction.[9] Other readings are more creative and subtle. Elisabeth Andersen interprets McCarthy as combining "an Existentialist's appreciation for heroic self-determinism with a darkly remained Christian metaphysics stripped of eternal redemption."[10] She thus reads the novels as asserting "that the shape of a life is predestined, even as they advocate the heroism of the outlaw who claims agency and defiantly struggles to shape his own fate."[11] David Holloway meanwhile marries Sartrean existentialism to a Marxist critique of late capitalism.[12] John Cant takes a further political and postcolonial turn while expressing similar commitments and a more distinct dissatisfaction with the religious:

> McCarthy's depiction of man in an absurdist universe is the product of a consciousness that has lost its religious belief but retained a religious cast of mind . . . But the consistent representation in his texts of the dialectic of vitality and insignificance does mark McCarthy as a religious writer in a Godless world. His existential position is inextricably bound up with his love of language, despite its limitations, and of narrative.[13]

Much like philosophical existentialism in its many versions, this group of critics searches for some steady moral ground in a world absent of stable meanings. But the "love of language . . . and

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[8] I don't mean to use the label "existentialist" with any philosophical precision, only as a placeholder for several works that either distinctly echo some themes of philosophical existentialism or that explicitly draw upon existentialist philosophers.

[9] Frank Shelton, "*Suttree* and Suicide," *Southern Quarterly* 29.1 (Fall 1990): 71-83; William Prather, "Absurd Reasoning in an Existential World: A Consideration of Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*," in *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995), 103-114.

[10] Elisabeth Andersen, *The Mythos of Cormac McCarthy* (Saarbrücken: M Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co., 2008), 4.

[11] Ibid.

[12] David Holloway, *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002).

[13] John Cant, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 15.

narrative" that Cant has flagged introduces the primary attribute of the second category of critics I have named: the aestheticists.

"Aestheticist" is a problematic term, to be sure, and I use it with some reservation only as a placeholder here for those critics who see McCarthy as grounding his morality somehow in art. The interpreters of McCarthy that I include among this group recognize the dramatic loss of epistemological and ethical foundation that the first group also sees, but these readers assert that McCarthy offers an aesthetic or narrative remedy or foundation in the midst of this loss. To be sure, Cant or Bell could be included in this group; the division of these categories reflects critical emphasis more so than stark difference. Furthermore, most readers of McCarthy (including myself) place great importance upon the style of his language and storytelling. What distinguishes this group is their exclusive attention to aesthetic or narrative categories, often at the expense of other ones. Nonetheless, these "aestheticist" authors present some of the most interesting and compelling readings of McCarthy, though they interestingly assume widely divergent positions with regard to the role of the religious in McCarthy's fiction. Linda Townley Woodson has read McCarthy alongside Nietzsche, Foucault, and Kristeva, and although she argues that for McCarthy "truths can never be known in conscious reasoning," and that "humans use language as a way of becoming and of holding against the other," she also contends that for McCarthy literature and "each individual's narrative and the witnessing to it in the memory of another . . . become a way of existing for a temporary moment in history."[14] Jay Ellis also sees narrative possibilities in these works, but his interpretation of the role of religion borders upon the reductive. When Billy Parham carries John Grady Cole's body through the streets of Juarez and cries out to God, "Do you see? Do you see?" Ellis calls it "the closest to grace we come to in McCarthy," a claim patently disproven only pages

[14] Linda Townley Woodson, "Leaving the Dark Night of the Lie: A Kristevan Reading of Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction" in *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*, ed. James D. Lilley (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 270.

later in the text.[15] Ellis also believes that "failure overwhelms the generative possibilities of love, let alone grace, in these novels."[16] To be fair, Ellis book was published prior to the publication of *The Road*, in which the subtleties and agonies of love and grace perhaps become most explicit.

But whatever the shortcomings of Ellis' readings, he accurately diagnoses the challenge that any thoughtful reader of McCarthy faces: "How can these two critical possibilities (nihilism and morality) continue to be as convincing as they are [in McCarthy] without canceling each other out?"[17] Ellis' solution is through fiction. Through stories, Ellis maintains, we "imaginatively extend a fiction (a dream life) to approximate and transcend that reality that we have already imagined," and he reads McCarthy keeping a nihilistic intellectual and philosophical system at bay through the sheer poetic force of his stories. Although Ellis wonders if in fact McCarthy's time has run out and it nihilism has finally caught up with his art, Ellis nonetheless see narration as McCarthy's only hedge against nothingness.

Lydia Cooper, meanwhile, presents the reading most sympathetic to the religious among the aestheticists; indeed, she is one of few critics to acknowledge the importance of sacramental imagery in these novels at all.[18] But her primary argument revolves around the development of empathy and morality through literary technique. According to Cooper,

> [however] much an apocalyptic despair seems to brood over the novel's blasted landscapes, interior revelations of morality suggest that hope may be a defining characteristic of humanity. And since narrative is the means by which these interior moral commitments are valorized, the novels suggest that heroism and narrative are inseparable from each other and, by extrapolation, from human existence . . . Narrative is thus a vehicle for bearing witness to moral courage, and at times narrative is the only means by which morality is recognized.[19]

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[15] Jay Ellis, *Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 313. See my reading of the conclusion of the border trilogy in chapter four, among other places, for a closer look at grace.
[16] Ibid., 289.
[17] Ibid., 289.
[18] Lydia Cooper, *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press, 2011), ix.
[19] Ibid., 22.

For the aestheticists, once the "sacred idiom" has been "shorn of its referents," that idiom – the word uttered and written, the story told – yet remains an available handle at which to grasp and secure a handle.[20]

The last group of critics are those most explicitly concerned with the religious, but in many cases they offer the least persuasive readings of McCarthy. These I'll call gnostic readings, since gnosticism as a tradition is consistently – if loosely – invoked. The appeal to gnosticism is not surprising, given the blighted worlds and the terrifying dangers of materiality and mortality that McCarthy so routinely writes. And, as these critics show, there are indeed repeated references to figures and notions variously associated with gnosticism. But if these critical works have a consistent shortcoming, it is in their overly broad characterization of persons and traditions as diverse in time and place as Mani or Boehme, Platonic theurgy and Lutheran pietism, as "gnostic." Gnosticism itself is a term that has only even been anachronistically applied by scholars, and it can never be applied without caveat, let alone across continents and centuries.[21] The weakest of these gnostic readings see McCarthy as something of a gnostic allegorist.[22] Douglas Canfield meanwhile reads the gnostic influences somewhat more carefully and alongside other critical and psychoanalytic schemas.[23] Dianne Luce, in her exhaustive and interesting study of the Appalachian novels, also reads the influence of gnosticism prominently but not so slavishly. She calls critical attention to the various references to ancient religious traditions while trying to synthesize these ideas with "Platonic, . . .

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[20] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 89.

[21] See David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[22] See especially Petra Mundik, "'Striking fire out of the rock': Gnostic theology in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," in *South Central Review* 26.3 (2009): 72-97; and Leo Daugherty, "'Gravers false and true': *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 159-174.

[23] J. Douglas Canfield, "The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius: Abjection, Identity, and the Carnivalesque in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*" in *Contemporary Literature* 44.4 (Winter 2003): 664-696.

Christian, and existentialist images and concepts."[24] Indeed, Luce states what is no doubt true: among these various schools of interpretation, ideas "conflict more in labels than in essentials."[25]

This threefold scheme ignores a small group of scholars who discern a sympathy for Christianity in the novels. The approach of this group is exemplified in the work of Edwin Arnold, who attempts a thoroughly Christian reading of Cormac McCarthy. In his persuasive essay "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables," Arnold displays an deep knowledge of Christian scripture and identifies countless biblical references in McCarthy's work while attempting to discern some traditionally grounded morality in these texts.[26] Though this might seem to distinguish Arnold little from the gnostic critics who discover and celebrate obscure hints of Manichean cosmology, Arnold proceeds with somewhat more caution. As he writes,

> While I recognize and appreciate the postmodern celebration of McCarthy's exuberant violence, his astonishing approximation of chaos, his grand evocation of the mystery of the world, there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious.[27]

This is too reductive a claim; as most of these other critics have shown, a fervent pursuit of some moral order need not be "essentially religious," and I remain unconvinced that any reader of McCarthy should call this fiction itself a religious fiction. Indeed, Arnold is not the only critic to advocate this strong Christian reading. Kim McMurtry also presents a highly Christological (and somewhat reductive) reading of the border trilogy, while Jason Ambrosiano looks at the same novels with similar aims but somewhat more subtlety.[28] Ambrosiano even briefly addresses the Roman Catholic catechism's account of sacrament – that the body of Christ "is not the bearer of meaning; it

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[24] Dianne Luce, *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 202.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Edwin Arnold, "Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables" in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999): 45-70.
[27] Ibid., 46.
[28] See Kim McMurtry, "Some Improvident God," *Southwestern American Literature* 26.2 (2001): 45-57; and Jason Ambrosiano, "Blood in the Tracks: Catholic Postmodernism in *The Crossing*" *Southwestern American Literature* 25.1 (1999): 83-91.

is meaning" itself.[29] He astutely aligns this teaching and the sacramental images in *The Crossing* with some postmodern thought, but the line he draws between McCarthy and the catechism is too direct.[30] Allen Josephs discerns a more mysterious and troubling rendering of God in *The Road*, but somewhat flatly identifies the boy with Christ in his reading.[31] Thomas Carlson also reads *The Road* with care and an eye towards the religious, but he too fails to acknowledge how *The Road* serves to undermine the religious in essential ways.[32] But if these thinkers are each somewhat reductive in their own way, they are right to point out that a pursuit as thoroughly beset by biblical and religious imagery as McCarthy's clearly is must bear some complicated relation, even some real debt, to Christianity. So when Arnold concludes that "the mystery McCarthy propounds is that we are blind to the mystery that is the stuff of our very existence," we should at least entertain the possibility that McCarthy's moral vision might be tangentially or problematically, if not essentially, religious.

Luce, in many ways is right: most of these readings differ in label more than in substance. All regard matter as corrupt and fate as sure; all see God as everywhere absent and death as everywhere present; all read ethics as dangerously unstable but goodness as perilously indispensible; all read an emptiness behind signs but seek meaning in the stories signs effect. Nearly all have pointed out these paradoxes, but almost none have recognized McCarthy's recurrent use of and allusion to sacrament. I will contend that the Christian notion of sacrament frankly addresses each of these paradoxes and uniquely incorporates them in ways McCarthy will expose and exploit in his novels.

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[29] Ambrosiano, "Blood in the Tracks," 83.

[30] In particular, Ambrosiano does not adequately acknowledge the important differences among postmodern theory, Roman Catholic doctrine, and Cormac McCarthy. For a more careful consideration of the theology of sacrament and its relation to both postmodern critiques of representation and McCarthy's work, see especially chapter five.

[31] Allen Josephs, "The Quest for God in *The Road*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 133-148. For a reading of why direct identification of the boy in fact contravenes the moral project of the novel, see chapter five.

[32] Thomas Carlson, "With the World at Heart: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* with Augustine and Heidegger" in *Religion and Literature* 39 no.3 (Autumn 2007): 47-71. For a more extended critique of this reading, see chapter five.

The theology of the cross and the signs of Christ

The unrelenting rejection of the religious, a frank assessment of matter's frailty, the empty significance of signs, and the possibility for moral action in a ruthless world: these things are all prevalent as themes in McCarthy's fiction, and each may be partially accounted for by systems of thought such as gnosticism or existentialism. But I will argue that all of these themes may be coherently held together under a particular sacramental theology, especially one deeply indebted to the *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross.

The *theologia crucis* is a term coined by Luther at Heidelberg: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible . . . He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God [literally: God's posterior] seen through suffering and the cross . . . [T]rue theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ . . . He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering . . . God can be found only in suffering and the cross."[33] The cross teaches that God is revealed *sub contrario*, under God's opposite. For Luther, it is not just that the cross reveals Christ; anything other than the cross – those things we might conventionally understand as beauty, goodness, or truth, for example – are in fact only distractions. Only the cross really reveals God. It "does no good to recognize God in glory and majesty, unless [one] recognizes [God] in the humility and shame of the cross "[34]

Theological attention to the sufferings of Christ is of course not new with Luther. Devotion in the Middle Ages is focused directly and at length upon the body of the bloody, bloody Christ. But I can say that Luther's fixation upon the suffering and vulnerability of the crucified Christ as the singularly mediating revelation of God is of prime importance for Reformation theology in general

[33] Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *Luther's Works Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, eds. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1957), 52-3.
[34] Ibid., 52.

and also, as we'll see, for a good deal of both Reformed and Roman sacramental theology to follow. If the cross is the prototypical sign of Christ, then it guides how we read Christ's other signs, the sacraments among them.

The term "sacrament" originates in the Latin west through Tertullian, who uses it to translate the Greek word *musterion*. *Musterion*, "mystery," was and is the term used in the Greek church to refer to the saving grace of God enacted in the ritual acts of the church. When Tertullian coins it, he is using the word to refer to baptism. Latin speakers reading Tertullian's loose translation would have understood "sacrament" typically to have meant the sacred oath of a soldier. But the term with its connotations of secrecy, fidelity, and mystery sticks and becomes the Latin standard for representing *musterion*. The term seems largely to retain this sense until Augustine adds a semiotic or symbolic aspect in his *Commentaries on John*. In the *Commentaries* Augustine calls the acts of Christ in the narrative accounts of the gospels "sacraments", or "visible words." As he writes, "the word is added to the elemental substance, and it becomes a sacrament, also itself, as it were, a visible word"; and again, "Christ himself is the word of God, even a deed of the Word is a word for us."[35] Augustine is alluding to the waters of baptism here while ambitiously interpreting the significance of Jesus' miracle at the wedding at Cana. In any case, Augustine influentially regards these acts – these sacraments – as communicative actions, as deeds of Christ which convey who Christ is, as enacted signs which reveal the nature of Christ to the church. So the sense that sacraments are revelatory acts, signs of Christ because deeds of Christ, is an early and persistent meaning.

In the medieval period, meanwhile, attention shifts from sacramental action to sacramental objects. Theology in the middle ages becomes concerned (almost exclusively) with eucharist over baptism, and with the consecrated bread and wine as themselves material bearers of Christ's presence. Either alongside or in addition to Augustine's concern with what God does in Christ and

[35]Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John 55-111* (Washington D.C.: Catholic U of America Press, 1994), 117.

what Christ in turn does through the acts of the church, theology begins to dispute the character and substance of the material objects of bread and wine, and the nature of Christ's presence in those objects. Monks of rival monasteries begin writing lengthy disputations which debate the nature of Christ's presence in the bread. Theologians ponder whether a mouse which infests the aumbry might actually receive Jesus' real body in the reserve host. Indeed, the most familiar theological vocabulary of the eucharistic disputes which arose in and around the Reformation and with which many students of theology today may be familiar – transubstantiation, consubstantiation, sacramental union, memorialism, real presence, pneumatic presence, symbolic presence, etc. – all these tend to revolve around the precise and substantial nature of the consecrated elements specifically as sacramental objects.

This dissertation focuses primarily upon how a certain understanding of sacraments, when married to a particular philosophy of both acts and of signs, might inform a subsequent reading of Cormac McCarthy. Thus there is no need here to delve too deeply into the Reformation debates. But I would like to paraphrase the Reformers' (largely misplaced) concerns with the Thomist position of transubstantiation, because it is crucial to the way I will be reading the role of sacrament in McCarthy's novels. John Wyclif in the fourteenth century and Martin Luther in the sixteenth each regard the scholastic account of transubstantiation as insufficiently faithful to the doctrine of incarnation, inadequately attendant to the cross of Christ. They accuse Thomas of excluding the substance of bread due to the sacredness of Christ, of denying that a common loaf of bread could bear the full divinity of God. In other words, Thomas – they claim – doesn't want to sully holiness with the profanity of mere bread. For Wyclif and Luther, locating the sacred in, with, and under the profane is precisely what incarnation is all about. As Wyclif writes, "the sacrament of the altar, white and rind, and like to our bread or host unsacred, is very God's body in form of bread . . . And right

as it is heresy to believe that Christ is a spirit and no body, so it is heresy for to trowe that this sacrament is God's body and no bread; for it is both together."[36] Luther expands this dialectic:

> Thus what is true in regard to Christ is also true in regard to the sacrament. It is not necessary for human nature to be transubstantiated before it can be the corporeal habitude of the divine, and before the divine can be contained under the accidents of human nature. Both natures are present there entirely, and one can appropriately say: 'This man is God,' or 'This God is man.'[37]

The theology of the incarnation analogically structures the theology of sacrament. If the divine and the human can both be entirely present in the dying man Jesus, then Jesus and bread can be wholly present in the holy host. In short, the Reformers worry that the Thomist position refuses the paradox incarnation invites. The sacred ostensibly opposes the profane, and so in Aquinas (the Reformers say) the profane must get out of the way to make room for the sacred.

As Rowan Williams has written, what "the Reformers worr[y] over [is] the suggestion that the sacramental bread and wine [are] diminished in respect of their worldly reality in order to make room for the supernatural."[38] Of course, as is obvious to Williams and others, this is clearly a misreading of Thomas Aquinas's version of transubstantiation, in which Thomas states explicitly that bread and wine are not annihilated by the divine presence.[39] But whether or not Wyclif and Luther are skilled readers of Aquinas, their position actually preserves this important aspect of Thomas' position: that there is a holiness embodied in the quotidian; that there is a sacredness in, with, and under the profane. (The echoes here in Vereen Bell's early critical claim – that "the world itself is mysterious enough" – are noted.) Aquinas, Wyclif, and Luther all interpret their position from incarnation and understand it in light of the cross. Because if the question is – how can a common, ordinary loaf of bread bear the full divinity of Christ? – then the answer is: because God is

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[36] John Wycliffe, *Writings of the Reverend and Learned John Wickliff* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1831), 46.
[37] Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" in *Luther's Works Vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, eds. Helmut T. Lehmann and Abdel Ross Wentz, trans. Frederick C. Ahrens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1959), 35.
[38] Williams, *On Christian Theology*. 207.
[39] See the *Summa Theologica* part III, question 75, article 3 on the annihilation of the bread and wine. *Summa Theologica Volume 58: The Eucharistic Presence*, ed William Barden O.P. (London: Blackfriars, 1965), 63-68.

revealed *sub contrario*, under God's opposite. The fact that a stale heel of bread doesn't look like anything like God is precisely the point. This is exactly why a broken loaf can bear God, Luther says; because a broken body can bear God too, because Jesus' broken body in fact does so in a proto- and arch-typical way. Theologies of incarnation and sacrament must look toward the humble and the ordinary, not at the glorious, for God. If the fullness of God is paradoxically revealed in the broken body of the man Jesus, then the fullness of Christ can be revealed in the broken loaf of the gathered community, too.

The road ahead

It bears saying at the outset that I am not eager to enlist McCarthy as a Christian theologian. The length at which I've framed the theological problem might give impressions to the contrary, but I will not here attempt to baptize either Cormac McCarthy or his fiction. Most theology makes claims – especially regarding the nature of the holiness sacramental signs present and re-present – that these novels do not seem to support. But two things are obvious from the primary and secondary sources in a study of McCarthy: that these novels attempt to establish some sort of moral system in light of metaphysical collapse; and that they are often adorned with sacramental imagery. My argument is that these two facts can and do intelligibly speak to one another; that if McCarthy does in fact offer some moral system through his fiction, a sophisticated understanding of sacraments might inform how we understand McCarthy. My study thus claims significance for both literary and religious studies. For one, when read this way, and alongside a philosophy of action and narration also evidently invoked by these novels, it will become clear that McCarthy exploits the ancient tradition of Christian theology in order to locate the value of human acts and relations in a "sacramentally" immanent way. In other words, I will show that – despite the overwhelming violence of his works – McCarthy means to defy rather than to embrace the cruelty of the world.

That is, acts of goodness or mercy or kindness or love, as rare and as futile as they sometimes are in these novels, do not fail to be real or worthwhile because of their rarity and futility. Just as the cross does not compromise the holiness of Christ for Christian theology, nor the stale bread impede the presence of his body to the church, McCarthy can – through deploying these eucharistic images – at once articulate in his fiction a cruelty absolutely without compromise while yielding no ground for the enduring worth of goodness. This is not to say that McCarthy attributes the worth of goodness exclusively to Jesus; that would make him a Christian theologian. But in recalling the logic and manner by which Christian theology gives an account of the goodness of Jesus' death, McCarthy can generate his own account of what goodness might look like in a death-ridden world. For McCarthy, acts of kindness or mercy are entirely valuable in and of themselves, not because they refer to some greater or future goodness beyond or behind them.

For the study of religion, meanwhile, this creative use of the sacramental tradition should remind theology that the sacraments are as important for what they present as for what they intend to re-present. From a theological perspective, the historical danger of eucharistic theology has been a failure of dialectic, too weak a stomach for paradox. When theology has failed richly enough to account for the sacraments, its mistake has typically been to look too far beyond or behind the given signs of bread and wine. Indeed, one might read some unsubtle versions of both Roman transubstantiation and Reformed symbolism as motivated by the same concern: that this profane bread must not, cannot bear the holiness of that body. Either the bread must therefore actually go away, or the body must therefore never actually arrive. McCarthy can perhaps inspire the theologian to declare, with Luther and Williams and others, that however worldly or material this bread or that body, *hoc est corpus meum*. What's more, in employing the language of sacrament as he does, McCarthy places it into meaningful conversation with postmodern understandings of immanence, action, identity, and narration that Christian theology can and should usefully deploy in thinking through its

own projects. Contemporary Christian sacramental theology might recognize important resonances that its deepest traditions might share with McCarthy's novels and with contemporary philosophy, and the conversation McCarthy thus inspires might bear interesting theological fruit.

In brief, the that follow I will trace this argumentative trajectory. Chapter one, "Knowledge" begins by addressing the scope and source of McCarthy's violence. In *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* I read McCarthy as following Friedrich Nietzsche in scorning an "ascetic ideal" which locates the value of life beyond or behind life, an ascetic posture which in fact hides a narcissistic nihilism that denies life. I read McCarthy as undermining, rather than embracing, nihilism in his depictions of human and natural violence. The influence of Nietzsche on later German thinkers, such as Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, is developed in this chapter and in chapter two, "Fate." Here Adornian questions concerning reason's relation to violence and Arendtian questions concerning will's relation to fate arise, and I consider how the Nietzchean rejection of asceticism/idealism might relate to problems of determinism. I conclude that an Arendtian ethics can forestall – or at least frustrate – fate. Arendt's corollary ideas of action and natality deeply influence my reading of *Suttree* in the third chapter, "Action." Of course, Arendt's philosophy of action correlates to a philosophy of narrative, too, one lately and compellingly developed Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler, and so the fourth chapter – "Story" – considers the role of storytelling in the construction of human identity throughout the border trilogy. The final, fifth chapter, "Sacrament," will draw the concerns of identity, action, and narration into conversation with Rowan Williams and Louis-Marie Chauvet on sacrament in order to construct a reading of *The Road*. Thus, while I will not attempt to read the whole of McCarthy's corpus or to provide an exhaustive explication of all his works, I do contend that the sacramental logic I uncover can usefully illuminate any of his writings. But because my focus is the sacramental, I will draw particular attention to those works that most importantly employ sacramental imagery and portray the persistence and power of

ethical actions in a godspent world. That the sacramental and the moral are deeply related should be clear throughout the study, but how and why they are related will only become gradually exposed over the course of these five chapters.

Knowledge

The ruins of Christian religion

The world Cormac McCarthy conjures often appears ruthless, but never so consistently as in church. Throughout the novels, whenever religious institutions appear, they do so in desolation, ruin, and uselessness. Of course, churches turn up only rarely. Although an inebriated Cornelius Suttree wanders into a few churches in the book *Suttree*, which the third chapter takes as its focus, and though Suttree's (sometimes combative) engagement with clerics will figure significantly in my reading of that novel, by and large institutional religion is of little consequence in Cormac McCarthy's novels. Of course, references to God and to religious faith do recur in provocative ways throughout these books, and as the following pages will show, indirect references to Christian sacrament abound through association, implication, and image. An intelligent interpretation of these images must therefore begin by sorting through the critique of Christianity McCarthy proffers, before investigating how this critique might cohere with the eucharistic imagery he deploys. Since the failure of religious institutions is nowhere more obvious than in *Blood Meridian*, and since the emptiness of that failure echoes so troublingly in *No Country for Old Men*, I will focus primarily upon these novels over the course of the next two chapters.

This chapter draws out McCarthy's critique of the religious in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* and sets the stage for a philosophical and interpretive consideration of this critique in the chapters to come. More importantly, however, this chapter reveals how religion relates to the larger critical posture the novels assume. I will show that McCarthy's undeniable critique of the religious is inseparable both philosophically and narratively from a corresponding critique of human reason and action. Knowledge, will, and fate are everywhere at stake in McCarthy's novels. Indeed, from McCarthy's earliest published work, the fallibility and lure of objective reason remains a recurring preoccupation for him, and questions of will and determinism always closely follow. But these

themes are most fully rendered, as the present chapter will show, once McCarthy shifts his attention to the American southwest and narrows his philosophical focus through a manipulation of the Western cowboy genre. Indeed, although certain forms of religious practice are thoroughly skewered in these works, I will argue that the concomitant collapse of modern objectivity leaves open a mysterious ambiguity that *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* suggest by their opaque endings. But these ambiguities must wait for the conclusion of the next chapter where I will offer a close reading of the perplexing ends of these two novels. There I will argue that a potentially renewed possibility for the significance of the religious remains. Here I will only suggest that a sign of sacrament – a black mass in the Sonoran highlands – opens the space for this ambiguity. Of course, the significance of religion in general and of sacrament in particular will remain unclear at the end of chapter two, as indeed they do at the conclusion of these novels, but my argument will be that a sacramental or eucharistic possibility will have arisen that waits to be realized elsewhere in McCarthy's corpus.

Blood Meridian

At first glance, this appears a tall task. *Blood Meridian* is a disturbing and relentlessly violent novel set in the North American southwest during the mid-nineteenth century and based upon real events.[1] With unremitting and nauseating detail, the novel documents the murderous journey of a group of American vigilantes commissioned by the Sonoran government to exterminate Indian populations. They deliver scalps as proof for payment. The group, led by a man named Glanton, soon discovers the ironically anti-racist convenience that all scalps look the same once dried in the desert sun, and so they commence killing and scalping everyone they encounter. As the Glanton Gang sociopathically pursues all the people of the southwest, regardless of race, the novel routinely

[1] For more on the historical underpinnings of *Blood Meridian*, see John Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

conveys the absolute failure of Christian religion to be of any practical protection to the persecuted. The religious practices of people in the book tend towards the talismanic; religious figures and devotions seem intended to invite protection or favor in a dangerous world, but these practices – especially evidently Christian ones – fail to do so almost without exception.[2]

Early in the tale, for example, the quasi-protagonist of the novel – a nameless kid whose life the novel roughly recounts – comes upon the burnt ruins of a village. He finds in the mud walls of an abandoned home "figures of saints dressed in doll's clothes, the rude wooden faces brightly painted. Illustrations cut from an old journal and pasted to the wall, a small picture of a queen, a gypsy card that was the four of cups."[3] The poignant portrait of a destroyed life rendered by the relics tacked to this mud wall implies a devotional practice which seeks protection from or prediction of the future is implied from the association of saints with Tarot. (Ironically, though the saints cards have here clearly failed to prevent catastrophe, Tarot proves itself of some use elsewhere in the book, as a woman in a traveling band of players accurately predicts the fates of many central characters using cards.[4]) Similarly, just prior to the kid's implied death at the novel's end, the reader is told that the kid carries with him "a bible that he'd found at the mining camps . . . no word of which could he read."[5] The narrator never reveals precisely why the kid carries the book, but the character's illiteracy obviously precludes scriptural study. Whatever function the bible serves for the kid, devotional or no, it does not forestall his death. There are other more ambiguous instances of Christian religious practice in *Blood Meridian*. The renegade Captain White and his men pray for deliverance from drought in the middle of a parched wasteland on a Christian crusade to rid the

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[2] Of course, what constitutes "Christian" practice or religious practice in general are themselves complicated problems. For the purposes of this study, I am taking for granted that the common devotions to saints and churches signify Christian practice, and I am bracketing the more complicated question of religious syncretism and taxonomy in the mid-nineteenth century North American southwest, and their fictional representation here.

[3] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or That Evening Redness in the West* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1985), 59.

[4] Ibid., 96.

[5] Ibid., 312.

southwest of heathen, and "within the hour the wind cool[s] and drops of rain the size of grapeshot [fall] upon them out of that wild darkness."[6] We might read this as an efficacious prayer until pages later, a Comanche army, a "legion of horribles," descends upon the detachment, physically and sexually tortures the men, then annihilates them ruthlessly.[7]

Christian holy places also are shown to be without protective power in this landscape. Nearly every church or mission depicted in this novel lies in ruins. At best, these buildings are merely empty, with birds or other wildlife lurking about. Vultures sit atop the buildings in "clerical black," their "wings outstretched in attitudes of exhortation like dark little bishops."[8] Dogs and madmen creep around the grounds. As the kid enters the sacristy of one abandoned church,

> [b]uzzards [shuffle] off through the chaff and plaster like enormous yardfowl. The domed vaults overhead [are] clotted with a dark furred mass that shift[s] and breathe[s] and chitter[s]. In the room [is] a wooden table with a few clay pots and along the back wall lay the remains of several bodies, one a child.[9]

Even the churches where people still practice are presented satirically. When the Glanton Gang enters the Mexican village of Jesús María on the feast of All Souls, they watch "a rude Christ in a stained and ancient catafalque" paraded through the streets.[10] Tellingly, the "Christ jostles past, a poor figure of straw with carven head and feet."[11] In the bluntly named town of Jesús María on the feast of All Souls, an inanimate Christ bumbles helplessly through the streets, quite literally a straw man for the faithful. At times, these images erupt once again into gruesome violence. With some regularity, churches become scenes of massacre that fail to provide any quarter to the falling faithful. About halfway through the novel, the Glanton Gang enters a nameless village in the mountains in order to murder the innocent Mexicans there and gather their scalps as counterfeit Indian bounty.

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[6] Ibid., 48.
[7] Ibid., 52.
[8] Ibid., 262, 59.
[9] Ibid., 26.
[10] Ibid., 190.
[11] Ibid.

As the scalphunters ride the innocents down on horseback through the streets, those villagers who "had been running toward the church . . . [kneel] clutching the altar and from this refuge they [are] dragged howling one by one and one by one they [are] slain and scalped on the chancel floor."[12] Neither altar nor chancel offers any physical protection to the persecuted. There is no sanctuary at church.

What's more, the failure of the church to offer any practical protection for believers is often rendered under the particular terms of sacramental observance and practice. The focus of critique is narrowing here, from general Christian devotion, to holy Christian times and places, to the individual sacramental acts of the church. Once again, the practical inefficacy of the sacraments is given with both mild satire but also with alarming violence. Late in the novel the Gang takes as a traveling companion a man who keeps his cognitively impaired brother in a cage as a twenty-five cent sideshow. At a ferry crossing a Christian pioneer woman named Sarah Borginnes saves the disabled man from his brother, burns the feces-smeared cage, and then bathes the rescued sibling in the river. In a momentarily touching scene meant clearly to evoke baptism, she wades into the river with the man to bathe him, "her dress ballooning about her and [takes] him deeper and swirl[s] him about grown man that he [is] in her great stout arms. She [holds] him up, she croon[s] to him."[13] The apparent tenderness of this scene gives way to satire almost immediately. After Borginnes kisses the man good night in his new suit of clean clothes, he emerges from his tent naked, wanders back into the river, falls in, and begins quickly to drown. Judge Holden - a murderous, ruthless member of the Glanton Gang about whom much more will be written shortly - steps into the river and grabs the drowning man "by the heels like a great midwife and [slaps him] on the back to let the water out. A birth scene or a baptism or some ritual not yet inaugurated into any canon."[14] For all its tenderness,

[12] Ibid., 181.
[13] Ibid., 258.
[14] Ibid., 259.

Borginnes' compassionate baptism doesn't keep the man from falling perilously into the river. It is the irreligious judge who instead unceremoniously saves the man with a spontaneous anti-sacrament and then adopts the disabled sibling as a sort of pet. Once again, Christian religious practice appears ineffective as practical protection from harm. It apparently amounts only to a useless adornment in a world of danger.

But nowhere is the indictment of church and sacrament more direct than at the grisly scene of another massacre. These Mexicans have been slaughtered by Comanche, not Glanton, but once again the text clearly means to imply the ineffectual protective powers of the church:

> 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 altars had been hauled down and the tabernacle looted and the great sleeping God of the Mexicans routed from his golden cup. The primitive painted saints in their frames hung cocked on the walls as if an earthquake had visited and a dead Christ in a glass bier lay broken in the chancel floor.
>
> The murdered lay in a great pool of their communal blood.[15]

The fallen altars and looted aumbry; the somnolent God and eaten flesh; the dead Christ and murdered Mexicans together lying in the congealed blood of communion: all signs point here to the mass, though with disturbingly disdainful intent. Whatever efficacy Christian theology claims for the sacraments in conferring grace, these things (or this grace) evidently offer no practical protection to the people who rally to them in desperation here.

No Country for Old Men

The critique of Christian practice is more cerebral, but no less dramatic, in *No Country for Old Men*. This novel is set in similar country, though nearly a hundred and fifty years later. The violence in *No Country* is somewhat more muted, but only because it deals with individuals, not armies. This

[15] Ibid., 60.

book follows a man named Llewellyn Moss who stumbles upon a drug murder in west Texas and absconds with two million dollars. An assassin named Anton Chigurh chases Moss, while the local sheriff, Ed Tom Bell, chases both. As the situation spins out of control and Chigurh (about whom also much more will be written shortly) asserts his uncompromising and brutal authority over all the other characters, the uselessness of faith as a form of physical protection once again surfaces. In perhaps the novel's most terrible scene, which will be examined more closely later in this chapter, one of Chigurh's victims pleads with God for mercy and attempts to hold her faith in face of her impending death.[16] These petitions go cruelly unregarded by Chigurh, and God also remains silent.

After most of the characters have been killed and Chigurh disappears, a shell-shocked Sheriff Bell visits his Uncle Ellis. They speak about family and regret and war service and the death of Ellis' brother Harold overseas. Ellis laments,

> You think about your family. Try to make sense out of all that. I know what it did to my mother. She never got over it. I dont know what sense any of that makes either. You know that gospel song? We'll understand it all by and by? That takes a lot of faith. You think about him goin over there and dyin in a ditch somewheres. Seventeen year old. You tell me. Because I damn sure dont know . . .
>
> You aint turned infidel have you Uncle Ellis?
>
> No. No. Nothin like that.
>
> Do you think God knows what's happenin?
>
> I expect he does.
>
> You think he can stop it?
>
> No. I dont.[17]

Not just religious practice but God himself is here seen as impotent to influence events or protect human beings. Indeed, this notion of God's indifference or impotence, as well as McCarthy's obvious and withering critique of religious institution, become favorite critical tools for making sense of the regular references to God in McCarthy's novels . This leads some readers to see a vague

[16] Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 259.
[17] Ibid., 269.

gnosticism in McCarthy.[18] There is a God in McCarthy's universe, such readers say, but that deity remains removed from a world governed by evil and darkness. Even those unwilling to embrace arcane gnostic theological commitments in interpreting McCarthy see plenty of evidence for an angry atheism, claiming with Stanley Coppinger that in the novels and in *Blood Meridian* particularly, "God is powerless and cowardly, for he does not fight for those who seek refuge in his house. Any moral or spiritual value system based on such a God, one might conclude, cannot be taken seriously."[19] Of course, I will argue that the use of sacramental imagery in this book and elsewhere can be read to generate precisely the moral system Coppinger finds so unserious. But the argument will prove a complicated one, and in any case I must grant that in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, as elsewhere in McCarthy, the efficacy and agency of the church as an institution has been profoundly undermined.

Rational monsters

Religion is unceremoniously disenchanted, even desecrated, in these novels. It appears at best an impotent adornment to the sufferings of humans. What's more, the location of so much violence in and around Christian church's seems only to reinforce religion's incapacity for agency in McCarthy's world. However, one may read the place of the religious with somewhat more subtlety – or at least, within the context of a more comprehensive desanctification. Both *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, and McCarthy's work in general, critically appropriates a gothic tradition that originates as an anti-religious European Enlightenment genre and that develops in unpredictable ways in America. On my reading, McCarthy sees in the genre of the American western an uncritical

[18] See Leo Daugherty, "'Gravers false and true': *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 159-174; and Petra Mundik, "'Striking fire out of the rock': Gnostic theology in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," in *South Central Review* 26.3 (2009): 72-97.

[19] Stanley Coppinger, "Searching for a Moral Center in Cormac McCarthy" (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2001), 21.

reversal of the politics of European gothicism, and then inverts that trope in order to make monstrous a form of instrumental reason that mythifies reason itself towards violence. And this, in subtle but important ways, aligns itself with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno, and Hannah Arendt, an alignment that will be explored further in chapter two. Importantly, however, McCarthy's inversion of the American gothic – and its ultimate alignment with critical theory – also occasions some possibilities for resistance to the reason it has darkly mythologized. The section to follow, therefore, will invest some space in reviewing both the nature of the gothic/western tradition before returning to consider the role and function reason and violence in these novels. My argument again, in sum, is that McCarthy will cast the mythologization of reason itself as a primary source of his violence, and suggest the need for critique in thinking, art, and ethics. This critique is one I will show to be shared in turn by Nietzsche, Adorno and Arendt, especially insofar as they regard the myth of reason to be especially vulnerable to art and ethical action. But much of this arguments must wait to be articulated in the next chapter. In the meantime, we turn to the American gothic tradition, and to the monsters Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh.

The inversion of American gothicism

I contend that McCarthy inverts the logic of an American gothic tradition, which itself develops uncritically out of the concerns of European gothicism. Prior to the rise of empirical science and the Enlightenment in Europe, the gothic represents a "supernatural or monstrous manifestation, inhabiting a mysterious space, that symbolizes all that is irrational, uncontrollable and incomprehensible."[20] The Enlightenment, however, alters the mythology and strategy of the gothic as the sources of supernatural haunting and mystery are systematically exorcized and demystified by

[20] Ruth Bienstock Anolik, "The Dark Unknown" in *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*, ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004.), 2.

empirical science. But the "ghosts and monsters who are explained and displaced – as the result of science, change, and discovery – do not disappear; they relocate to new dark spaces, beyond the frontiers in social, racial, and gender politics and consciousness."[21] In particular, the new dark spaces after the rise of Enlightenment empiricism tend to be inhabited by elements of an *ancien regime* - religious figures demystified by science and aristocrats diminished by revolution. The monsters of the European gothic at the height of its popularity typically "take the shape (in a genre which, like the sentimental novel, is both Protestant and bourgeois) of the devious Inquisitor, the concupiscent priest, the corrupt nobleman – or, with almost equal appropriateness, the depraved abbess or the lascivious lady of the manor."[22] The inhuman other, once made monstrous by mystery and misunderstanding, becomes demonized by Enlightenment thinking instead because it is antiquated and irrational. Rather than a supernatural monster, these gothic monsters are remnants of a hierarchical church and state which political and scientific revolutions have denuded. Gothic writers at the zenith of their popularity in Europe thus deliberately invest their texts with politics. The vision of the gothic, pre-Enlightenment times of which they write is

> bitterly critical, and they [evoke] the olden days not to sentimentalize them but to condemn them. Most gothicists [are] not only avant-garde in their literary aspirations, but radical in their politics; they [are], that is to say, anti-aristocratic, anti-Catholic, anti-nostalgic . . . The spirit of Voltaire broods over the haunted castle; and ghosts squeak eerily that they do not exist.[23]

The superstition of the form is in fact an anti-superstition, an inversion of pre-Enlightenment magic upon itself in order to demonize pre-Enlightenment hierarchies of thought and culture, to make monsters of aristocracy and (especially Roman Catholic) religion.

In the United States, the gothic alters its mythology and so alters its meaning. In the new western world, the old hierarchies of religion and culture do not exist in the same way they did in

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Normal, Il: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997), 132.

[23] Ibid., 137-8.

Europe, America "being, as Voltaire among others had suggested, the showcase of the Enlightenment."[24] The United States ostensibly becomes an experiment of enlightened politics and knowledge in a western world, an ocean away from nobles and Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, potential opponents of Enlightenment do still exist in this new world, they simply need to be found and positioned as victims by European American authors:

> The gothic, after all, had been invented to deal with the past and with history from a typically Protestant and enlightened point of view; but what could one do with the form in a country which, however Protestant and enlightened, had (certainly at the end of the eighteenth century!) neither a proper past nor a history? It was easy enough for the American writer to borrow certain elements, both of cast and setting, from the tale of terror . . . But what was to be done about the social status of such hero-villains? With what native classes or groups could they be identified? Traditionally aristocrats, monks, servants of the Inquisition, members of secret societies like the Illuminati, how could they be convincingly introduced on the American scene?[25]

This problem is tellingly solved by a "wild disciple of the Enlightenment" and early American gothic writer, Charles Brockden Brown.[26] Rather than castles, monsters, or shades, Brown invokes "the incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness" as the new markers of the gothic myth in America.[27] The true enemies of Voltaire's Enlightenment across the Atlantic prove themselves on Brown's telling to be indigenous "savages," not aristocratic lords. For "the corrupt Inquisitor and the lustful nobleman, [Brown] has substituted the Indian, who broods over the perils of Brown's fictional world in an absolute dumbness that intensifies his terror."[28] The gothic equation, as it were, has been turned inside out; at one time a politically radical affront to aristocracy, it becomes in America an essentially conservative gesture of power consolidation for whites in the new world. In the

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[24] Bill Christophersen, *The Apparition in the Glass: Charles Brockden Brown's American Gothic.* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 2.
[25] Fiedler, 144.
[26] Ibid., 145.
[27] Ibid., 159.
[28] Ibid., 159-60.

> American gothic, that is to say, the heathen, unredeemed wilderness and not the decaying monuments of a dying class, nature and not society becomes the symbol of evil. Similarly not the aristocrat but the Indian, not the dandified courtier but the savage colored man is postulated as the embodiment of villainy. Our novel of terror, that is to say . . . is well on the way to becoming a Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack upon a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition. The European gothic identified blackness with the super-ego and was therefore revolutionary in its implications; the American gothic (at least as it followed the example of Brown) identified evil with the id and was therefore conservative at its deepest level of implication, whatever the intent of its authors.[29]

Interestingly, within the showcase of the Enlightenment, amidst the democratic experiment on the shores of this new world, the politics of the gothic are uncritically reversed. The west is wild, untamed, peopled by savage figures without reason or republican government. The myth of America carries conquest magnanimously westward and engages those irrational races by any means necessary (and usually by violent ones) to grant them the enlightened democracy they cannot deliver themselves.

Indeed, prior to encountering the Glanton Gang in *Blood Meridian*, the kid joins a renegade military detachment led by the suitably named Captain White who aims to conquer Mexico by force for the United States, lest the west continue to be administered by "a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favor will admit have no least notion in God's earth of honor or justice or the meaning of republican government."[30] For White, "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 now what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them."[31] Enlightened ends – justice and republican

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[29] Ibid., 160-1. Indeed, Brown states this case explicitly himself in the preface to his novel *Edgar Huntly*: "One merit the writer may at least claim . . . that of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader, by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors. Puerile superstition, and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology." Cited in Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 159.

[30] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian,* 33.

[31] Ibid., 33-4.

government – are turned inside out by genocide and jingoism, and impossibly justify the most brutal, irrational means. Just as the haunted European castle cannot be fully gothic without its ghosts, the wild American frontier is not sufficiently wild without its savages. The gothic in America, inheriting the techniques of radical anti-aristocratic liberalism in Europe, reverses itself and redirects its demonizing aim towards new enemies in the new world. The project of national formation is positioned specifically against Native and African Americans, against the supposedly anti-rational, anti-republican, non-white monsters who crowd the borders or lurk within. Consequently, the European gothic mutates and bastardizes itself in the American western, a genre wherein the enemies (once enemies by virtue of class, now victims by virtue of race) of enlightened reason are battled and ultimately bested.

The role of race in *Blood Meridian* is incredibly complicated, justifying its own extensive study. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will only mention how the assumed monstrosities of the Indian under the conservative trope of the American gothic are deeply troubled by McCarthy. McCarthy then replaces Europe's irrational monsters with a monstrously mythified reason that appoints Indians and Mexicans monsters in the first place. By placing his work squarely within the American gothic tradition – that is, within the tradition of the American encounter with the Indian and the conquest of the West – McCarthy "presses the psychology of the frontier theory to its logical, appalling extreme."[32] However, mindful of the American westward myth, McCarthy narrates a west in which "there is no progressive myth of good overcoming evil, no courageous men taming the West for civilization."[33] In McCarthy's west, racial categories are instrumentalized by reason towards violence, but they carry no meaningful significance. To be sure, Native Americans – in particular Comanches – act with great menace and cruelty in this novel, but they are not distinguished by this behavior. The Glanton Gang behaves with similar cruelty and violence and

[32] Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press, 1988), 119.
[33] Barclay Owens, *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 7.

there is no sense in the novel that one form of violence or another is justified. Even the appearance of race itself becomes confused in the text. When Indians are figured in this novel, they often arrive with Spanish names and wear unmatched assortments of western dress. The band of Comanche that destroys Captain White's detachment appears

> 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 tacked 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 wedding veil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo 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 very 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 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.[34]

This racial confusion is not confined to the attacking Indians. In addition to taking the scalps of their victims, members of the Glanton Gang also adorn themselves with prizes from the bodies of the slain, the most notable of which is a scapular of human ears worn by David Brown and later taken by the kid. The marauding whites literally assume the bodies of their racial others. And, as mentioned previously, during their campaign the Glanton Gang profitably learns that human scalps all resemble one another, regardless of race, upon drying. The category of race quickly becomes one quite irrelevant to their purposes in Sonora, and so they abandon it practically and kill at will. Though race is used to justify and commission their campaign, ultimately it hinders profit and so is quickly forsaken. In short, race as a rational category, as an object of knowledge, is irrelevant. All that matters is how that knowledge may be deployed as power. Will instrumentalizes reason towards violence.

[34] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 52-3.

Race is not a universal, empirical category; it is tool of thought, imposed upon humans by the will and intention of others. Religion, the terrible (or garishly revealed) ghost of an *ancien regime* in the European gothic becomes an irrelevant ruin for McCarthy in his version of the American gothic. What haunts McCarthy's gothic landscape, if neither monarchs nor monks, savages nor slaves? The real terror, in fact, is a particular sort of knowledge, a form of reason deployed as violence by will. The truest monsters in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* are Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh, who instrumentalize reason ruthlessly and relentlessly towards violence.

Reason, will, and fate

If the Christian religion fails to protect in *Blood Meridian*, reason instrumentalized by the will to power is supremely effective. And if Nietzsche echoes somewhat loudly in this assertion, this is no accident. As John Cant, among others, has noted, Judge Holden seems clearly to recall Friedrich Nietzsche's Zarathustra.[35] The ex-priest Tobin, a member of Glanton's Gang, specifically notes the judge's talents as a dancer, and the book's final lines pronounce that the judge's "feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die."[36] Compare this with the depiction of Zarathustra in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

> Zarathustra the dancer, Zarathustra the light one who waves with his wings, the flightworthy, waving to all birds, worthy and ready, a blissful lightweight . . . it is better to be foolish with happiness than foolish with unhappiness, better to dance ponderously than to walk lamely. So learn this wisdom from me: even the worst thing has two good reverse sides – even the worst things has good legs for dancing: so learn from me, you higher men, to stand on your right legs.[37]

[35] The association of Holden with Nietzsche is widely agreed upon, but see especially John Cant, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 174.
[36] Ibid., 335.
[37] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 239-40.

Beyond what Cant and others have documented, however, there are other reasons we should see an echo of Zarathustra in *Blood Meridian*'s Judge Holden. Nietzsche's Zarathustra decries the folly of a market where all are equal before an absent God and celebrates the death of God because in that absence "the great noon comes, only now the higher man becomes – ruler!"[38] As I will show, the appearance of the higher man at noon recalls the judge's inexplicable first appearance to the Glanton Gang at the "meridian" of the day. The judge also proclaims that he aims to make himself suzerain and ruler of all the earth, during a crucial discourse to be examined more closely below.[39] The marketplace of folly from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is referenced in *Blood Meridian* too in a dense passage towards the novel's conclusion. Just prior to his death, the kid in his fitful sleep dreams. In his dream, he sees the judge peering over the shoulder of a

> false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end.[40]

The judge determines what will pass as currency in the folly of the market place. This counterfeit is the object of the judge's judgment. To know precisely what this means, and how the association of Judge Holden with Zarathustra functions in this novel, I will look more closely at Zarathustra and the judge to reveal the coherences between them more explicitly. What follows does not intend towards an exhaustive account of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* or *On the Genealogy of Morals* (so much of which Nietzsche asserts to be exegesis of *Zarathustra*). But even this quick study will reveal a close association, perhaps even an identification, between Judge Holden and Zarathustra.

In short, I will argue that Judge Holden embodies an (ultimately corrupt) version of the Nietzschean philosophical and moral position, and that Anton Chigurh extends this embodiment in a specific and important way in *No Country for Old Men*. Taken together, Holden and Chigurh

[38] Ibid., 231-2.
[39] Ibid., 198.
[40] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 310.

communicate a relation among will, reason, and fate deeply indebted to Zarathustra. Many scholars recognize the clear contours of the association between Holden and Zarathustra that I will begin to draw out below, even if most critics have not pursued the relation as deeply as I intend to. I will furthermore extend this argument into *No Country for Old Men*. More crucially, I contend that McCarthy's critique of instrumentalized reason and its relation to historical determinism in Holden and Chigurh initiates a more critical appropriation of Nietzsche than other readers of McCarthy have recognized. But I will also suggest in chapter two that Zarathustra and Nietzsche may in fact be at odds; that (at the least), Holden and Chigurh should be regarded as primary objects of Nietzsche's critique, however much they may recall Nietzsche's own prophet of the higher man. That is, many see Nietzsche in this fiction; but most miss the implicit Nietzschean critique that also hides here. By drawing out some specific contours of Nietzsche's thought, I will show how Holden and Chigurh – as terrible and powerful as they may be – still incur a critique which suggests the possibilities for resistance to their power, a resistance rooted in Nietzsche's thought and realized in Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt. Ultimately, McCarthy will critique the relation among reason, will, and fate that Holden and Chigurh so clearly personify, and the philosophical and moral position of these novels will eventually perhaps better resemble critical appropriations of Nietzsche's work in thinkers like Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt than the work of Nietzsche himself.

Nietzsche and Holden's suzerainty

A core principle of Nietzsche's thinking, one that essentially establishes much postmodern thought and which Judge Holden also embraces, is that reason can be understood as an instrument and knowledge a creation of the mind. Nietzsche denies the possibility of any wholly objective knowledge; all thinking and knowledge is indebted through reason to will. The roots of modern hermeneutics, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodern philosophy generally owe to

Nietzsche their skepticism over objectivity. Reason "is only an instrument," Nietzsche claims; it is an exercise of will and an imposition upon the world.[41] That is, reason is a tool by which humans impose their will upon things. Recall again the how the category of race is exploited as violence by the Glanton Gang, how its meaning depends entirely upon how the Gang wills its use. Knowledge is not an element waiting in the world to be measured by our minds, it is manipulated by our reason in order to create the world we will. Thus Nietzsche resists the idea of any objective, uninterpreted facts. Once reason apprehends them, they have been made objects of will and desire; knowledge only arises towards a purpose. All thought, all knowledge, manipulates and interprets conditions towards a desired end, whether acknowledged or not. The notion of the objective perceiver of reality is therefore a falsehood, Nietzsche claims. The objective observer is "easily damaged and tarnished . . . but he is not an end, a termination and ascent, a complementary man in whom the *rest* of existence is justified, a conclusion – and even less a beginning, a begetting and first cause, something solid, powerful and based firmly on itself that wants to be master."[42] The myth of objectivity, of the human as a passive instrument that merely measures the world, yields a passive human, incapable of realizing (in both senses of that word) his will. Nietzsche exhorts his listener to embrace reason therefore, not as an objective measure, but as a tool by which determined ends can be achieved. He lampoons the pursuit of passive objectivity as an "immaculate perception" which is "content in viewing, with dead will, without the grasp and greed of selfishness" and that claims to "desire nothing from things, except that I might lie there before them like a mirror with a hundred eyes."[43] Such a reason never "gives birth," never gives rise to new ideas, acts, or intentions.[44] Nietzsche thus sees philosophy and knowledge as acts of creation, not observation, and reason as the tool by which such creation is achieved. It is one things to assume and clarify the categories of older generations.

[41] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1990), 114.
[42] Ibid., 135.
[43] Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 96.
[44] Ibid.

Actual "*philosophers, however, are commanders and law-givers*: they say 'thus it *shall* be!', it is they who determine the Wherefore and Whither of mankind."[45] The higher man, the man of instrumentalized reason, is a commander, a ruler and law-giver, who makes the world he desires.

Associated with this account of instrumental reason is Nietzsche's famous genealogy of morals. Since moral categories such as good and evil are willed impositions rather than universal categories, Nietzsche discounts them. As he famously argues in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, what once were descriptive terms associated with utility – "good" referring to power, utility, nobility, etc., and "bad" referencing weakness, impotence, vulgarity – have been secretly moralized and inverted by a weak, impotent, and vulgar slave class such that they might arrogate to themselves moral power through "goodness" while consigning the strong and noble to moral "evil." This morality, writes Nietzsche, achieves its pinnacle with "Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate gospel of love, this 'Redeemer' who brought blessedness and victory to the poor, the sick, the sinners – was he not this seduction in its most uncanny and irresistible form?"[46] Christian morality, on this account, inverts the practical categories of goodness and badness and covers them with the moral categories of good and evil, such that the poor, the sick, and the weak become lauded into moral authority, despite their obvious impotence, ailment, and failure. The priests come to bear the power of this moral authority, consecrating weakness and impotence as holy. Nietzsche's philosophical task critiques this slave morality through the figure of a higher man who overcomes the problem of moral categories through the creation of new values.

This is clearly an incomplete and simplified account of Nietzsche, but it is sufficient to demonstrate the affinities between this moral and epistemological project and the behavior and orations of Judge Holden. Holden routinely lectures his largely uneducated cohort, bending their ears by the campfire and discoursing philosophically in the darkness. These sermons are lengthy and

[45] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 142. Original emphasis.
[46] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Geneaology of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 35.

dense, but merit extensive quotation since they so dramatically embrace a form of Nietzschean philosophy. Holden passes time foraging for artifacts in the desert, then by the campfire takes "up each piece, flint or potsherd or tool of bone, and deftly sketche[s] it into his book . . . in profile and perspective, citing the dimensions in his neat script, making marginal notes."[47] Afterwards he takes each piece and pitches it into the fire. When asked why, the judge "smile[s] and [says] it [is] his intention to expunge them from the memory of man."[48] Pressed further, the judge laughs and claims that what "is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it's writ."[49] Knowledge of things – indeed, the written account of things – is an authority the judge exerts over them, and he retains that knowing authority even upon (or toward) their destruction. But this is only the logical extension of his basic claim, which is that his knowledge of the thing is finally the thing as known.

Holden has wordier explanations by the campfire too. While the Glanton Gang wanders through Sonora seeking victims, Holden rides ahead to allow himself time to "dress expertly the colorful birds he'[s] shot, rubbing skins with gunpowder and stuffing them with balls of dried grass and packing them away in his wallets. He presse[s] the leaves of trees and plants into his book" and catches and preserves butterflies, too, in a ledger book he nightly studies.[50] When pressed by the horsethief Toadvine as to his purpose, the judge lectures:

> Whatever exists in creation without my knowledge exists without my consent . . . These anonymous creatures . . . may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth.[51]

The unknown is an affront, a rebellion against Holden's sovereignty. Placing a hand on the soil at his feet, the judge continues: "This is my claim . . . yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous

[47] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 140.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 141.
[50] Ibid., 198.
[51] Ibid.

life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation."[52]

When Toadvine complains that no one can know everything, and that catching and stuffing birds seems to be unrelated entirely to his argument, the judge concludes with a flourish:

> 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 . . . The freedom of the birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos.[53]

Crucial in this passage is the judge's insistence that the decision to resist mystery alone ennobles the man as suzerain. That is, the decision to master one's own fate constitutes that mastery. Fundamentally, it is a question of will.

This is a version of the Nietzschean claim that mystery is an unnecessary vulnerability in one's knowledge, an irrational passivity of will. Here perhaps the abject impotence of all Christian devotion in this novel finds its source. The poor, sick sinners who take religion rather than reason as their instrument – those who solicit saints for assistance or run towards an altar for safe haven – have submitted to superstition, rather than become suzerain over mystery. Their faith is both a poor instrument of will and an affront to it, and so faith accordingly fails them. If reason is an instrument of will, as Nietzsche argues, then to know an object is to impose one's own authority over that object, rather than submissively to receive knowledge or benefit from it. Religion is a poor, because passive, tool. For Holden, reason is the instrument of the higher man.

During a later discourse, however, Judge Holden holds forth on the inexplicability and wonder of the world and on the nature of mystery; he seems at first to contradict much he has spoken above. "The truth about the world," he tells his compatriots,

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 199.

> is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dram, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analog nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tent show whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning.
>
> The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and 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.[54]

There is a humility to this passage which seems to contradict the general spirit of the judge's dancing discourse. That the mind is "but a fact among others" seems to support Toadvine's previous complaint that no one could manage to know and conquer all things. And indeed, several critics see these apparently competing discourses as evidence of the Judge's persistent trickery and mendacity.[55] The judge's eloquence is only in service of his more characteristic attributes, such scholars maintain, of deception and murder. He will therefore lie and contradict himself to distract his audience with wordplay. But I believe this interpretation misreads both Judge Holden and his Nietzschean commitments. What grants authority is the decision itself, as stated above: the willful decision to embrace knowledge as itself an exercise of power. The world remains no narrow thing, but once one recognizes that reason is in fact but a string in a maze, that one gains the awareness then to plot his own course rather than follow the loose ends and lost threads of others. With this decision, "anything is possible." As Holden declares only pages later, "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is there is no mystery."[56] Mystery is submission. The refusal to submit alone scatters mystery from before one's will.

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[54] Ibid., 245.

[55] See, for example, Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 90-95, or Elisabeth Andersen, *The Mythos of Cormac McCarthy* (Saarbrücken: M Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co., 2008), 98-100.

[56] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 252.

Based on these arguments, the judge's moral philosophy is perhaps predictable and echoes Nietzsche's thought just as resoundingly:

> 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 . . . Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural.[57]

Indeed, the first line of this passage – "moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak" – is a simple paraphrase of Nietzsche's position in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Holden moves beyond Nietzsche here, though, in following out the contest of human wills to a necessary conclusion in violence. Indeed, as my analysis in chapter two will show, Holden severely corrupts Nietzsche here. But by Holden's reckoning, if all that counts is the will to power, then reasoned argument (along with everything else) must finally give way to the contest of wills, which itself terminates in a duel, where all is resolved in "the historical absolute." For Holden, war "is the truest form of divination" because it matches this contest of wills not against contingent moral or spiritual values, but against time itself, and the will of fate. War "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."[58] That larger will I take to mean the historical absolute, the fateful conclusion that only one will survive the duel, and by that very survival, be the one will reconciled worthy of history. Right and wrong, good and evil, are moral complaints for the weak. What matters is power; what is strong survives and monopolizes right. So says the Judge.

[57] Ibid., 250.
[58] Ibid., 249.

Nietzsche and Chigurh's coin toss

In fact, Holden's relation to Nietzsche in this novel becomes more complex insofar as he begins to raise the questions concerning the "historical absolute" – questions of fate, violence, and historical determinism – in their relation to morality. This is where I will read Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* as an extension of Judge Holden. Here also I will show how McCarthy's subtle reference to Nietzsche begins to twist and complicate. Throughout *Blood Meridian*, questions of fate and history surface occasionally and complicate the text. At one level, the text appears flatly deterministic. There is a sense in the novel that fate directs the events of all persons. The oddly coincidental appearances and intersections of characters, the miraculous survival of the kid after the massacre of Captain's White's marauders, the predictive power of the Judge and various gypsies, all give a magical sense of predetermination to *Blood Meridian*. Apart from these details, there is a definite aura of doom and death awaiting all characters (save the judge). For example, as the Yuma Indians who defeat Glanton's gang burn the scalphunters' corpses, they watch "like prefigurations of their own ends the carbonized skulls of their enemies incandescing before them bright as blood among the coals."[59] Many characters share this sense of doom and fate, even if they strain against it. Captain Glanton, for example, has

> long foresworn 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 . . . [60]

Glanton believes in fate but disregards it and acts insanely against it – or at least aims to.

This flat determinism is complicated elsewhere in the novel. Judge Holden's cardgame-as-metaphor for history recalls the accuracy and frequency of the use of Tarot in *Blood Meridian*, of true

[59] Ibid., 276.
[60] Ibid., 243.

destinies drawn by chance from decks of cards.[61] In the wake of one particular Tarot telling, for example, after Glanton has drawn his revolver to murder the soothsayer out of dislike for her (eventually fulfilled) fortune and after Judge Holden has calmed Glanton in the darkness, the narrator observes the campfire "sucked by some maelstrom out there in the void, some vortex in that waste apposite to which man's transit and his reckonings alike lay abrogate. As if beyond will or fate he and his beasts and his trappings moved both in card and in substance under consignment to some third and other destiny."[62] McCarthy's prose here is densely ornate and difficult to follow, but at the least these lines seem meant to trouble any easy distinction between chance, will, and fate. What else could it mean for humans and all their trappings to move "both in card and in substance" beyond "will or fate" except as through chance? But if the narrator does mean to press the case for chance here, why should he call it an "other destiny" beyond will or fate? What distinguishes chance as destiny from fate or, for that matter, from will?

Once again, the judge offers an answer and it is one in which will is unsurprisingly, if subtly, privileged. The judge's resistance to fate is not quite so brazen or reckless as Glanton's. The judge seeks to position himself somewhere between a simple notion of human agency and another simply predetermined fate with a commitment to a third thing, a "tertium quid" that is something like chance or play.[63] But for the judge such play is important not in itself, but for its players. That is, the judge promotes the chance of gameplay as the ultimate test of will. According to Holden, men "are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work."[64] But the merit of the game is finally not in the play, but in the risks taken and the wagers made. The merit of the test is "the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have meaning at

[61] Ibid., 249.
[62] Ibid., 96.
[63] Ibid., 81.
[64] Ibid., 249.

all."[65] The higher the stakes, the less the game has to do with chance and the more to do with the will of the participants. That is, the rules, maneuvers, and eventualities of chance become less significant than the willingness of the contestants to wager themselves against that chance and one another. Recall the judge's insistence that the decision for mastery alone constitutes that mastery. Risk here obviates chance, for it grants meaningfulness to the randomness of the game. Thus such tests of will in which the wager is death – in other words, war – become the most meaningful human activities. For Holden history constitutes the unfolding result of this progressive and eternal testing, and as such realizes perpetual gamesmanship as war. On Holden's view, only in war does the will to power run its course and have the chance to reconcile itself with the historical absolute. War remains but a game of cards, the judge laughs, but with the wager utter annihilation, that game resolves itself into the will of history. Thus chance and fate both collapse into will. In his final words to the kid before murdering him, Judge Holden articulates the slippery relation among chance, will, and fate even more expressly:

> A man seeks his own destiny and no other . . . Will or nill. 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. This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. . . The world goes on. We have dancing nightly and this night is no exception. The straight and the winding way are one . . . I will tell you. Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance.[66]

If Holden seems to have embraced the Nietzschean will to power already, here he appears to take hold of Nietzsche's famous maxim: *amor fati*.[67] Will does not alter history; "the straight and winding way are one," and "that selfsame reckoning" will arrive "at the same appointed time," regardless of

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., 330-1.

[67] "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*, that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity." Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 258. For an extended discussion of how Holden in fact betrays both the Nietzschean *amor fati* and the will to power, see the next chapter.

what one does. But in the shadow here of the dancing Zarathustra, Holden affirms that the decision to wager one's own death is itself the ultimate agency, and thus colludes with fate; what one wills in that wager is always one's own destiny – will or nill.

Holden's ideas about fate become more clearly articulated and expressed in the character of Anton Chigurh, the similarly terrifying analogue to Holden in *No Country for Old Men.* Those who pay attention to *No Country for Old Men* at all find it less artful than *Blood Meridian* (which it surely is) and Chigurh less philosophically sophisticated than Holden (which he may be). Jay Ellis has recognized that "Chigurh can extend his thin line of philosophical argument regarding free will so as to extend Holden's (and McCarthy's) larger arguments on this."[68] But Ellis reads this relationship incorrectly, I think. Chigurh's practice is to speak with his victims before he murders them. Ellis sees this cruelty as Socratic, because Chigurh aims in these final moments to teach his victims something true about the nature of their lives, to deprive "them of their last potential position of moral authority, by convincing them that their understanding of morality never amounted to more than a comforting delusion."[69] A comparison of two coin tosses will show, I believe, what Ellis is trying to argue but also why he is mistaken.

The reader of *No Country for Old Men* first encounters Anton Chigurh as he escapes from and strangles a county deputy who has detained him, then randomly murders another man to steal his car. But his first discourse with a potential victim occurs in a nondescript gas station where Chigurh is refueling the stolen car. Chigurh strikes up an antagonistic conversation with the proprietor, asking about how and why the man ended up owning a gas station in west Texas. The man says that he married into the business. Then Chigurh asks,

. . . what's the most you ever saw lost on a coin toss?

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[68] Jay Ellis, *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 229.

[69] Jay Ellis, "'Do you see?': Levels of Ellipses in *No Country for Old Men*" in *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*, ed. Sara Spurgeon (New York: Continuum, 2011), 99.

> Coin toss?
> Coin toss.
> I don't know. Folks dont generally bet on a coin toss. It's usually more like just to settle something.
> What's the biggest thing you ever saw settled?
> I dont know.

Chigurh takes out a quarter, flips it, then slaps it onto his forearm and asks the man to call it. The attendant, unsettled, resists, but Chigurh responds,

> You need to call it . . . I cant call it for you. It wouldnt be fair. It wouldnt even be right. Just call it.
> I didnt put nothing up.
> Yes you did. You've been putting it up your whole life. You just didnt know it. You know what the date is on this coin?
> No.
> It's nineteen fifty-eight. It's been traveling twenty-two years to get here. And now it's here. And I'm here. And I've got my hand over it. And it's either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it.
> I dont know what it is I stand to win . . .
> You stand to win everything, Chigurh said. Everything.[70]

Chigurh coerces the man into wagering his life on this toss of the coin. He has conscripted the man into just the sort of wager Judge Holden concludes that history impresses upon each of us. The proprietor calls the coin correctly, and Chigurh flips it to him and departs. This gas station owner has made certain decisions, choices the consequences of which he could not have predicted (i.e., he unknowingly married into the eventual encounter with Chigurh), and these decisions have coupled with chance to land him in this particular gas station, at this particular moment, with his life spinning on the flight of a coin. The coin, "like a vehicle running a red light, would have missed him had he made different choices, just as much as it misses killing him only by chance."[71] In a way that echoes Holden's collapsing of chance, choice, and fate, Chigurh wagers this man's fate upon the flip of a coin. Ultimately, it is Chigurh's will that decides the man's fate, that manipulates chance and destiny towards his own insane purpose. Indeed, before departing the gas station, Chigurh instructs the man

[70] McCarthy, *No Country*, 56.
[71] Ellis, "Do you see?", 104.

that "[a]nything can be an instrument . . . small things. Things you wouldnt even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People dont pay attention. And then one day there's an accounting."[72] The instrument here is not only the coin, but also the flip of that coin, and the unpredictable destiny of all that man's prior choices: all are instruments of Chigurh's will. This is analogous to the notion of race for John Joel Glanton and his gang of scalphunters: the idea is an instrument for violence. Thus, apart from the game which in this toss resolves fate and chance into will, other notes also resonate with both Holden and Zarathustra: the notion of instrumentality, of course, but also that previously mentioned and puzzling dream scene of Holden peering over the shoulder of the counterfeiter, judging coins that can pass in the marketplace of human affairs. The exchange of ideas in the moral marketplace gives the impression of a universal standard, but all such standards are groundless, all currencies contingent and the judge knows them so. Chigurh's coin, too, carries only the meaning Chigurh grants it, precisely because it has become an instrument of his will.

The second coin toss presents what I regard as the climactic scene of this book. Chigurh is chasing a man named Llewellyn Moss who has taken $2 million from the scene of a drug murder. (His decision to take this money, and the danger that decision and subsequent ones entail are critical to understanding the novel, and will be investigated further below.) Chigurh tries to persuade Moss to give up the money by threatening Moss's wife, telling Moss over the phone:

> This is what I'll do. You bring me the money and I'll let her walk. Otherwise she's accountable. The same as you . . . I won't tell you you can save yourself because you cant.
>
> I'm goin to bring you something all right, Moss said.[73]

As Moss is on his way, he is killed by other hired assassins, rather than by Chigurh. Chigurh himself only appears after Moss is dead and he easily recovers the money from behind an air vent in Moss's hotel room. Then he goes to kill Carla Jean. She has just buried the grandmother who raised her and

[72] McCarthy, *No Country*, 57.
[73] Ibid., 184-5.

who has recently died of cancer. When she enters her hotel room after the funeral, Chigurh is waiting for her there with a revolver in his lap. Sitting across from her in her hotel room, he aims to instruct her in the same lesson he gave the gas station proprietor. He tells her that her husband had the chance to save her but chose not to. When Carla Jean complains that she doesn't know what she's done to deserve death, Chigurh responds, "Probably you do . . . There's a reason for everything."[74] Indeed, like the station owner, Carla Jean has unknowingly married into this business. That was the unforeseen cause of her fate. But Chigurh doesn't blame her for what she's done to arrive at this moment. "None of this was your fault," he assures her, "You didn't do anything. It was bad luck."[75]

As if to impress upon her the ruthlessness of chance, out of mock mercy he offers her a coin toss as a means of possible escape, but she guesses incorrectly. As the moment of her murder draws closer, Chigurh philosophizes.

> Every moment of your life is a turning and everyone a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning.[76]

In the novel's most disturbing scene, Carla Jean – entirely innocent of these events and sobbing – begs Chigurh, "You dont have to. You dont. You dont."[77] Chigurh's response is telling:

> You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesnt allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps. In this case to small purpose . . . When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean. They are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world. Do you see?
>
> Yes, she said, sobbing. I do. I truly do.

[74] Ibid., 256,
[75] Ibid., 257.
[76] Ibid., 259.
[77] Ibid.

Good, he said. That's good. Then he shot her.[78]

For Carla Jean, Chigurh's will is as irrevocable and random as her Mama's cancer. And indeed, this is precisely the instruction Chigurh means to give, according to Ellis. This doesn't reduce the novel to nihilism, Ellis argues. It is "not merely some nihilistic determinism trapping these characters, but rather the unforeseen consequences of their prior choices in life, along with chance."[79] The result, Ellis claims, is to point towards the groundlessness of all moral and ethical systems of meaning. Only after abandoning such foundations can humans attain some truly productive morality. That "our values . . . may be the result not only of our collective choices, but also of myriad chance events, leads some of us to celebrate and value [them] all the more so. To live without knowledge of [choice and chance] however, to substitute for our own limits of knowledge a created certainty that our little lives have necessary, inevitable, meaning, however, squanders life."[80]

Fair enough; indeed, the possibility for moral and social value in the absence of certainty will be a theme I embrace and to which I will return throughout the course of this study. But Ellis' vague non-foundationalism has almost nothing to do with Chigurh's cruelty. His dialogues are not intended towards Socratic moral upbuilding; they are sadistic flourishes to execution. And if a cruelty of this kind does not meet the strict test of nihilistic determinism for Ellis, the label is irrelevant. Ellis wants to see the man Chigurh as one more chance or fated event in the world, like a car accident or Carla Jean's Mama's cancer. But Chigurh does not reconcile himself to chance and choice the way he forces others to reconcile themselves; rather, he resolves both, instrumentalizes both, towards the violence of his will. He is an agent, not an event. At every turn, Chigurh makes choices, moral choices, that he wants to hide behind the chance and the fate he has taken as tools for his own violence. He lies to Carla Jean about her husband's wishes, telling her that Moss wished

[78] Ibid., 260.
[79] Ellis, "Do you see?", 112-3.
[80] Ibid., 101.

her dead when in fact he was (perhaps unadvisedly and with vengeful intent) doing just what Chigurh had asked: he was coming for him with the money. Chigurh doesn't have to kill Moss to recover the money; Moss is already dead when Chigurh finds it. The obligation to murder Carla Jean should have been rendered moot. His cruel instrument of a coin toss is obviously arbitrary, that is undoubtedly its lesson, but it is Chigurh who grants that toss necessity. He could just easily arbitrate mercy by dice: the decision is his, the toss – as he admits to the gas station owner – is only his instrument. In the moment before her death, all Carla Jean's chances and fates have distilled to one will: Chigurh's. And Chigurh will not make himself vulnerable, he will remain suzerain of the future. When she tells Chigurh he needn't kill her, she in fact recognizes the actual position in relation to destiny and chance that Chigurh has taken. All that's left is his will. Whatever blame is due fate and fortune for bringing about the present moment, neither define Chigurh's choice in that moment. Indeed, the assertion of a will like his, which takes unpredictable things like chance and fate as tools, is precisely Chigurh's project. He refuses to make himself vulnerable to fortune or determinism; he must bend them to his will, and so his will must likewise be unbending. Crucially and tragically, Carla Jean sees this too, through her tears. As Chigurh waxes nostalgically over the common reaction of all his victims – they all say "you don't have to do this," he recalls – Carla Jean stops him. "There's just me," she says, "there aint nobody else."[81] Whatever fate and fortune have dealt, in this moment there is only a man, a woman, and a decision. Chigurh wants to cloak his own will with necessity and bad luck, but it's basically a ruse. What's relevant morally at this moment is his choice, not a fated system of rules by which he claims to fetter fortune.

On the one hand, Ellis is right; ethics, morals, and religious systems of meaning are ultimately contingent, at least rationally so. Chance, will, and fate do bleed into one another – at least with respect to these victims, the gas station owner and Carla Jean. But what Ellis crucially fails to

[81] McCarthy, *No Country*, 257.

recognize is that the vaguely generous non-foundationalist morality he proposes is not necessitated by Chigurh. That morals are rationally groundless may indeed lead some of us, as Ellis states, to cherish them. But Chigurh is not one of these kindly people. Chigurh's will has subsumed chance and fate. He will not make himself vulnerable. His will alone decides what and who shall be his instrument, and what choices shall have consequence, and which chances shall hold, and which rules apply, and who shall die. Chigurh exempts himself not just from the categories of a universal morality; he also exempts himself from all contingent moralities. Ellis is right when he asserts that we need not dismiss the value of ethics and morality "because they have no ultimate foundational value," but of course, this is precisely what Chigurh does. In instructing his victims through his sadistic method, he exempts himself from the content of his discourse. All that remains for him will be the exercise of his will, he is vulnerable to nothing. What Carla Jean tragically recognizes in the moments before her death, I believe, is not only that the foundations of her morals all reduce to will, but that Chigurh's foundations do too. And she sees that he has made his choice, a murderous one. Chigurh doesn't ask Carla Jean if she understands his philosophy; he asks simply, "Do you see?"[82] She sees him better than he sees himself.[83] Carla Jean is right when she tells Chigurh he doesn't need to kill her. He does retain that agency; this is precisely the point of that undetermined will to power. If fate and fortune have distilled in this moment to the whim of Chigurh's will, then he also retains power to change, despite the chanced or determined decision of the coin. There is no logical reason why his power might not also manifest as mercy. It is only his choice, and – Ellis would perhaps agree – the groundlessness beneath that decision is precisely what makes the moral failure of that moment so cruel and so crucial. The real moral question is not: have ethics come bereft of ground? It is whether groundlessness itself, vulnerability to others and to the future, can establish an ethics.

[82] Ibid., 260.

[83] For a more extended consideration of human identity, appearance, and exposure, see chapter three.

The answer, I think, is yes, and forthcoming chapters will lay out my answer in detail. But the question is raised by Anton Chigurh and Judge Holden.

What Chigurh shows in committing these murders is that he and Holden are more than non-foundationalists and they are not really Nietzscheans. The defy rather than embrace a postmodern groundlessness by narcissistically rooting the good and the true in themselves. How Chigurh fails truly to love fate as Nietzsche intends will be demonstrated soon enough. But Holden's monstrosities are just as telling. He destroys more than just the specimens he collects and draws in his books. In particular, he shows a special cruelty towards children. He buys puppies from a little boy with a coin that the child holds "in both hands before him like a small ciborium," only to throw the dogs immediately into the river while the boy watches.[84] (Note here, once again, the trope of currency and communion.) Most monstrously, Judge Holden repeatedly befriends young Indian and Mexican children, playing with them in kindness before raping, killing, and scalping them.[85] He might have given the same words of cold comfort to these children as Chigurh offers to Carla Jean. But that of course would not make him a Socratic moral teacher anymore than Chigurh is philosopher to Carla Jean. All things resolve to the violent will of these men, and they refuse any vulnerability to fortune, fate, or – especially – to other humans. Judge Holden, like Chigurh, is a moral monster, and the cruelty he incarnates is a narcissistic betrayal of the Nietzschean willfulness he embraces. The nature of that narcissism will be outlined and examined in chapter two. Because first, before he is a monster, Judge Holden is a priest.

A bloody dark pastryman

Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh act with almost supernatural impunity in these books. One must wonder how and why these figures are able to navigate so ably the unrelenting violence of

[84] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 192.
[85] Ibid., 118, 164, 191.

the worlds they inhabit.[86] An incredibly important and telling scene in *Blood Meridian* indicates how Judge Holden achieves this almost supernatural efficacy. The scene is narrated to the kid by Tobin, a member of the Glanton Gang and an expriest. The story constitutes the whole of the novel's tenth chapter. The kid and Tobin wonder at the Judge's diverse talents – "I've never seen him turn to a task but what he didn't prove clever at it,"[87] Tobin says – and they remark that every member of the Glanton Gang claims to have encountered the Judge at some previous moment in their diverse past lives. Thus occasions the beginning of the tale. Tobin recalls that the gang had run out of gunpowder and were fleeing for their lives from Comanche who had them in pursuit:

> That sunrise we'd looked to be our last . . . Then about the meridian of the day we come upon the judge on his rock in that wilderness by his single self. Aye and there was no rock, just the one. Irving said he'd brung it with him. I said that it was a merestone for to mark him out of nothing at all . . . And there he sat. No horse. Just him and his legs crossed, smilin as we rode up. Like he'd been expectin us . . . He didnt even have a canteen.[88]

The judge appears out of nothingness and immediately assumes indirect command of the company. Once again, note the reference to Zarathustra given the judge's appearance at the "meridian of the day." Taking notes of the passage of bats in the sky, he leads them into the mountain caves and fills all the men's wallets with dirt from the cave floors. The judge leaches niter out of the cave dirt in a clear creek as the men move on, then after another day he rejoins them and leads the group towards a volcanic peak. At the foot of the mountain the judge "commences to give an address. It [is] like a sermon . . . and he conclude[s] with the tellin us that our mother the earth as he said was round like an egg and contained all good things within her."[89] This homiletical reference is crucial – the scene has taken on a distinct and self-consciously liturgical form. Then the judge leads the band up the

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[86] Unlike Holden, it should be noted that Chigurh does take some injury. But he seems relatively unconcerned by his injuries – despite one existential qualm I'll address later in this chapter – and mostly revels in an undeniable and evidently superhuman power. See again Jay Ellis, "Do you see?".

[87] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 122.

[88] Ibid., 125.

[89] Ibid., 130.

volcano along frozen lavaflow where Tobin claims to have seen "little hooflet markings" in the "black and glassy slag."[90] At the rim of the volcano the judge exhorts the men to chip away and chop up "a weal of brimstone all about the rim of the caldron, bright yellow and shining here and there with the little flakes of silica but most pure flowers of sulphur."[91] Then occurs the central sacrificial act of this black mass. The judge mixes the leached niter with this collected sulphur and some charcoal. Tobin recalls to the kid,

> I didnt know but what we'd be required to bleed into it like freemasons but it was not so. [The judge] worked it up dry with his hands and all the while the savages down there on the plain drawin nigh to us and when I turned back the judge was standin, the great hairless oaf, and he'd took out his pizzle and he was pissin with great vengeance and one hand aloft and he cried out for us to do likewise.[92]

As the men urinate into the mixture, the judge is "laughin all the while and workin up this great mass in a foul black dough, a devil's batter by the stink of it and him not a bloody dark pastryman himself I don't suppose and he pulls out his knife and he commences to trowel it across the southfacin rocks."[93] The mixture dries on the rocks into gunpowder and the judge invites the men "all about to fill [their] horns and flasks and [they] did, one by one, circlin past him like communicants." They each test their weapons by firing straight down into the volcano, then they turn to the Comanche who have come up the side of the mountain in pursuit. "God it was butchery," Tobin remembers. "At the first fire we killed a round dozen and we did not let up."[94] The liturgical allusion at the judge's oration obviously has become overt. This is a devil's batter, dough for bread at a black mass, and the gang receives the offering like communicants and renders the first fruits of their sacrifice to the smoky mouth of the volcano. The eucharistic resonances are clear. But what is the reader to conclude has been transformed or made present in this ritual? Despite Tobin's insistence upon

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., 131.
[92] Ibid., 131-2.
[93] Ibid., 132.
[94] Ibid., 134.

hoofprints and the odd appearance of the judge at midday, this is not a supernatural process. The wonder here is just simple chemistry and human resourcefulness: niter and sulphur and ammonia make gunpowder. This mass is a miracle of science, not religion; the judge has transubstantiated knowledge into power and employed it as violence upon his enemies. When the reader understands this, the significance of this ritual of gunpowder comes into far clearer relief. Judge Holden has imposed his will through reason on both natural elements and human enemies. His will has transformed knowledge into power. He has demonstrated himself a high priest of reason, a higher man who instrumentalizes reason as self-serving power. But if he is just this sort of priest, the sort who embraces science religiously, then the Judge perhaps demands further scrutiny, a scrutiny the next chapter aims to undertake.

Fate

Nietzsche against Holden

The critic mindful of Nietzsche is left with something of a dilemma when reading *Blood Meridian* and *No County for Old Men*. Holden appears at high noon, the judge of all false counterfeiters, destabilizing all universal morals. He insists upon play and never stops dancing. He seems a clear and direct (re)incarnation of Zarathustra. But the black mass that so centrally characterizes Holden in *Blood Meridian* reveals the Judge also to be a high priest of Enlightenment thinking. As my brief exposition of *On the Genealogy of Morals* implies, this particular priesthood should heap a twofold share of Nietzsche's scorn upon Judge Holden. So what is the relationship between Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Holden, and Chigurh? I will argue that, Zarathustrian appearances to the contrary, Holden and Chigurh in fact embody exactly those failures of philosophy that Nietzsche aims to critique, and I will further argue that *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* subtly undermine the agency of Holden and Chigurh. Despite all the death, devastation, and violence in these two novels, I will demonstrate that they in fact aim to undermine the place, if not the reality, of violence. Indeed, in concert with my eucharistic theme, I will further indicate how Judge's Holden's black mass might reveal the potential place for an understanding of sacrament in McCarthy's world, even if the reader never quite arrives at that place in these particular novels. Through a closer reading of Nietzsche's critique of the religious, and through an analysis of the arguments of Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, I will show how even the ambiguously tragic endings of these two novels advance an account of artistic and ethical action that may be entirely commensurate with the sacramental logic I propose to uncover in the course of this study.

Nietzsche's critique of the Christian religion is part of a larger and more sweeping critique of western thought in general. In order to understand why and how Nietzsche despises Christendom, and how Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh might come under the same critique, we must examine

what Nietzsche calls the ascetic ideal. Indeed, when Nietzsche writes that reason is only an instrument, that claim is made within the context of a more capacious and thoroughgoing critique of western reason as rooted in a fundamental and structural nihilism. Insofar as western thought locates value or truth or meaning beyond or behind life, Nietzsche regards that thought as essentially nihilistic, as life-denying. He associates this impulse to locate value outside of life with the ascetic ideal, a desire to deny life in order to preserve some value above or beyond life, a desire for metaphysics at the expense of the real. In the "ascetic life, life counts as a bridge to that other mode of existence. The ascetic treats life as a wrong road on which one must finally walk back to the point where it begins, or as a mistake that is put right by deeds – that we *ought* to put right: for he *demands* that one go along with him."[1] Nietzsche's version of Christendom, which locates ultimate value in the heavens and encourages the sacrifice of this life for the good of the next, clearly models this asceticism.

But for Nietzsche Christian thought is only one species of western thought, and this asceticism corrupts all traditions of western thinking, not just western religious thought. What Zarathustra calls immaculate perception, the myth of objectivity, poses a problem precisely because it assumes an objective, final value or truth behind perception. Science, therefore, on Nietzsche's account, is "not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather *the latest and noblest form of it*."[2] Because science of this sort wills truth rather than life, wills an objective ideal rather than subjective will, it replicates and reproduces the nihilistic structure of western thought: that truth and value lie beyond the immanence of life. This "unconditional will to truth, is *faith in the ascetic ideal itself*, even if as unconscious imperative . . . it is the faith in a *metaphysical* value, the absolute value of *truth*, sanctioned and guaranteed by this ideal alone."[3] Where God once reigned, now objective truth rules, with all the

[1] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo,* 117. Original emphasis.
[2] Ibid., 147. Original emphasis.
[3] Ibid., 151. Original emphasis.

same metaphysical trappings. The clear thinkers, the immaculate perceivers, the men of science – these are merely the latest order of priests, bearers of a truth beyond our perception rather than posited by our wills. This ascetic ideal structures western thought and denies life because it seeks value beyond life, in heaven or truth or reason. The search for value beyond what is directly before us amounts, for Nietzsche, to nihilism. For Nietzsche, this

> is precisely what the ascetic ideal means: that something was *lacking*, that man was surrounded by a fearful *void* – he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, "Why do I suffer?" . . . We can no longer conceal from ourselves *what* is expressed by all that willing which has taken its direction from the acetic ideal" this hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself – all this means – let us dare to grasp it – *a will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life; but it is an remains a *will!* . . . And, to repeat in conclusion what I said at the beginning: a man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will.[4]

Though the Christian God or the prospect of immortality can easily assume the metaphysically privileged position that Nietzsche says undermines life, these religious examples do not exhaust the force of the ascetic ideal. Metaphysics "is history's open space wherein it becomes a destining that the suprasensory world, the Ideas, God, the moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, civilization, suffer the loss of their constructive voice and become void."[5]

When human beings asceticize the real for the sake of an ideal – when the ideal demands life's service rather than giving service to life – that ideal promotes what Nietzsche calls nihilism. Indeed, if Nietzsche's fundamental posture is to affirm life in all its fates and forms, especially over and against any ascetic ideals beyond the real, then a gap seems to have opened between him and the

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[4] Ibid., 162-3.

[5] Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'", *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 65.

murderous pair Holden and Chigurh. Holden and Chigurh shake foundations in a manner Nietzsche (or Jay Ellis) might endorse, but there is more to Nietzsche than non-foundationalism. Instead of affirming life in the wake of those falling moral and philosophical supports, they take advantage of the philosophical vacuum to murderously valorize themselves.

And indeed, this is the unique nature of their nihilism. One might propose that Holden and Chigurh merely will power through their violence, that – as Holden argues – the logical outgrowth of will must be war. But this violates the sense of Nietzsche's will to power, a will which in fact posits value in life, a will that must prove antithetical to the deadly dance of Holden and Chigurh. For them, it is not truth or reason that has replaced God; they themselves stand in God's place. Holden and Chigurh have merely vaulted themselves into God's place, rather than evacuated that metaphysical place entirely in order to affirm the here and now of life as lived. They posit a nihilism that has become coupled to narcissism, an ascetic ideal that valorizes the sovereignty of the self in the absence of God. In Holden and Chigurh, Nietzsche's "death of the sovereign God now appears to be the birth of the sovereign self."[6] Once God is eliminated as the source of all truth and value beyond life, narcissism elevates the self into that untouchable place, and in doing so replicates the logic of metaphysical nihilism while arrogating the power of that violence to the sovereign self. Indeed, when Holden declares that he must be sovereign, when Chigurh insists he will not be vulnerable, they embody this narcissism. From this elevated post, they stand as firmly against Nietzsche as the priests Nietzsche despises. For all the Judge's eloquence and sophistication, his "critique of values never reaches the extreme point of questioning the function of truth and the value of value."[7] The Judge "regards the death of God as the death of death – a death that is

[6] Mark Taylor, *Erring* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 25.
[7] Ibid., 33.

necessary for [his] own birth . . . By negating the transcendent *causa sui*, the narcissistic subject hopes to become *causa sui* . . . This narcissism is finally nihilistic."[8]

Two questions arise on this analysis, one raised by the text and the other raised by this reading. If, as I have argued, Holden stands in opposition to Nietzsche with respect to the ascetic ideal, why does he so clearly recall Zarathustra, the prophet of the higher man? We might remain somewhat agnostic on this question; that Holden referentially recalls Zarathustra is clear; that Holden philosophically opposes Nietzsche's affirmation of life is also clear; that the textual relation between that reference and this philosophy conflicts may occasion some textual opacity but doesn't undermine the oppositional clarity of the positions. But one should also recognize the ambivalence and irony already implicit in the rhetoric and argument of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* itself. According to Nietzsche, in God's absence, no other thing should take that metaphysical place. As scholars have noted, however, the nature of Zarathustra's discourse and the disciples who gather around him already endanger Zarathustra of elevating in precisely the manner he means to decry, in exactly the priestly manner Holden and Chigurh so readily embrace.[9] It is unclear in the scholarship around *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* how ironic a reading Nietzsche intends. I take no final position on how Nietzsche should be read; in my reading of McCarthy, however, it seems clear that Holden and Chigurh are narcissistic models of metaphysical nihilism.

The question my study raises, meanwhile, has to do with the relevance remaining for Christianity in these texts after Nietzsche's critique has been levied. Answers will be forthcoming, but it should be noted at least that Nietzsche's scorn is primarily and directly (though not exclusively) aimed at the church, that institution the stone remnants of which lie so decayed and violated in *Blood Meridian*. What Nietzsche celebrates as useful and right in the teachings of Jesus (that "true life, eternal life, is found – it is not promised, it is here, it is *within you*: as life lived in love,

[8] Ibid., 30.

[9] Gary Shapiro, "The Rhetoric of Nietzsche's Zarathustra," *boundary 2* 8, no.2 (Winter 1980): 173.

in love without deduction or exclusion, without distance"[10]) he sees ruinously undermined by the church.

> [O]ne constructed the *Church* out of the antithesis to the Gospel. If one were looking for a sign that an ironical divinity was at work behind the great universal drama he would find no small support in the *tremendous question-mark* called Christianity. That mankind should fall on its knees before the opposite of what was the origin, the meaning, the *right* of the Gospel, that it should have sanctified in the concept 'Church' precisely what the 'bringer of glad tidings' regarded as *beneath* him, *behind* him – one seeks in vain a grander form of *world-historical irony* – [11]

The factual justifications for Nietzsche's rhetorical critique of Christianity stand beyond the scope of this study. But, as my introductory outline of sacramental theology has shown, what is primarily at stake in the theology of sacrament – especially as posited by the great Reformers and many contemporary Christian thinkers – is to direct the church's attention to the worth, value, and meaning of the life directly in front of us, to the holiness of the *hic et nunc*. The sacraments affirm the worth of the material world, rather than sacrifice that worth for a world to come. Of course, much sacramental theology still has enough invested in that world to come to irritate Nietzsche, who would no doubt object to it as 'asceticism.' But the theology of sacraments will nonetheless compromise the fullness of God's presence in the present not one whit, and to this extent it denies an ascetic ideal. Again, these associations are only preliminary in the novels presently at hand; the full significance of Cormac McCarthy's sacramental imagery will be made clear in time. It is enough now to say that Judge Holden's black mass nihilistically violates the life-affirmation voiced by both Nietzsche and the sacramental theology I enlist.

It is one thing, of course, for Nietzsche to oppose Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh. This seems clear enough. But I want to argue, more ambitiously, that these two novels themselves resist the seemingly unrelenting violence of their most charismatic characters. In the case of both *Blood*

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[10] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist* trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1990), 153. Original emphasis.
[11] Ibid., 160.

Meridian and *No Country for Old Men*, actions remain that might undermine the power of violence. Before illuminating the possibility for these actions in the novels, allow me to show how Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt extend Nietzsche's critique of knowledge and fate.

Adorno and Horkheimer against Enlightenment Reason

As Vereen Bell notes, what the judge "says and he and his confederates act out eventually seems like an only slightly demented revival of Enlightenment philosophy, and the judge's intellectual imperialism may be read finally as an instance of what happens if Enlightenment doctrine is pressed to its logical conclusion."[12] Bell probably leaves a bit too much unexplained with this statement, but the sentiment is largely accurate and well frames my introduction of a Frankfurt School that will not seek to abandon Enlightenment reason, but rather aims dialectically to turn critical theory back upon the trajectory of Enlightenment thought itself in order to critique its assumptions and expose its myths. In this sense its project is heavily indebted to Nietzsche. Adorno does not mean to oppose the Nietzschean idea of reason as an instrument, or to propose something other than reason as the tool by which we should make our way through the world. Rather, like Nietzsche, he and Max Horkheimer want to expose the dangers that the instrumentality of reason holds for modernity. In the introductory essay of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer take aim at Francis Bacon and argue that the Enlightenment, "understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters."[13] With a tone that recalls Judge Holden, Horkheimer and Adorno read Bacon as looking to reason as an instrument of will:

> the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its

[12] Bell, *The Achievement*, 124.

[13] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

> deference to worldly masters. . . What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts . . . There shall be neither mystery nor the desire to reveal mystery.[14]

Indeed, we easily could imagine these words spoken by Judge Holden around the campfire. But the concern and pessimism over this tendency of Enlightenment thought becomes quickly clear in Horkheimer and Adorno. Articulating Holden's enlightened priesthood further, Horkheimer and Adorno continue:

> On their way toward modern science human beings have discarded meaning. The concept is replaced by the formula, the cause by rules and probability. For enlightenment, anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion . . . For Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry. Unity remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell. All gods and qualities must be destroyed.[15]

Witness here again Holden's scrupulously written calculations in his ledger; Chigurh's willfully deterministic coin toss. But the relentlessness of this Enlightenment trajectory soon demeans all value and devalues all meaning, according to Horkheimer and Adorno. Once "the movement is able to develop unhampered by external oppression, there is no holding it back. Its own ideas of human rights then fare no better than the older universals."[16] That is, when reason has unmoored all value from its foundations, even its own values come under critique. This danger accompanies the non-foundationalism Enlightenment uncovers, and it is one Jay Ellis, for example, misrecognizes but that Horkheimer and Adorno try to diagnose. Enlightenment reason "stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them. Their 'in-itself' becomes 'for him.' In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination."[17] In other words, the self has ascended

[14] Ibid., 2.
[15] Ibid., 3, 4-5.
[16] Ibid., 3.
[17] Ibid., 6.

towards a narcissistic nihilism: reason reconciles all things to instruments of will. In Chigurh's words, anything can be an instrument.

Importantly, however, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno show that this logic of instrumentation is not novel to Enlightenment reason. The same instrumentality governs what they term totemic religion and magic. Magic, "like science is concerned with ends," only it pursues its ends through attention to the particularity of things, rather than to their intellectual abstraction.[18] This is not to say that Horkheimer and Adorno advocate a return to what they term "magic." Rather, they recognize a trajectory between the mimetic practices of magic and the abstracting ones of reason. Against the absolute particularity of being, magic attempts to gain control through mimesis and sacrifice. Sacrifice "implies specific representation. What is done to the spear, the hair, the name of this enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god."[19] Still, in sacrifice the "sanctity of the *hic et nunc*, the uniqueness of the chosen victim which coincides with its representative status, distinguishes it radically, makes it non-exchangeable even in the exchange."[20] But nonetheless, the "substitution which takes place here marks a step toward discursive logic."[21] As abstraction flattens the *hic et nunc* into categories of thought, the sacrifice of "representation gives way to universal fungibility."[22] With the rise of Enlightenment reason, instrumentality is only improved, not invented: "matter [is] finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties. [23] Witness again the judge's black mass in the mountains. What is consecrated there is not the particularity of a single victim or of a unique community; what is sanctified is law and regularity: niter, sulphur, and

[18] Ibid., 7. Recall again the critique of the talismanic use of Christian religion in *Blood Meridian*, as an instrument that pursues particular ends such as protection or prediction of the future.
[19] Ibid., 6.
[20] Ibid., 6-7.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 7.
[23] Ibid., 3.

ammonia (rather than bat shit, volcano dust, and piss) make gunpowder. If Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh appear almost supernatural, it is because their reason has attained the status of myth, because (in God's absence) they have made gods of themselves. Reason "serves as a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools, rigidly purpose-directed and as calamitous as the precisely calculated operations of material production, the results of which for human beings escape all calculation. Reason's old ambition to be purely an instrument of purposes has been finally fulfilled."[24] Here the relation to Nietzsche is clear and troubling. No foundations remain, God has vacated his throne, and a narcissistic reason has ascended in God's place.

Having met Holden and Chigurh already, we may find the disease Adorno and Horkheimer diagnose to be predictable. The relentless abstraction of reason, having denied the mimetic particularity of myth – or rather, having ballooned beyond mimesis by way of instrumentation towards the totalizing unity of abstraction – results in a liquidating violence worrisomely justified by the maneuvers of reason. Since humans "believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown," Enlightenment reason "is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the 'outside' is the real source of fear."[25] As the judge demands, whatever exists without knowledge exists without consent. All must be made subject, by any means necessary: there can be no mystery. So artifacts are tossed into the fire, along with whatever secrets they hide. All that remains are the notes, the knowledge. And this is as true of events (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Chigurh assure us) as of objects. The more thought abstracts all particularities into unified concepts, the "more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws

[24] Ibid., 23.
[25] Ibid., 11.

of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects."[26] That is, once the regularity and repetition of natural laws come to be understood and employed by thought, then "there is nothing new under the sun, since all the pieces in this meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaption."[27]

The path of Chigurh's fateful coin, traveling all those years towards murder, may have been predicted and could not have been other. The laws of nature have consigned it and Carla Jean to fate. But this "barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine which it rejects: the sanction of fate which through retribution incessantly reinstates what always was. Whatever might be different is made the same."[28] Recall again then Carla Jean's plaintive plea to Chigurh, "There's just me. There aint anybody else." She voices Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as her own singularity, in desperation. But Chigurh's reason cannot hear her. The "radical replaceability of the individual makes [her] death practically – and in utter contempt – revocable."[29] The unifying trajectory of totalizing thought resolves all the vagaries and varieties of time, place, and person into notion and fate. Thus abstraction, "the instrument of enlightenment, stands in the same relationship to its objects as fate, whose concept it eradicates: liquidation."[30] In other words, that which is other – whether object or event – that which is mysterious or which resists the unifying patterns of thought and natural law, is and must be destroyed.

Horkheimer and Adorno uncover the danger of Nietzsche's instrumental reason when metaphysical nihilism fails sufficiently to be overcome, a danger fully embodied in the characters of Holden and Chigurh. And although Adorno's ethical concerns tend more towards the critical than

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[26] Ibid., 8.
[27] Ibid., 8.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 232.
[30] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.

the constructive, he does gesture towards a positive morality that might be generated in the wake of this danger. Although Adorno admits to his thought owing more to Nietzsche than any other, Adorno maintains that Nietzsche has

> failed to go beyond the abstract negation of bourgeois morality, or, to put it differently, of a morality that ha[s] degenerated into ideology, into a mask which conceal[s] a dirty business . . . [h]is analysis of the individual moral problems he face[s does] not lead him to construct a statement of the good life. Instead, having proceeded in a summary fashion, he [comes] up with a positive morality that is really nothing more than the negative mirror-image of the morality he had repudiated.[31]

In other words, despite his groundbreaking work to free morality of its fetters, Adorno interpret Nietzsche as offering only the disappointing inverse of the morality he has lacerated. Nietzsche would likely resist the criticism that he offers a "positive" morality, but it does seem that he is so blinded by the vigor of his critique of morality that he fails to "recognize that the so-called slave morality that he excoriates is in truth always a master morality, namely the morality imposed upon the oppressed by rulers."[32] What Nietzsche should have done is turn "his gaze to the conditions that determine human beings and make them and each of us into what we are."[33] Moral philosophy remains bound in Nietzsche to private ethics, to questions of will and causality, when its proper attention belongs in the social, with the realization that "in our universal state of dependency, there is no freedom."[34] In short, because Nietzsche neglects the social, he misses the chance sufficiently to critique the ascendency of narcissistic nihilism. Sociality, solidarity, and universal dependency are the starting points for morality, writes Adorno, not a private ethics. If the will to power affirms life, it must affirm life in sociality and solidarity. Sociality will ramify more constructively in my forthcoming reading of Arendt, but Adorno here assumes a posture of almost tragic critique. For Adorno, the "only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the

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[31] Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 172.
[32] Ibid., 174.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 176.

attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption."[35]

Interestingly, Adorno's own work mimics Nietzsche's in at least this way: his philosophy remains largely critical, and he generally eschews the constructive. Indeed, the book from which the poignant words above are taken, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, is meant to begin pursuing the practical and ancient task of philosophy – "the teaching of the good life"[36] – by way of the modest but only available means: subjective reflections upon the "damaged life." Adorno admits that his subjective approach "necessitates that the parts do not altogether satisfy the demands of the philosophy of which they are nevertheless a part. The disconnected and non-binding character of the form, the renunciation of explicit theoretical cohesion, are meant as one expression of this."[37] That is, the renunciation of cohesion itself expresses the philosophical project undertaken, and this aversion to cohesion – to the totalizing powers of conceptual abstraction that his work with Horkheimer has already exposed – motivates Adorno's turn towards aesthetics. It is also why he interprets the aesthetic in the manner he does. Art – in particular, the avant-garde modern art Adorno most celebrates – achieves an autonomy from abstraction impossible for philosophy. Because it refuses to be incorporated by thought, its autonomy critiques Enlightenment. Art "becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful,' it criticizes society by merely existing."[38] Art of this sort refuses to be instrumentalized, it sets itself by its mere existence against the totalizing trajectory of rational thought.

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[35] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.
[36] Ibid., 15.
[37] Ibid., 18.
[38] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 225-6.

Adorno's primary target is against the trend in Marxist art towards an uncritical form of realism meant flatly to express political opinion, but he wants to point to a more radical aesthetic form which refuses to be subsumed by any idea or opinion, and asserts its own autonomy by that very refusal. For Adorno, art, "even as something tolerated in an administered world, embodies what does not allow itself to be managed and what total management suppresses."[39] By realizing its own singularity and autonomy against the rule, repetition, and abstraction of reason, the "nominalistic tendency of art toward the destruction of all preestablished categories of order has social implications."[40] On Adorno's account, art – much like ethics – exists primarily for critique. It relinquishes the task of construction in order to set itself against "preestablished categories of order." Apart from critique, all autonomous art can achieve is a subtle but important movement back towards the mimesis of magic, but escaping magic's superstitious dangers. Artworks "point – as with their finger – to their content without its thereby becoming discursive. The spontaneous reaction of the recipient is mimesis of the immediacy of this gesture."[41] I will argue shortly that one of the measures Cormac McCarthy employs in *Blood Meridian* to resist the violence of instrumentalized rational abstraction is the artistic autonomy Adorno advocates. But I want also to assert that these novels attempt to "contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption."[42] To establish that assertion, I must move from Adorno's aesthetics back into ethics, with Hannah Arendt.

Arendt against fate and sovereignty

Indeed, how a world inextricably fettered to fate might be redeemed – or at least, how we might mitigate the unforeseen consequences of chance and choice – becomes one focus of Hannah

[39] Ibid., 234.
[40] Ibid., 235.
[41] Ibid., 245.
[42] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

Arendt in her defense against historical determinism and Nietzschean vengeance. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche claims that the real problem regarding man is "to breed an animal *with the right to make promises*."[43] In *The Human Condition*, Arendt pursues a resolution to this problem. For Arendt, the sort of Enlightenment reason that Horkheimer and Adorno critique above, that reason which presses natural law and causality towards a conclusion in fate, denies the active capacity of the human and the human's unique facility to begin things anew, a trait she refers to as natality. Despite the seeming irresistibility of law and fate, the fact that humans "are capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from [them], that [they are] able to perform what is infinitely improbable."[44] Arendt does not deny the force and momentum of cause, law, and fate, but she does deny their certainty. For her, the "new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle."[45] Compellingly, for Arendt, this miracle appears in a moral form: as promise and forgiveness.

Arendt begins her defense of these moral miracles by making an insight also crucial to Adorno, that in our "universal state of dependency, there is no freedom."[46] Or better, she contends that freedom must be understood as something other than absolute sovereignty, as something other than the complete lack of need, obligation, or vulnerability so characteristic of the suzerain. Indeed, Arendt diagnoses this anxiety over mutual dependency as deeply ingrained in the western philosophical tradition, which has often conceived of the human in ways meant to mitigate vulnerability. Here we begin to see how Arendt aims to keep the spirit of Nietzsche alive while keeping the impulse towards narcissism at bay. Freedom does not exclude dependency or mutuality. Again, acknowledging the occasionally calamitous consequences of our choices and of chance,

[43] Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 57. Original emphasis.
[44] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 178.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Adorno, *Problems*, 176.

Arendt reads the tradition as constantly "seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end . . . The calamities of action all arise from the human condition of plurality."[47] The sociality of universal dependency – what Arendt identifies with plurality – is one root of the unpredictability and irreversibility of chance and choice that Chigurh so likes to exploit among his victims. The result is that Western philosophy has acted against plurality and has conceived of the human as a maker rather than an actor. It aims to "save human affairs from their frailty by dealing with them as though they were or could become the planned products of human making."[48]

Nietzsche's ascetic priest and clear thinker, and Horkheimer and Adorno's man of science, the priest of Enlightenment, emerges as the object of critique here. This results in an altered relation between the human and the natural world, Arendt contends, one in which the "human capacity for action, for beginning new and spontaneous processes" has been redirected towards the "exploring of natural laws and fabricating objects out of natural material."[49] The human who fabricates, the one who makes the world around him, who makes gunpowder from common elements, he controls his surroundings from beginning to end. But the human who acts rather than makes enters a more complicated, less controllable space where reactions and consequences become far less predictable or reversible. For Arendt, to

> do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others.[50]

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[47] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 220-1.
[48] Ibid., 230.
[49] Ibid., 230-1.
[50] Ibid., 190.

That medium of which Arendt speaks is the social and political sphere, where other persons who have their own agency and who participate in the same complicated network of dependency and sociality also act and react. Chigurh's twenty-two year old coin initiates a chain reaction, it is true, but (despite Chigurh's contention) the consequences of each toss are boundless, since each flip occasions new, rather than necessary, human actions in the public realm. To be sure, the boundlessness of human action and reaction does invite dangers of its own. Acts carry with them inherent unpredictability. As Arendt continues, this "is not simply a question of inability to foretell all the logical consequences of a particular act, in which case an electronic computer would be able to foretell the future, but arises directly out of the story which, as a result of action, begins and establishes itself as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past."[51]

Apart from their unpredictability, acts also are immediately irreversible. Without exception, acts cannot be undone. Human beings "never have been and never will be able to undo or even to control reliably any of the processes they start through action . . . And this capacity to undo what has been done is matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed."[52] Indeed, these two obvious dangers – unpredictability and irreversibility – are exactly the traits Chigurh exploits, the ones he uses to hide his own agency in his killings. (Incidentally, they are also the problems the Tarot cards and painted saints of *Blood Meridian* are meant to mitigate.) But Arendt insists that these two risky traits, unpredictability and irreversibility, depend in the first place upon the "human ability to act – to start new unprecedented processes whose outcomes remain uncertain and unpredictable whether they are let loose in the human or the natural realm."[53] It is because some acts are novel, some unprecedented, some miraculous even – it is because these acts

[51] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 191-2. The category of story is quite important here and intimately related to all Arendt has to say about action. I will bracket discussion of Arendt's approach to story, however, for forthcoming chapters. As such, the summary of Arendt's account of promise and forgiveness as actions which deny determinism will be more fully exposited in forthcoming chapters.

[52] Ibid., 232-3.

[53] Ibid., 231-2.

arise among persons who have never so exactly been and in situations which have never so exactly arisen, that all the laws of causality and nature which so closely bind us fail to offer any certainty of outcome. The coin will fall on one side or another, it is true, but never before in this hotel room, never before between these two particular people under these particular circumstances. "There's just me. There aint any others." History is not a predetermined outcome waiting to be unraveled by time or the eye expertly focused on the laws which guide it. History is a process constantly in motion and pressed forth by the novel acts and reactions of real, free persons.

What then of that freedom which Adorno rhetorically denies and which Judge Holden equates with rule? The dangers of uncertainty and irrevocability, Arendt writes, are

> enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom, which, by producing the web of human relationships, seems to entangle its producer to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done.[54]

And to be sure, philosophy does turn away from freedom, like Holden and Chigurh seek to turn away from vulnerability. Thought begins to "accuse freedom of luring man into necessity, to condemn action, the spontaneous building of something new, because its results fall into a predetermined net of relationships."[55] Chigurh will not make himself vulnerable. He and Holden thus identify suzerainty with freedom, but Arendt insists that "if it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty . . . is contradictory to the very condition of plurality."[56] Fundamentally, Holden and Chigurh deny plurality, vulnerability, and dependency. Their denial is an illusion that predictably results in a violence which denies others their humanity, a violence which cruelly extracts monarchy from plurality and power from vulnerability. But there remains a freedom in human action, Arendt insists, though it may appear very different from sovereignty in its character. Action yet harbors "within itself certain potentialities

[54] Ibid., 233-4.
[55] Ibid., 234.
[56] Ibid.

which enable it to survive the disabilities of non-sovereignty."[57] Plurality, or sociality in Adorno's vocabulary, protects the Nietzschean critique from the dangers of narcissistic nihilism; it frees freedom from the oppressive isolation of sovereignty.

Arendt claims that action can redeem itself. The fact of action's unprecedented novelty – the same reality which incurs its unpredictability and initiates its irreversibility – make possible the responses to these dangers. In Arendt's account,

> redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty of make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past . . . and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security.[58]

Almost as if Arendt had predicted McCarthy's villains a half century before their creation, she continues to argue that forgiveness and promise save humans from the dystopic cruelty both Holden and Chigurh promote. Without being "released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would . . . be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victim's of its consequences forever,"[59] much as Chigurh's victims remain bound unnecessarily to acts of love or courage or charity whose outcomes they could not have predicted.

It may be that Arendt is taking particular issue with Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same and his *amor fati* in an attempt to preserve the possibility of novelty against fate. But in fact, Arendt seems to be positing exactly the sort of openness to an unpredictable future that Nietzsche insists upon and to which Chigurh will not allow himself to become vulnerable. Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo* that greatness "in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not

[57] Ibid., 236.
[58] Ibid., 237.
[59] Ibid., 237

forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but *love* it."[60] This sounds like Carla Jean at the Wal-mart meeting Llewellyn Moss and ignorantly accepting all the cruelly unimaginable risks of love when he walks back to her register and asks here when she gets off. "That was all she wrote," Carla Jean says, "There was not no question in my mind. Not then, not now, not ever."[61] She accepts the future without being able to predict its danger. Rather than embracing an open future, meanwhile, Chigurh's vengeful will shows an "aversion to time" in discord with the Nietzsche who foreshadows Arendt in proclaiming posthumously "*Love alone shall have jurisdiction* (creative love which *forgets* itself in its works)."[62] An openness to the future, a willingness to act in spite of the past, for the sake of this life, this moment: this is what Nietzsche calls loving fate, and what Arendt calls defying it.

Furthermore, the one who confines himself – like the judge – to making, who operates within the categorical framework of means and ends, lies "in the concomitant self-deprivation of the remedies inherent only in action, so that one is bound not only to *do* with the means of violence necessary for all fabrication, but also to *undo* what he has done as he undoes an unsuccessful object, by means of destruction."[63] Vengeance and violence, on this account, are unfreedoms, unable to access the non-sovereign but truly free acts of forgiveness and promise. The forgiver and the promiser do not merely react to other events, they are not beholden to causality: they act "anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act[s] which provoked [them]."[64] Promise and forgiveness are difficult, uncertain events – acts that, as Arendt has said, have the character of miracles. But they constitute the human as such. If

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[60] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 258.
[61] McCarthy, *No Country*, 132.
[62] Quoted in Martin Heidegger, "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" *Review of Metaphysics* 20, no. 3 (March 1967), 425.
[63] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 238.
[64] Ibid., 241.

> left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality, which is the most certain and the only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death. It is the faculty of action that interferes with this law . . . The lifespan of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin . . . The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ultimately rooted.[65]

Indeed, Arendt is careful to acclaim Jesus of Nazareth as a savant of this sort of miraculous forgiveness against vengeance and determinism.[66] And if simple, miraculous acts like promise and forgiveness are what make their stand against the destructive powers of Holden and Chigurh, then despite all the darkness and horror of *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* and despite their essentially tragic ends, there is yet a note of natality that hums in each. These novels begin quietly to resist the inexorable dominion of both Holden and Chigurh, and that resistance will gain momentum in Cormac McCarthy's other novels.

Mysterious endings

The violence of Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* and of Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* appears indomitable. But Nietzsche shows how we must affirm life against these dangers; Adorno shows how we might resist the monstrosity of reason, and Hannah Arendt shows how we can open a future beyond fate. I hope that my readings of Nietzsche, Adorno and Arendt have been both persuasive and accurate. But my central claim is finally about Cormac McCarthy. I contend that the possibility for resistance to the Judge's and to Chigurh's violence exists internal to the novels. I believe what glimmers McCarthy's gives us can be intensified through the preceding readings of Nietzsche, Adorno and Arendt, but whether or not that is true, I maintain that a subtle (albeit tragic) struggle against the inexorable cruelties of Holden and Chigurh yet stands, with or without the

[65] Ibid., 247.
[66] Ibid., 239, 246-7.

benefits and clarifications of German philosophy. In short, I argue that these novels are moral tragedies, stories that offer portraits of failed or incomplete or yet to be realized moral choices, and (to alter Adorno's phrase) mysterious contemplations of the utterly amoral from the viewpoint of the ethical.

The kid

As I argued in my introduction, criticism around *Blood Meridian* (and around the work of McCarthy in general) has attempted to hold two competing readings in tension: one which sees his work as generally nihilistic, documenting a world free of all ethical moorings and set adrift in the morass of postmodernity; and another which reads these works as darkly moralistic, presenting a world of unforgiving ethics through the telling of violently uncompromised fables. The defense of each interpretation tends to hinge centrally, at least with regard to *Blood Meridian*, on the particular critic's interpretation of the kid. If *Blood Meridian* has a protagonist, it is the kid. The book's first line is "See the child" and the child in question is the kid.[67] We follow him into the southwest as he joins first Captain White then Captain Glanton. For the middle two hundred pages of the book, however, the kid is hidden by the narrator from the gaze of the reader. Once the kid joins Glanton's Gang, he recedes into the background as the exploits of the marauders in general are recounted. Various characters step into clearer focus at various times, but the kid is only rarely mentioned. The Judge, meanwhile, is nearly always present. When, toward the end of the novel, the Gang is attacked by Yuma Indians and scattered, disbanded, and killed, the narrative refocuses upon the kid once again. We follow the kid's wanderings until he happens upon, and is murdered by, the judge many years later in an outhouse. Those who want to moralize McCarthy see the kid as preserving a sort of

[67] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 3.

heroic remnant of morality in this wilderness of nihilism.[68] They cite evidence for this latent morality: the kid, when he sometimes appears in the middle of the book, offers small acts of mercy to his compatriots. When the gang draws straws to kill their own injured comrades in order to spare them being captured and tortured, the kid draws short but will not murder the boy Shelby from Kentucky. He draws an arrow from David Brown's leg when no others will help. With the ex-priest Tobin, the kid opposes the judge after the gang has scattered, but he will not shoot the unarmed judge even though he has the opportunity and Tobin urgently goads him to do it. Indeed, at the end of the novel the judge – that champion of the amoral – seems to chastise the kid for holding on to this moral remnant. "You alone," the judge declares, "reserved in your heart some corner of clemency for the heathen."[69] But these examples are ambiguous at best. Against the absolute moral horror perpetrated by the Glanton Gang, these minor mercies simply do not suffice. Although the kid's acts are not descriptively recounted in the narrative, this amounts merely to McCarthy's sleight of hand. Certainly the kid has participated in all these massacres. Like each member of that gang, the kid has murdered and tortured and desecrated innocents all over the southwest. He is as guilty as Glanton, the judge, or any other of the group.[70]

Thus, although Harold Bloom and others want to call the kid a hero, at best he is an antihero, or better, a tragic hero, and *Blood Meridian* is the document of the kid's progressive, absolute, and final moral failure.[71] The climactic scene of this failure comes just before the kid finally

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[68] Harold Bloom is probably the most famous of these readers, though Edwin Arnold has written more and better on McCarthy's morality, in my opinion. See "Blood Meridian" in *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 254-264 and "Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables" in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (ed. Edwin Arnold and Dianne Luce, Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1999): 45-70.

[69] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 299.

[70] Peter Josyph, Amy Hungerford, and Elisabeth Andersen especially well document the insufficiency of these small acts to stand against the genocidal horrors of the kid's participation in the Glanton Gang's marauding.

[71] Tragedy is itself a contested term. Here I embrace Terry Eagleton's description, one that echoes Adorno's account of philosophy and perhaps my own account of sacrament in chapter five: "only by accepting the worst for what it is, not as a convenient springboard for leaping beyond it, can one hope to surpass it . . . Reclamation is necessary exactly where it seems least possible." *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 37, 40.

encounters the judge in a brothel in Griffin, Texas. Forty-five years old now and referred to as the man, he has been wandering the west for years, still wearing the scapular of human ears he took from the body of David Brown and still carrying with him that bible he can't read. He travels through the vast plains where bison have been slaughtered by the millions, everywhere around him piles of "the crazed and sunchalked bones of the vanished herd . . . The bones ha[ve] been gathered into windrows ten feet high and hundreds long or into great conical hills."[72] Among the bones he sees the pickers, "ragged, filthy, the oxen galled and mad-looking."[73]

These pickers will prove central; Fort Griffin, John Sepich tells us, was an outpost established for bison-hide hunters during the mid-nineteenth century. As the herds vanished and decomposed on the plains, the dried skeletons became marginally valuable in fertilizer production, and so the plains began to crowd with poor folk called "bonepickers" who gathered the remains as last resort for subsistence in that waste.[74] Out on that prairie, the man makes a fire and spends the night among the pickers. Toward midnight a group of five bonepicker boys, one very small, approaches "out of the dark, sullen wretches dressed in skins."[75] They speak briefly, one brazen boy named Elrod challenging the man and doubting the provenance of the scapular of ears. Elrod's friends aim to keep him out of trouble as the tension escalates. The man asks,

> You aint callin me a liar are you son?
> I aint ye son.
> How old are you?
> That's some more of your business.
> How old are you?
> He's fifteen . . .
> I was fifteen when I was first shot.
> I aint never been shot.
> You aint sixteen yet neither.
> You aim to shoot me?
> I aim to keep from it . . .

[72] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 317-8.
[73] Ibid.
[74] John Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 66-7.
[75] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 318.

> I knowed you for what you was when I seen ye.
> You better go on.
> Set there and talk about shootin somebody. They aint nobody done it yet.[76]

There are important echoes in this exchange. After the kid's first documented altercation in the novel, hundreds of pages before this scene, Toadvine tells the kid that he had meant to kill him and the kid uses the same words as Elrod in this scene, "They aint nobody done it yet."[77] Elrod is clearly meant to re-present the kid in his own younger days, violent and reckless and nearly the same age as the kid when he joined Glanton. Elrod returns alone later in the night with a rifle in his hand. The man cocks his pistol in the dark and lifts it "with both hand to the darker shape of the visitor. 'I'm right here, [the man says].'"[78] Elrod fires his rifle first and misses. Then the man says, "You wouldnt have lived anyway," and kills the boy.[79]

The next morning the remaining boys, including the smallest, Elrod's brother, come to retrieve the body. They speak briefly again, the older boys telling the man of Elrod's difficult childhood, of his parents dead and his grandfather murdered in Kentucky. The boys name the youngest among them as Elrod's brother Randall, a child who has "never knowed good fortune in his life and now he aint got a soul in the world."[80] Then they tell Randall to "take a good look at the man that has made you a orphan."[81] The scene ends with the man watching Randall and the other boys receding into the waste with Elrod's body:

> When they set out across the prairie with [Elrod's] body carried up on their shoulder [Randall] followed behind carrying the musket and the dead boy's rifle and the dead boy's hat. The man watched them go. Out there was nothing. They were simply bearing the body off over the bonestrewn waste toward a naked horizon. The orphan turned once to look back at him and then he hurried to catch up.[82]

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[76] Ibid., 321-2.
[77] Ibid., 10.
[78] Ibid., 322.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., 323
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.

Within a paragraph, the fully grown kid has entered Fort Griffin, where he will be accosted and killed by the judge.

Readers of this climactic scene often see Elrod as a juvenile doppelganger of the kid, which he surely is, but they miss the moral import of the encounter because they disregard its timing. Even those unwilling to defend the kid as a moral figure in general regard the shooting of Elrod as an act of self-defense.[83] Here the violence of the kid's youth is wrought back upon him in old age, only to be met with violence yet again. But the deliberate pacing of this scene, and the man's patient delay in returning fire, invites a different reading. The man announces himself to Elrod and waits for the boy to shoot first. Only after Elrod has fired and missed does the man speak to the boy, tell Elrod why he deserves to be shot, and then finally return fire in vengeance and kill the child. And those final words of judgment – "You wouldn't have lived anyway" – align the man exactly with Judge Holden (and by extension, Anton Chigurh). The man asserts a knowledge of the future that he does not have. He declares knowingly that boys like Elrod do not survive (although, of course, the man himself has managed to live these forty-five years). He claims fully and finally to know who Elrod is and what his future holds. To be sure, Elrod's accusation – "I knowed you for what you was when I seen ye" – expresses the same sort of knowledge, and leads to a similar sort of violence.[84] In both cases, the reduction of the particularity and novelty of another person into a category of knowledge inevitably directs action towards violent fate. As if to reinforce the particularity of Elrod after he has been killed, Elrod's friends offer to the man his terrible story and his orphan brother, the tragic and unique circumstances and relations of his suffering, but by then it is too late.[85] Once Elrod has fired

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[83] See, for example, Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief*, 94.

[84] There is another example of a similar exchange earlier in the novel. Two men survive the massacre of Captain White's marauders, the kid and a man named Sproule. Sproule has a gangrenous arm and one night a large bat lands on his chest and begins feeding from Sproule's neck. Sproule wakes and screams and holds his hands out to the kid, who replies without any note of patience or mercy, "I know your kind . . . what's wrong with you is wrong all the way through you." McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 66.

[85] See chapter four for more on the relevance of storytelling.

his rifle, the kid has an opportunity to begin anew; in Arendt's terms, to forgive and to initiate a different chain of actions and events. It would have been a risky act, to be sure, perhaps even a miraculous one. But having failed to realize this miracle, the kid – like the judge – transforms his knowledge into violence and resolves an open future into fate. Perhaps those moralistic critics are correct: perhaps the kid has been only a resistant disciple to the judge all those years with Glanton. But in this climactic scene, the kid matriculates into the full violence of Judge Holden's vision. That corner of clemency in his heart has vanished. The kid falls into the same deterministic trajectory of vengeance that Adorno and Arendt might have predicted for him, just as surely as he falls into the murderous arms of the judge in that outhouse only pages later. Having relinquished the chance for natality so climactically in this scene, it's no wonder then that the kid will so quickly succumb to the mortality waiting for him with the judge.

One might see this as a strong reading of a brief scene. But the epilogue to *Blood Meridian* bears out my interpretation. This final passage, set apart from the main text of the novel and placed in italics, is deliberately perplexing and has occasioned much speculation among critics. Indeed, as I will argue below, the mystery of this passage is an element of its argument. But what meaning can be gleaned directly recalls the killing of Elrod and the poignant passage of the survivors who bear his body across the prairie. The full passage merits quotation:

> *In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. 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 prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in the 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 as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again.*[86]

[86] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 337.

Most critics see the man progressing over the plains and using this implement to strike fire out of the rock for what it surely is: a man with a post-hole digger, plotting the course of a fence through the west.[87] But this is not just any prairie. It is filled with "the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather." In other words, we have been returned to the landscape of that final climactic scene between the kid and Elrod, to those plains near Fort Griffin covered in bison bones and the ragged children there gathering the bones for their bare pittance. And if this prairie is not just any prairie, then this man is not just any man. We are told that the plotting of this fence "is the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality." There is a metaphorical sense to this fence and this fence-plotter; they signify the imposition of order in a western (philosophical or geographical) waste without any clearly given sense. It marks what Jay Ellis mistakenly saw implicit in Chigurh, what he attempted to call the establishment of a moral or ethical sense despite the lack of any final recourse to universal foundation. The judge's moral critique cannot be undone; but the work of setting some order in the absence of final foundation, of plotting some boundary through the waste, that work nonetheless moves on. Crucially, however, "they all move on" *together*. The man does not move through the waste alone, a dominant and untouchable suzerain of the wasted prairie. No; the bonepickers go with him. What order is plotted is one that moves forward – if it is to move forward at all – in sociality and plurality. There is little to hope for at the end of this novel, and I don't mean to argue that this epilogue entails anything like a happy ending.[88] The judge is powerful,

[87] There are notable exceptions to this interpretation. Harold Bloom sees the fire as a Promethean motif and sees the wanderers and inhuman ghouls seeking nourishment in bones. See "Tragic Ecstasy" in Peter Josyph's *Adventures in Reading Cormac McCarthy* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 85. Leo Daugherty regards this fire as a gnostic reference. See "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy" in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, 159-174. As my reading above shows, I think these are both quite incorrect readings and there are telling internal references which invite us to glance only a few pages back at Elrod, rather than as far as Prometheus or Mani, for meaning.

[88] Indeed, the only other reader I've found who has identified the gatherers of bones with Elrod and his companions sees the fencing of the west and the slaughter of buffalo as extensions of the judge's dominion of the natural world. I would not argue with Jay Ellis on this point as I have with other ones, but the tragic interpretation of McCarthy I'm proposing perhaps has room to house both Ellis' historical reading and my moral one. See Ellis' *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 193-198.

perhaps absolutely so, and says that he will never die. He appears disturbingly correct at novel's end. But there is an ethical response to him implicit in the novel's final words. The kid does not know Elrod or his future and so does not need to kill him. The workman can move forward with the bonepickers through that waste, though that work will remain dangerous, unpredictable, and quite possibly futile. But what path might lie ahead, if any, will require the assertion, rather than the erasure, of a common moral sense among both the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather.

Of course, these are strong readings too, and perhaps the most that anyone could or should say about the epilogue to *Blood Meridian* is that it is opaque. Given the relevance of the bone gatherers near Griffin at the novel's end, it would be hard not to see some allusion to that scene in this epilogue, but still, the nature and meaning of this odd implement, these mysterious holes, the fire God has put there, even these bones – all these things remain obscure and may be incapable of being fully wrangled by discursive thought. But this, then, is perhaps the novel's other response to the judge. McCarthy's language is always ornate and his syntax often complex, but he is rarely as deliberately elliptical as he tends to be at the end of his novels. Here, as elsewhere in his work, his text resists finalization and completion in thought. In many ways, this novel aims towards something of the autonomy that Adorno has characterized as essential to successful art. At the very least, it "renounces explicit theoretical cohesion" in the manner Adorno sought and might have appreciated. The judge is powerful, but for all his denial of mystery, his story remains contained within a text that refuses to be totalized, which remains obstinately opaque to its reader. *Blood Meridian* is "haunted by the mystery that its own language challenges the very nihilistic logic that it gives representation to. The language itself is a presence, and the world as it enters into language is a presence; and whatever it is that this presence may be said to be is precisely what the judge and his cerebral violence have declared war upon."[89] The language of presence that Vereen Bell deploys here must be

[89] Bell, *Achievement*, 128.

problematized in forthcoming chapters, but his point is taken. This text and its language resist totalization in thought. Whatever frustrations its opacity occasions for the critic, at the least it keeps the terrors of the judge somewhat at bay. Despite Holden's eloquent and sociopathic protests, in *Blood Meridian* there yet remains a note of mystery.

Ed Tom Bell

Anton Chigurh survives *No Country for Old Men* even as he disappears from its ending. Although he does not dance or boast his immortality to conclude this book in the manner of Judge Holden, he continues to haunt the landscape they share. Indeed, Chigurh's disappearance at the end of the book seems to contribute to the fear of him. As Ed Tom Bell, the sheriff who chases Chigurh throughout the book, admits near the end of the novel, "[H]e's pretty much a ghost [but] he's out there. I wish he wasnt. But he is."[90] Sheriff Bell feels defeated when the book ends. He cannot make sense of Chigurh and cannot equal Chigurh's power, so he resigns his position. Once again, there is no happy ending in *No Country for Old Men* and I don't hope to impose one where it's missing. But Bell does resist in ways even he doesn't recognize, with a participation in promise and forgiveness that subtly and uncertainly undermines the fatality of Chigurh.

One of the most alarming aspect of *No Country for Old Men* is, of course, the propensity for human choice – even upstanding, evidently moral choice – to have unintended and terrible consequences. In the two encounters detailed above, this is clearest in the decision to marry. The gas station proprietor marries into a business that almost kills him because Anton Chigurh stops by one day; Carla Jean dies because she meets Llewellyn Moss at the Wal-mart and falls in love. Perhaps most ironically, however, Chigurh enters Moss' life because of what might be read as a profoundly

[90] McCarthy, *No Country*, 299. Many of these reflections from Ed Tom Bell are written as sort of excurses in italics in the text. For the sake of clarity, I will remove italics here when they seem not significantly to alter the sense at which I aim to convey.

generous, forgiving, and moral act on Moss' behalf. Moss happens upon the scene of the drug murder while hunting and walks away with the money. But there is one man badly wounded, still alive, whom Moss discovers in the driver's seat of a vehicle as he paces through the carnage. The man looks at Moss, his face bloody, the "smell of blood and fecal matter"[91] in the cab. The man pleads with Moss: "Agua, cuate . . . Aqua, por dios."[92] Water, friend. Water, for God's sake. Moss shuts the door and goes home with the money, but wakes in the middle of the night and resolves to return to the scene. His intention at first is unclear. "You have to take this seriously," he says to himself, "you can't treat this like luck."[93] Chance and fate are again at play. But to what does the demonstrative pronoun "this" refer? Moss speaks again into the darkness, asking the lone Mexican survivor, "Are you dead out there? . . . Hell no, you aint dead."[94] Immediately he grabs his colt .45, loads it, places it in his belt, and returns. The reader's first impression is that Moss means to kill the sole survivor, to eradicate the only witness of his theft. But the narration quickly suggests that Moss's motives might be more compassionate as he fills a gallon jug with water before he goes. When Moss arrives at the scene with water he finds that the dying man has already been shot dead. He then looks back at his own truck in the distance and sees Chigurh standing there. He says to himself, "There is no description of a fool that you fail to satisfy . . . Now you're going to die," a prediction that proves true.[95] Fleeing now from Chigurh through the desert we are given glimpses of Moss's thoughts as he recalls his fateful decision to return to the crime scene to aid the wounded drug runner. He recalls having said to himself at home, lying in the dark: "Why dont you just get in your truck and go on out there and take the son of a bitch a drink of water?"[96] The "this" to be taken seriously, the reader now realizes, is the thirst of a dying man. When Moss complains to

[91] Ibid., 14.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., 23.
[94] Ibid.,
[95] Ibid., 27.
[96] Ibid., 29.

himself, "For a Mexican dopedealer," he rebuts himself right away: "Yeah. Well. Everybody is somethin."[97] Note in these words a sentiment that directly opposes the kid's words in his encounter with Elrod. Because Moss *doesn't* know what else this man might be apart from a criminal, he extends toward a dying man perhaps this most basic act of mercy, a drink of water, and at deadly risk to himself.[98] That this risky – Arendt might call it miraculous – act of generosity initiates a sequence of events that will ultimately occasion the deaths not only of Moss and Carla Jean, but also of countless other innocent people wholly unrelated to the protagonists, seems to lend credence to Chigurh's dark fatalism. But a more complicated picture emerges in the story Ed Tom Bell, and in the dreams recounted in the novel's final words.

Bell is profoundly defeated at the end of the novel. Anton Chigurh has wreaked havoc in his county, and he cannot help but feel responsible for failing to prevent it. As he tells his wife Loretta "if you got a bad enough dog in your yard people will stay out of it. And they didnt."[99] And this is not just a case of being outwitted; when Bell has Chigurh accidentally cornered at the motel where Moss has been killed, Bell refuses to confront Chigurh out of fear. Walking out of the courthouse one final time, Bell thus feels a sense of "defeat . . . [m]ore bitter to him than death."[100] Chigurh has recovered the money; Moss and Carla Jean have died; Ed Tom has quit in shame. But Moss dies with eighty pages left in the book, Carla Jean with forty, and Chigurh disappears from the text with Carla Jean. The final section of the novel – nearly a sixth of the total text – narrates the aftermath of these events through Bell's encounters with various people: Llewellyn's father, prosecutors and other law enforcement, and most crucially, his own family. These encounters with his Uncle Ellis and his wife Loretta constitute the major portion of the novel's final section, and point towards the concluding dream sequence. Taken together, I contend these things make some sense of Moss'

[97] Ibid., 26.
[98] "If anyone gives even a cup of cold water . . ." Matthew 10:41.
[99] McCarthy, *No Country*, 299.
[100] Ibid., 306.

faltering moral courage, or at least continue to hold that courage up against the invisible presence of Chigurh.

The first of these encounters is with Ed Tom's Uncle Ellis, a former law enforcement officer who was paralyzed by a gunshot wound. Ellis, however, is fairly philosophical about his physical condition. When Sheriff Bell asks his uncle about it, Ellis takes an optimistic view of the fate Chigurh has elsewhere employed to murderous purpose.

> All the time you spend tryin to get back what's been took from you there's more goin out the door. After a while you just try and get a tourniquet on it. Your grandad never asked me to sign on as deputy with him. I done that my own self. Hell, I didnt have nothing else to do. Paid about the same as cowboyin. Anyway, you never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from. I was too young for one war and too old for the next one. But I seen what come out of it. You can be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more than what they're worth. Ask them Gold Star mothers what they paid and what they got for it. You always pay too much. Particularly for promises. There aint no such thing as a bargain promise. You'll see. Maybe you done have.[101]

That promises entail unpredictable dangers seems to challenge Arendt with Chigurh. But of course, the possibility of promise as a hedge against the uncertainty of the world and events is precisely Arendt's point. Ellis is not only abstract here, however. It becomes clear in the ensuing conversation that he is speaking concretely here of his brother Harold who was killed in the war, and his mother who never recovered from the results of her son's wartime oaths. This has occasioned some loss of faith in Ellis: "I always thought when I got older that God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didnt. I dont blame him. If I was him I'd have the same opinion about me that he does."[102] This memory of Harold leads Bell to confess to Ellis that his own wartime service medals are unearned. Ed Tom fled a firefight and left his wounded and dead comrades behind, but the army decorates him for valor for public relations' sake when he returns home. Ed Tom protests the commendation but his superiors silence him. He painfully apologizes to his uncle that

[101] Ibid., 267.
[102] Ibid.

> [y]ou go into battle it's a blood oath to look after the men with you and I dont know why I didnt. I wanted to. When you're called on like that you have to make up your mind that you'll live with the consequences. But you don't know what the consequences will be. You end up layin a lot of things at your door that you didnt plan on. If I was supposed to die over there doin what I'd give my word to do then that's what I should of done. You can tell it any way you want but that's the way it is. I should of done it and I didnt.[103]

Arendt's categories are folding in upon each other here. Bell seeks forgiveness for breaking a promise from a man whose brother died keeping that same promise. And although Ellis deals with Bell gently, he doesn't explicitly offer any forgiveness. What he does do is recognize that the confession Bell gives here is only a dress rehearsal for another one, the one Bell plans to give to his wife Loretta. Ellis suggests,

> [M]aybe this was just a practice run.
> Maybe.
> You aim to tell her?
> Yessir, I guess I do.
> Well.
> What do you think she'll say?
> Well, I expect you might come out of it a little better than what you think.
> Yessir, Bell said. I surely hope so.[104]

Marriage so far in this novel has been rendered as a risky enterprise. Bell's marriage to his wife, meanwhile, is described in the most endearing, almost sentimental, terms throughout the course of the novel. There are brief moments of understanding, tenderness, and generosity between Ed Tom and Loretta that occasionally surface and lighten the darkness of this tragic narrative. Bell admits to Uncle Ellis that their relationship has been "a little rough . . . a time or two."[105] And Ed Tom and Loretta have lost a child whom Ed Tom promises early not to speak to the reader about, but of whom he poignantly declares towards the novel's end, "I talk to my daughter. She would be thirty now. That's all right. I dont care how that sounds. I like talking to her. Call it superstition or whatever you want. I know that over the years I have give her the heart I always wanted for myself

[103] Ibid., 278.
[104] Ibid., 279-80.
[105] Ibid., 266.

and that's all right."[106] (Note, incidentally, how little this "superstition" resembles the skewered superstitions of *Blood Meridian* or Adorno, and how much more it resembles the spoken confessions and promises which otherwise crowd the end of this narrative.[107])

When Bell tries to bring up the subject of confession while sitting with his wife under the trees during an afternoon ride, Loretta forgives him before he even begins speaking. Sorry to have failed and sorry to have quit, sorry for the secret of his wartime cowardice and sorry that it has resurfaced in face of Anton Chigurh, Ed Tom begins to speak about it to Loretta. The exchange is important, if lengthy, and merits full quotation. Ed Tom says to his wife,

> You hate it.
> Leavin here?
> Leavin here.
> I'm all right.
> Because of me though, aint it?
> She smiled. Well, she said, past a certain age I dont guess there is any such thing as good change.
> I guess we're in trouble then.
> We'll be all right. I think I'm going to like havin you home for dinner.
> I like bein home any time.
> I remember when Daddy retired Mama told him: I said for better or for worse but I didnt say nothin about lunch.
> Bell smiled. I'll bet she wishes he could come home now.
> I'll bet she does too. I'll bet I do, for that matter.
> I shouldnt ought to of said that.
> You didnt say nothing wrong.
> You'd say that anyways.
> That's my job.
> Bell smiled. You wouldnt tell me if I was in the wrong?
> Nope.
> What if I wanted you to?
> Tough.
> He watched the little brindled desert doves come stooping in under the dull rose light. Is that true? he said.
> Pretty much. Not altogether.
> Is that a good idea?
> Well, she said. Whatever it was I expect you'd get it figured out with no help from me. And if it was somethin we just disagreed about I reckon I'd get over it.
> Where I might not.

[106] Ibid., 285.

[107] See chapter four for further comments on confession.

She smiled and put her hand on his. Put it up, she said. It's nice just to be here.

Yes mam. It is indeed.[108]

Technically, of course, this is neither confession nor forgiveness. Ed Tom never says what he's done; Loretta simply promises that it's forgivable. The mystery of whatever secret crime he might bear is likely (though not altogether) something she promises she is willing to weather. What's crucial here is the keeping of a promise, and in particular a promise of forgiveness (textually christened by doves and a dull rose light). Indeed, there are clues in the conversation with Uncle Ellis that this promise of forgiveness carries more weight than might at first glance appear. When Ed Tom asks him about Ellis's greatest regret, the paraplegic uncle replies "I think you already know that . . . And it aint this chair." Then after a pause and a fraught comment about not quitting when things turn "out to be a little roughern what you had in mind," Ellis asks Ed Tom, "What would it take to run Loretta off?"[109] The meaning here is hidden, but understood by Ed Tom. Ellis' greatest regret is his unnarrated separation from his wife, not his handicap.

Marriage is, of course, considered a sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church (and confession is too, for that matter). Ed Tom's politics are decidedly conservative, and he has clear misgivings about the social changes he sees in late twentieth century America.[110] So my aim in pointing towards marriage, the commitment to which initiates so many plot events in this novel, is neither to laud it as a magic solution to the problem posed by Chigurh nor to characterize any essential qualities of it as either human practice or Christian sacrament. It is only to show – in this novel at least – that the marriage of Ed Tom and Loretta bears those familiar, Arendtian natal traits of promise and forgiveness. Again, marriage offers no sure security; Moss and Carla Jean are murdered for it. Ellis' wife leaves because of an undescribed "rough" spell. Bell and Loretta end up

[108] Ibid., 301-2.
[109] Ibid., 265.
[110] Ibid., 196-7.

unemployed and in debt. But the promise and forgiveness that Ed Tom's marriage at least signifies (even if a specific forgiveness remains unrealized) do take their stand against fate, and it is a stance that remains firm even as Bell heartbreakingly confesses all his fears and sadness to the dead daughter he and Loretta have lost, even as his story concludes with the cold comfort of two mysterious dreams.

Without his wife, Bell reflects, "I dont know what I would have. Well, yes I do. You wouldnt need a box to put it in neither."[111] As Lydia Cooper has insightfully noted, for Bell love "and goodness . . . occur only in relationship."[112] Ed Tom has nothing without Loretta. There is an ironic sympathy with some of Chigurh's nihilism in this tender admission. But the stand Bell takes against nothingness is through his relationship of vulnerability to Loretta (signified here by a marriage which promises forgiveness) rather than through something like's Chigurh's narcissistic will to dominion.[113] The Bells accept fate; they stand open to a future they cannot predict, an open future Chigurh refuses. Indeed, one could read Bell's choice to resign as sheriff as a repercussion of this vulnerability which is his basic commitment. He begins the novel by announcing that he always knew he might have to be "willin to die to even do this job."[114] His reasons for resigning, he says, are not due to a fear of death but to a fear of losing the sense of his own humanity. He's afraid of what a man in his position might be "willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that."[115]

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[111] Ibid., 305.
[112] Lydia Cooper, *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 130.
[113] Cooper indeed recognizes this moral stance in Bell more clearly, I think, than any other interpreter of this novel, and even sees that stance as one that opposes the position of Chigurh in a reading that closely approaches my own.
[114] McCarthy, *No Country*, 4.
[115] Ibid.

In Bell's final reflection, set in italics to conclude the novel (much like the epilogue which closes *Blood Meridian*), Ed Tom begins with odd words about a stone trough which sat behind his childhood home.

> *Where you went out of the back door of that house was a stone water trough in the weeds by the side of the house. A galvanized pipe come off the roof and the trough stayed pretty much full and I remember stopping there one time and squattin down and lookin at it and I got to thinking about it. I dont know how long it had been there. A hundred years. Two hundred. You could see the chisel marks in the stone. It was hewed out of solid rock . . . And I got to thinkin about the man that done that. That had not had a time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of. I've read a little of the history of it since and I aint sure it ever had one. But this man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years. Why was that? What was it he had faith in? It wasnt that nothing would change . . . I have to say that the only thing I can think is that there was some sort of promise in his heart. And I don't have no intentions of carvin a stone water trough. But I would like to be able to make that kind of a promise. I think that's what I would like most of all.*[116]

Set these strange words against the discourse of the judge, who – looking upon similar structures in the same country – says "whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But he who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe and so it was with these masons however primitive their works may seem to us."[117] For the judge, masonry[118] is a narcissistic triumph of will. But for Bell, it is a promise, and the difference in their interpretation lies in what we've already seen in Adorno and Arendt: sociality and plurality. The judge sees stonework as an extension of his own will, an act of dominion. For Bell, it is a promise to strangers, a service to people who wait to be born into a world entirely mysterious to the conflict-ridden mason.

As if to extend these thoughts, Bell recalls his father and then recounts two dreams he had about him when he died.

> *I don't remember the first one all that well but it was about meetin him in town somewheres and he give me some money and I think I lost it. But the second one it was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the*

[116] Ibid., 307-8.

[117] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 146.

[118] Cormac McCarthy's play *The Stonemason* takes up many of these same themes, though it will not be studied here.

> *mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothing. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had hi head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people use to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.*[119]

Cormac McCarthy is an author deeply indebted to the style and syntax of scripture and to its narrative approach too.[120] But here are two direct biblical references. The loss of the father's money recalls that prototypical story of forgiveness, the parable of the prodigal son, which narrates a "miraculous" forgiveness and defies the order of things to begin a life anew. "He was dead, but now he has come to life."[121] And the second dream, though harder to place, comes from the twenty-second chapter of Genesis, when Abraham carries fire in a horn[122] as he leads his son up into the mountains to slay him. But the promise of God results in miracle and life here, too, despite the seeming inevitability of death. Once again, these biblical dreams do not generate a happy ending. These scenes, like any human action, remain decidedly incomplete. The lost money remains unrecovered, its loss not yet forgiven; the promise has been made but not yet realized: Ed Tom and his father still move forward towards sacrifice in the mountains. Loretta still hasn't heard Ed Tom's confession. Chigurh is still out there. The only response to him is the uncertain, incomplete promise of forgiveness. But there is still a response, even as the specter of his fate continues mercilessly to haunt this landscape.

One might reasonably ask what all this has to do with the theological notion of sacrament or of eucharist. Indeed, although there are gestures towards aspects of the sacramental in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, the only direct references to the sacramental life of the church in these

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[119] McCarthy, *No Country*, 309.

[120] See chapters three and four for further considerations of how McCarthy incorporates the narrative style of scripture.

[121] Luke 15:32

[122] Genesis 22:6.

two novels are either highly critical (recall Christ routed from his golden cup and the sleeping God of the Mexicans) or highly satirical (witness again the judge's black mass of gunpowder in the mountains). If the sacramental is to retain some meaning in the bleak world McCarthy here and elsewhere conjures, it will not be in the instrumental fashion so roundly criticized by these texts. Reason is a better, if bitter, instrument, a more effective tool for suzerainty, though one administered in fatedness and violence. Rather, the eucharist and other sacraments – if they are to hold any significance here at all – must involve themselves somehow in the risk and mystery of an uncertain ethics, they must echo with promise and forgiveness, they must stand vulnerable to chance and other monstrosities while yet remaining open to a future for which they may or may not prove the possible beginning. In this sense, the sacraments – if they are to hold any earnest significance in McCarthy's works – should aim to do what Adorno says philosophy must: contemplate despair from the perspective of redemption; or what Eagleton says tragedy must: accept the worst in hopes of surpassing it; or what Luther says theology must: comprehend the things of God through suffering and the cross.[123] *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Man* certainly contemplate the worst of despair and suffering. Hope and redemption remain only murmured hints in these texts. To be sure, McCarthy never much more than hints at such things anywhere, but the clues will appear far clearer elsewhere in his corpus.

[123] For Eagleton, see note ____ above.

Action

Suttree and misogyny

Ed Tom and Loretta Bell's marriage spurs natal acts of promise, forgiveness, and promised forgiveness that resist the terrors of chance and fate. But romantic relation is by no means unproblematic in Cormac McCarthy's work. Carla Jean Moss and Llewellyn's marriage, for example, seems far less idyllic. Although each – and Carla Jean especially – seems committed to the promises they have made, they are so encumbered by the gender roles they have embraced that they are left with little agency. Llewellyn offers Carla Jean little else than dismissive, terse commands; Carla Jean has little to do but wait for rescue from her man. And although Ed Tom and Loretta do look forward with promise and forgiveness, they too have assumed roles in their relationship that may or not be sustainable in the future. Whether or not their promise and pardon will be sufficient to the demands of the days to come remains in question; the title of the book – *No Country for Old Men* – indicates some cause for us to doubt. Indeed, if race is a complicated and fraught category in *Blood Meridian*, the category of gender is fraught, confused, and conflicted nearly everywhere in Cormac McCarthy's work, and perhaps nowhere more than in *Suttree*.

Suttree is McCarthy's longest novel and arguably his most ambitious and complex. Composed over the course of twenty years and alongside the writing of his first three published novels, *Suttree* rambles episodically and autobiographically among the lowly and low lying places on the banks of the Tennessee River in Knoxville. It recounts three years in the life of Cornelius Suttree, a young man who has abandoned his wife and child and rejected his privileged upbringing in exchange for a dilapidated houseboat, some catfish lines, and a community of undesirables and outcasts. Suttree is a drunk, a vagrant, and an occasional inmate; the book recounts his and his friends' misadventures in a disjunctively episodic style and within an amorphously deceptive yet intricate structure. Suttree is also depressed, intelligent, and reflective, yielding a novel as deeply engaged in philosophical

questions of life and death as it is with picaresque developments of plot. The style, too, is unique among McCarthy's works, the diction florid and rich even by McCarthy's standards and the narrative voice moving from omniscience, limitation, and free indirect speech, to stream of consciousness. The novel's uncompromising complexity, even obscurity, has invited various interpretations among its readers, and yet it remains among the least critically reviewed of McCarthy's works. This is not to say that the novel lacks critical regard; by some, it is in fact considered to be one of McCarthy's finest. Others, however, read it as too immature, disorganized, or indebted to Faulkner to be of much worth.[1] As such, *Suttree* is often considered to be an anomaly among the novels, an impressive re-working of juvenilia or a skillfully collated "chapbook of apprentice pieces."[2] I believe this assessment insufficient. *Suttree* is a messy novel, but a masterful one, too, and it engages McCarthy's usual questions of knowledge, fate, agency, and ethics as deeply and insightfully as any other work. But the novel undoubtedly has a problem with gender that the critic must address. My contention will be that the critical response to *Suttree*'s evident misogyny resides within the novel itself, and that this response continues to cohere around the Arendtian model of action I've already introduced (and indeed, with contemporary feminist appropriations of her work), and that it points towards an ethic one might suitably label as incarnationally religious.

The character of *Suttree*'s misogyny is rooted in questions that arise all over McCarthy's works, and especially in the problem of knowledge as presented by *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*. I will begin by uncovering some of these common concerns, especially over the violence inherent in a form of knowledge that objectifies or instrumentalizes others. As argued in my first chapter, McCarthy is concerned with a self-founding, ultimate knowledge that tends by its own foundation towards power, totalitarianism, and myth. Despite all its dark suicidal meditations, *Suttree* is far more lighthearted than *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, and McCarthy thus pursues

[1] See Josyph, "Tragic Ecstasy" in *Adventures in Reading Cormac McCarthy, 77-92*.
[2] Andersen, *Mythos*,128.

his questions in *Suttree* with more humor. But the focus is no less clear or consistent in this work than in others. Whereas *Blood Meridian*'s sinister Judge employs his knowledge towards unrelenting violence, *Suttree*'s antiheroes use their technical ingenuity in hare-brained, half-successful, comically cruel money-making enterprises. The character of Gene Harrogate fulfills this role most fully, though several characters in the novel show similarly crass resourcefulness.

Gene's schemes commence early in the novel, when Suttree first visits him in his hovel under the viaduct:

> [Suttree and Gene] sat in purloined lawnchairs and watched a pigeon ringing down, standing off with backing wings and neck hooked while his pink pettysingles reached to grasp the pole and then like the Dove itself descending the bird limned in blue flame and a hot crackle of burnt feathers and the thing pitching backward to fall blackened to the ground in a plume of acrid smoke.
>
> Gene, Suttree said.
>
> Slick, ain't it?
>
> Gene.
>
> Yeah.
>
> What have you got that pole wired to?
>
> Harrogate pointed. Them lightwires yonder. What I done, I got me some copper wire and wired it and tied one end to a rock and thowed it . . .
>
> Gene.
>
> Yeah.
>
> What the hell do you reckon is going to happen when somebody touches that pole?[3]

Gene hopes to sell the pigeons for food to the poor black folk who live in and among the white reprobates of McAnally Flats, though this plan ends in failure when Gene, despite his clever electrical work, discovers he has overestimated the demand for his wares.

A similar scheme arises later when the Knoxville health department puts a bounty on bats after a local woman is diagnosed with rabies. Gene slings strychnine-laced meat into the air and massacres a whole colony of "flittermouses." The health department is simultaneously disgusted and amazed at his cleverness:

> How did you do it? Poison forty-two bats. They only feed on the wing.

[3] Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 137.

I don't know nothing about it. They was dead. Listen, I brought one down here before and nobody never said nothing. They never said they was a limit on how many you could collect on.

Mr Harrogate, the city is offering a reward for any dead bats found in the streets . . . We have not authorized a wholesale slaughter of bats.

Do I get the money or not?

You do not.

Shit.

I'm sorry.

Well.

I would like to know how you managed to poison them . . .

I done it with a flipper.

A flipper?

Yessir.

The doctor looked at the ceiling. Ah, he said. I see. What? Did you poison scraps of meat and then shoot them in the air?

Yeah. Them sons of bitches like to never quit fallin.

Very ingenuous. Damned ingenuous.

I can figure out anything.[4]

Gene can, in fact, figure anything out. The comedy of his character derives from the earnestness and ingenuity with which he pursues his schemes. But his clever, technical knowledge is crassly material: all things for Gene are commodified. Gene "extends the tentacles of his ingenuity, Robinson Crusoe-fashion, into the urban wasteland around him,"[5] and if Crusoe represents a capitalist commodification of the new world, then Gene Harrogate stands as the same for McAnally Flats. He is "the novel's most extended, if comic, critique of predatory materialism,"[6] and despite the relatively innocuous nature of his enterprises, his knowledge remains basically exploitative. Where *Blood Meridian's* Judge drowns puppies and smashes infants for pleasure, Gene creates clever means of exterminating animals for money. In either case, however, the objectifying power of technical knowledge is exploitative and destructive.

If pests are not persuasive enough, then the nature of Gene's knowledge is rendered more explicit in his sexual pursuits. Again, the comedy of Gene's sexual exploits covers but does not

[4] Ibid., 218-9.

[5] Thomas D. Young, Jr. "The Imprisonment of Sensibility," in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi Press, 1999): 111.

[6] Luce, *Reading the World*, 237.

mitigate the fact that they are, indeed, exploits. He investigates his desires technically, seeking out the knowledge necessary to satisfy them. At first this means figuring out how to break into a watermelon patch to violate ripe melons. But later Gene seeks Suttree's help in seducing actual women, a more difficult task than winning watermelons:

> What do you say to em?
> Say to them?
> Yeah. Say.
> Hell, say anything. It doesnt matter, they dont listen.
> Well you gotta say something. What do you say?
> Try the direct approach . . .
> How do you get em to take off their clothes. That's what I'd by god like to know.
> You take them off.
> Yeah? Well what does she do while you're doing that? I mean hell, does she just look out the winder or somethin? I dont understand it at all Sut. The whole thing seems uneasy to me.[7]

Gene's concern with women is entirely acquisitive. When Gene asks Suttree for advice, he "makes it clear that his goal is neither communion nor a loving relationship but sexual acquisition."[8] Women are, to Gene, material objects to be figured first and then consumed. And of course, Gene is not alone in this sentiment. Suttree is distinguished from Gene in this regard perhaps only by virtue of his better success.

The novel documents three of Cornelius Suttree's sexual relationships, as well as a possible fourth and the memories of a fifth. Suttree's estranged relation with the mother of his son will be discussed later; the tryst interrupted so Suttree can help bury Leonard's father in the river is brief, comic, and consistent with the other readings I'll offer here. This section will thus focus primarily upon Suttree's two (or three) other relationships: one with the prostitute Joyce and another with the teenager Wanda, as well a final, drug-induced and confused encounter with the "geechee witch" Mother She.

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[7] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 315-6.
[8] Luce, *Reading*, 238.

The materialistic acquisitiveness of Suttree's desire is especially evident late in the novel during Suttree's extended relationship with Joyce. Suttree and Joyce mime and undermine domestic scenes as she returns as breadwinner to him each morning in their shoddy hotel room. He eats and drinks and lives in hotels with the money she earns. Although there seem to be genuinely tender moments between them, even these are tinged by loneliness, ignorance, and indifference. After watching fireworks together over Knoxville, Joyce begins to cry but Suttree cannot reckon why, nor does he seek to ask. Skipping stones in the woods, she kneels "beside him and [nibbles] at his ear. Her soft breast against his arm. Why then this loneliness?"[9] he wonders. He notices the "light tracery of old razor scars on her inner wrists" in nearly the same moment that he impatiently recognizes that she is gaining weight.[10] Indeed, Suttree's desire for Joyce is constantly given in grotesque terms through which the text reveals Joyce's attempts to arouse Suttree's desire by covering or cleansing her own physical body.

> He watched her while she sat at the mirror and dried and set her hair, himself consumed in womby lassitude there in the sagging bed, watching her scoop great daubs of cream from a pot and slab it onto her arms and her breasts, her eyes turned to his in the mirror where he lay sipping his drink. She had smeared her face with a sizelike caulking that set up in a clown's alabaster mask, crumbling gently in the lines of her smile, a white powder sifting from the cracks. In this theatrical cosmetic she came to the bed.[11]

> She seemed always bearing her douchebag about with the hose bobbling obscenely and the bag flapping like a great bladder. Her ablutions were endless. In her bright metal haircurlers she looked like the subject of bizarre experiments upon the human brain. And she was growing fatter. She said: How'd you like to live in a whorehouse? You'd eat too.[12]

Ironically, Suttree's desire for Joyce's commodified body depends upon the rejection of that body with sizing caulk and endless ablutions. And Suttree's occasional disgust at Joyce's body is counterpoised with his comfort among the material goods that the commodification of her body has made available to him. When he complains about her weight, for example, Joyce buys Suttree a

[9] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 408.
[10] Ibid., 404.
[11] Ibid., 401.
[12] Ibid., 404.

Jaguar. Later, during a fight, Joyce destroys the car, forcing the gearstick into reverse while Suttree is driving and then kicking out the windshield. Suttree steers into the curb as she gets out screaming. Suttree says to her, "You crazy bitch . . . You dizzy cunt."[13] And Joyce replies "almost soberly. It's just a car . . . It can be fixed."[14] Joyce's reply to Suttree's insults is, of course, right. It is just a car. But the car is what Suttree values most in Joyce, and Joyce, in destroying the car, condemns that desire.

Wanda is the daughter of the character Reese, whose family has washed down the river on a shantyboat, a "patchwork shack composed of old slats and tarpaper and tin snuff signs all mounted in wild haphazard upon a derelict barge."[15] After they tie up near Suttree's houseboat, Suttree offers them a catfish as a gesture of hospitality and is welcomed for a meal a few days later on the barge. Reese begins describing his mussel-brailing enterprise upriver and solicits Suttree's help – for a share of the profits – in the work. The work is difficult and the shells only command forty dollars a ton, but Reese insists that there's real wealth to be made from the freshwater pearls the mussels sometimes hide, and so Reese and Suttree begin to negotiate his potential portion. As they haggle and are served by the women, "a soft young breast crosses [Suttree's] nape."[16] This breast belongs to Reese's eldest daughter Wanda, and Reese and Suttree thereafter come to an agreement. It's no accident that the sexual enticement of Wanda's breast punctuates their negotiation. There is a materialism to Suttree's desire here as with Joyce; Wanda is given as a potential profit for his work. In fact, the conversation between Gene and Suttree cited above is in response to Gene watching Wanda across the river, observing to Suttree, "Boy, she's got a big old set of ninnies on her," then complaining that he doesn't know how to speak to women. Wanda is thus an object of acquisitive desire from the outset, and for Suttree she is always considered a benefit of his material enterprise

[13] Ibid., 409-10.
[14] Ibid., 410.
[15] Ibid., 307.
[16] Ibid., 312.

with Reese. Unsurprisingly, a sexual relationship develops between Suttree and Wanda almost immediately upon his arrival upriver.

Many critics have read the relationship between Suttree and Wanda with sympathy, mostly because during their brief relationship on the river, Suttree's typically suicidal melancholy (about which more will be shortly written) is set aside and he begins to appear more at home in the world. As Dianne Luce has noted, when Suttree first arrives upriver with Reese, he is glad when he looks to an overcast night sky because the stars are not able to "plague him with their mysteries of space and time."[17] But after he camps near the Reese family and Wanda commences her furtive nighttime visits to him, his opinion of the stars and their mysteries changes. One night in his camp after Wanda has left him and he is sexually satisfied, Suttree gazes at the night sky and watches the "sole star to the north pale and constant, the old wanderer's beacon burning like a molten spike that tethered fast the Small Bear to the turning firmament . . . He [is] struck by the fidelity of this earth he inhabit[s] and he [bears] it sudden love."[18] Clearly, Suttree's mood has improved. This "nascent love for Wanda . . . seems to reconcile him to the world itself and to its galactic whirling" casting "a romantic fog over Suttree."[19] But it's important to note that however much Suttree has been reconciled to the stars and the galaxies, his relationship with Wanda remains disturbingly exploitative. Suttree may feel better about his existential position with respect to the cosmos, but surely the reader should regard this feeling with some suspicion, given the nature of his romance with Wanda. Even if we set aside that his desire intersects with his financial negotiations and is only circumstantially possible because of his participation in the mussel-brailing scheme, Suttree's desire for the girl is rendered in disquietingly pedophiliac language. Suttree enjoys Wanda's "childlike shamelessness, her little

[17] Ibid., 332.
[18] Ibid., 354.
[19] Luce, *Reading*, 242. It should be noted that Luce does not regard this romantic fog sympathetically, although in general critics read this encounter with Wanda positively.

hands,"[20] how she "holds her arms aloft like a child for him to raise up over them the nightshirt,"[21] and that when he kisses her she has a "child's breath, an odor of raw milk."[22]

As the relationship develops further it becomes clear that Suttree's longing for Wanda is just as acquisitive and material as Gene's pathetic, lascivious leering at her "ninnies." One night over dinner, Reese volunteers to Suttree over the fire light, "I believe that gal's a better cook than her mother . . . What do you think?"[23] Alarmed, Suttree stops "chewing and look[s] sideways at Reese," then spits "an insoluble wad of gristle at the dark."[24] Reese has evidently noticed something between his child and Suttree, and is parading her (as perhaps he has been all along) with intimations of marriage. That night Suttree tells Wanda not to come back again and their relationship more or less ends. For several nights she stays away, and even when she returns once more it is under the same pedophiliac fog of desire which occludes her reality from him. When Wanda comes that final time, Suttree holds "his ear to the womb of this child [and hears] the hiss of meteorites through the blind stellar depths."[25] To borrow a phrase, Suttree's head is in the clouds. In a paradoxical twist of desire, Suttree's longing for Wanda's unavailably juvenile body disregards the very materiality of that body in order to consummate his desire. Suttree cannot attend to her sexually or bodily, and so he does so cosmically. He can only possess the body of this child if he pretends she is something other than a child, if he pretends to desire her spiritual, stellar depths, rather than the flesh and blood sexuality of her teenage womb. As forthcoming sections of this chapter will show, I take *Suttree* as a whole to be a critique of the spiritual rejection or replacement of material reality. While that argument will develop a few pages hence, Suttree's relationship with Wanda fits this pattern. To consummate his desire for this child, Suttree must transform her into the cosmos. So he does. If the corrective to

[20] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 354.
[21] Ibid., 353.
[22] Ibid., 352.
[23] Ibid., 354.
[24] Ibid., 354.
[25] Ibid., 358.

Joyce's body is cosmetic, for Wanda it is cosmic, but in each case, Suttree must obscure the bodily object of his desire in order to commodify and consummate it.

It is also notable that Suttree abandons the relationship as soon as he begins to incur some responsibility towards the child, something of a promise for the future. I want to be careful here: Suttree has good reason to cease exploiting the girl and Reese's implied offer of marriage is made with the same material, acquisitive gender assumptions I mean to expose. He advertizes his daughter to Suttree as a laborer, as a useful worker around the house. But Suttree's reasoning is clear when he tells Wanda why they must stop: "We'll get caught . . . You'll get pregnant."[26] It is the potentially and literally embodied natality of their acts that Suttree resists. And when Wanda dies terribly in a rockslide only pages later, Suttree returns to his skiff almost immediately and lets the current carry him back downriver to Knoxville, "his hands in his lap with the dark blood crusted on his upturned palms" and "with no plans for going back the way he'd come nor telling any soul at all what he had seen."[27] Suttree's grief is earnest and this tragedy real. But his decision not to return to the scene of Wanda's death and never to speak of her again perpetuates a denial of her (now broken) body and a refusal of the future that was basic to Suttree's desire for Wanda in the first place.[28]

Suttree's final sexual encounter in the novel seems not to be a real one, but it most explicitly troubles Suttree's relationship to material bodies, and to the female body in particular. Mother She is a witch in McAnally Flats who hints throughout the novel that she wants to see Suttree and help him deal with his enemies.[29] Her name signifies the prototypicality of her gender. After Suttree's friend the ragman dies, Suttree visits Mother She and she makes him drink a potion that nauseates him. He lies in her cot, tries to rise after a few moments, then settles back into the bed and "he [is]

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[26] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 355.
[27] Ibid., 363.
[28] The reasons for this will become more clear in my next chapter, where I take up questions of storytelling more directly.
[29] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 232.

somewhere else."[30] Mother She is replaced in his hallucination by an "old hag's sere and shrunken face"[31] who approaches the bed and rapes him.

> Dust fell from her, her eyes rolled wetly in the red glow from the fireplace. A dried black and hairless figure rose from her fallen rags, the black and shriveled leather teats like empty purses hanging, the thin and razorous plings of the ribs wherein hung a heart yet darker, parchment cloven to the bones, spindleshanked and bulbed of joint. Black faltress, portress of hellgate. None so ready as she. Her long flat nipples swung above him. Black and crepey skin of her neck, the plaguey mouth upon him . . . Dead reek of aged female flesh, a stale aridity. Dry wattled nether lips hung from out the side of her torn stained drawers. Her thighs spread with a sound of rending ligaments, dry bones sagging in their sockets. Her shriveled cunt puckered open like a mouth gawping. He flailed bonelessly in the grip of a ghast black succubus, he screamed a dry and soundless scream.[32]

Although some critics believe Mother She herself to be this succubus, the text seems deliberately to indicate that Suttree has descended deeply into hallucination by the time he experiences this rape. Whether or not there is a sexual encounter between Suttree and Mother She in the midst of his hallucinatory haze is another question, of course, though Mother She's sternly maternal demeanor prior to his descent seems to make this unlikely. In any case, the grotesque body of this aged female hallucination, this ghast black succubus, remains and invites interpretation. My own is that this succubus personifies the death Suttree so deeply fears and that the creature aims to consume Suttree through her womb in a sort of reverse birth towards death. Suttree's paralyzing existential anxiety will be the topic of the forthcoming portion of this chapter, but what's relevant now is how these fears are personified in grotesque and offensive depictions of the black female body. Indeed, the offensive language used here recurs throughout the novel in a way that echoes the racially offensive language found elsewhere in McCarthy's novels. These books demand further critical study with respect to both race and gender. For the purposes of this project, however, I want only to argue that Suttree's existential anxiety around death is one that is married to a disgust aimed at the mortality

[30] Ibid., 426.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 426-7.

and materiality of the human body, a disgust which in this book manifests most obviously as a rejection of the bodies of women but which also, I think, points suicidally towards Suttree himself.

Suttree and Identity

Late in the novel, as Suttree is leaving the ruins of McAnally Flats after nearly all of his friends have died or been incarcerated, he encounters Trippin Through the Dew, an outlandish, black drag queen. As Suttree says goodbye, "all of [Trippin Through the Dew's] carnival bravado, the drag-queen jive, the lurid persona fall away."[33] Trippin Through the Dew worries over Suttree and offers money for his journey, asks for a postcard, and then seizes Suttree's hand and holds it for several moments, "his face pinched."[34] Trippin Through the Dew then wishes his friend best of luck with a little salute, and Suttree kindly responds, "Thanks, John. You too."[35] Implied in this encounter is that Suttree identifies his old friend in some essential way, in some manner that sets aside the clothing, behavior, and demeanor of Trippin Through the Dew and discerns the one and only true "John" underneath. This implication, though, is a sign of Suttree's continued gender trouble, and an extension of his material misogyny. To show how, I must first outline the nature of Suttree's suicidal crisis of identity. I will then turn towards how feminist theory and the novel each resolve this identity crisis with a rejection of essential identity and by locating of the self in embodied actions. That is, despite his lingering confusion in the encounter with Trippin Through the Dew, what Suttree finds in this novel is what feminism has long argued in theory: that the self is exposed (rather than obscured) by our bodies, that the self is realized in embodied actions, and that Suttree's suicidal impulse and his female loathing in fact stem from the same rejection of material reality.

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[33] Bell, *Achievement*, 113.
[34] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 468.
[35] Ibid.

Identity and Suicide

Suttree's trouble with women has attracted surprisingly little critical interest in the scholarship around the novel. But several critics have rightly interpreted *Suttree* as an extended meditation on death, and more particularly upon the siren call of suicide. My contention is that this obsession with death is related in a complicated way to Suttree's troubling relationships with women and their bodies. This relationship will require much of the remainder of this chapter to articulate, but one critical aspect of this relationship is that Suttree's obsession with suicide is related in important ways to his conflicted and elusive sense of self-identity.

Suttree opens with a suicide. The reader wakes with Suttree one morning in McAnally Flats; as he goes to check his lines for fish, he sees a rescue boat "taking aboard a dead man. He was very stiff and he looked like a window-dummy save for his face. The face seemed soft and bloated and wore a grappling hook in the side of it and a crazed grin. The raised him so, gambreled up by the bones of his cheek. A pale incruent wound."[36] Suttree watches as they pull the corpse aboard and wrench the hook from its face. A friend tells Suttree that the man jumped off the bridge into the Tennessee River the previous night. Suttree takes his catch to his curmudgeonly old friend, the ragman. As previously stated, the eventual death of the ragman occasions Suttree's visit to Mother She, and Suttree's conversations with the ragman will factor into my reading of the religious in this work. Although marginal to *Suttree*'s plot, the ragman is introduced here in a way that signifies his thematic importance in the novel. Suttree enters the ragman's hovel and lays down a catfish as a gift. The old man reciprocates with a mealy, steamed potato, then recollects Suttree as a child. Years ago the ragman begged from door to door and performed ventriloquism at Suttree's family home. Then they strike up a short conversation. Suttree asks the ragman,

> You didnt see that man jump, did you? . . .

[36] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 9.

He shook his head. An old ragpicker, his thin chops wobbling. I seen em draggin, he said. Did they find him?

Yes.

What did he jump for?

I dont guess he said.

I wouldnt do it. Would you?

I hope not. Did you go over in town this morning?

No, I never went. I been too poorly to go.

What's the matter?

Lord I dont know. They say death comes like a thief in the night, where is he? I'll hug his neck.

Well, dont jump off the bridge.

I wouldnt do it for nothing.[37]

Suttree comes with a fish for a sick old man. The ragman paradoxically wishes for death, hoping to hug death's neck when he comes, but will not act to end his own life. Suttree, on the other hand, is more ambivalent. "I hope not," is the best he can say about his own suicidal intention.

His ambivalence becomes even more clear when this first section of the novel concludes; Suttree ascends the bridge from which the suicide jumped and he looks down at the river below him.

> He folded his arms on the rail. Out there a jumbled shackstrewn waste dimly lit. Kindlingwood cottages, gardens of rue. A patchwork of roofs canted under the pale blue cones of lamplight where moths aspire in giddy coils. Little plots of corn, warped purlieus of tillage in the dead spaces shaped by constriction and want like the lives of the dark and bitter husbandsmen who have this sparse harvest for their own out of all the wide earth's keeping.
>
> Small spills of rain had started, cold on his arm. Down stream recurving shore currents chased in deckle light wave on wave like silver spawn. To fall through dark to darkness. Struggle in those opaque and fecal deeps, which way is up. Till the lungs suck brown sewage and funny lights go down the final corridors of the brain, small watchmen to see that all is quiet for the advent of eternal night.[38]

The source of Suttree's suicidal impulse is not clear. We learn as the novel progresses that he has abandoned his family, at least partially due to a disagreement with his father, but Suttree is estranged from his own son and her mother as well. My aim is not to diagnose this character, however, only to observe his obsessions, and this opening section clearly shows that Suttree feels beckoned by death

[37] Ibid., 12.

[38] Ibid., 29.

and troubled by thoughts of suicide. Indeed, Georg Guillemin has helpfully noted that the mysterious hunter and hounds that both open and close this novel likely recall Dante's fifth circle of hell and the forest of suicides, where black hounds hunt the victims of this sin.[39]

The cause of Suttree's suicidal ideation remain unclear, in many ways, throughout the novel, and although his obsession with suicide can be usefully read as a general preoccupation with death, ultimately Suttree's concern is primarily with his own death. As Frank Shelton, William Prather, and to a certain degree Vereen Bell, have shown in their existentialist treatments of *Suttree*, the question Cornelius Suttree poses to himself is the one Camus likewise raises in "The Myth of Sisyphus"[40]: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."[41] For example, when Suttree travels to his a small town for the burial of his son, he wanders through the cemetery prior to the committal and considers how "surely are the dead beyond death. Death is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of bitter memory. But the dead do not remember and nothingness is not a curse. Far from it."[42] In other words, if death represents such absolute nothingness in the wake of a fallen metaphysics, then it is a preoccupation of the living: the dead are nothing and so cannot know death. As such, Suttree muses, death is in fact an escape from death, it is that final nothingness that can eradicate "what the living carry with them." As such, it is no curse: "Far from it."

Still, though nothing definitive can be said of Suttree's suicidal impulse, his judgment about whether or not life is worth living is closely tied to a consistently prevalent concern and confusion in the novel over identity, since such a judgment must finally be rendered on his own life in particular,

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[39] Georg Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 5.
[40] Frank Shelton, "Suttree and Suicide" in *Southern Quarterly* 29.1, William Prather, "Absurd Reason in an Existential World" in *Sacred Violence*, ed. Hall and Wallach, and Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*.
[41] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 3.
[42] McCarthy, *Suttree* ,153.

and not life in general. As Douglas Canfield writes in his psychoanalytic/Bakhtinian study of *Suttree*, "Suttree's identity – and thus his integrity – are threatened throughout the novel by two powerful forces: uncanny figures of a Devouring Mother and an identical twin."[43] My reading of Mother She diverges a bit from Canfield's, but the issue of the twin is clear and consistent throughout the novel. Early on in the novel, during the suicidally focused first section, the narrator attends to a birthmark on Suttree's temple and enters Suttree's mind through that mark.

> Suttree turned and lay staring at the ceiling, touching a like mark on his own left temple gently with his fingertips. The ordinary of the second son. Mirror image. Gauche carbon. He lies in Woodlawn, whatever be left of the child with whom you shared your mother's belly. Born dead and witless both or a terratoma grisly in form. No, for we were like to the last hair. I followed him into the world, me. A breech birth. Hind end fore in common with whales and bats, life forms meant for other mediums than the earth and having no affinity for it. And used to pray for his soul days past. Believing this ghastly circus reconvened elsewhere for all time. He in the limbo of the Christless righteous, I in a terrestrial hell.[44]

The style is opaque, but Suttree recalls here his stillborn brother, "like to the last hair," only bereft of life. His twin has preceded him in both birth and death, and Suttree knows that as he followed his twin into life, he will follow him again into death, however much delayed. The first person emphasis – "I followed him into the world, me" – hints at his troubled sense of identity, and his discomfort within both the world as given and the metaphysical comforts offered by tradition are both clear. The twin unsettles him, because he cannot reconcile this dead doppelganger to his own uniqueness. These twin troubles multiply as the novel progresses. We are told that Suttree's "subtle obsession with uniqueness trouble[s] all his dreams";[45] that while walking towards a glass door on Gay Street he sees "come up from life's other side like an autoscopic hallucination, Suttree and Antisuttree, hand reaching to the hand."[46] While Suttree is mussel brailing with Reese at a camp upriver, a pair of

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[43] Douglas Canfield, "The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius: Abjection, Identity, and the Carnivalesque in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*" in *Contemporary Literature* 44.4 (Winter 2003): 676.
[44] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 14.
[45] Ibid., 113.
[46] Ibid., 28.

twins named Fernon and Vernon arrive one day, two hunters surrounded by the bay of calling hounds, echoing the allusion to the wood of suicides given in the novel's prologue and ending. Like ragged sideshow attractions, Fernon and Vernon demonstrate their eerie unity when Reese whispers a word into Vernon's ear and several yards across the fire Fernon listens then looks directly at Suttree and correctly announces: "*Brother.*"[47] As the "hunter [spins] about and face[s] his unarmed image across the fire, his sinister isomer in bone and flesh,"[48] Suttree flees. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Suttree visits Mother She early in the novel with his friend Ab Jones, who is hoping to put a hex on an abusive policeman named Tarzan Quinn. But when Mother She attempts to tell Jones' fortune, the bird bones, river stones, and dried snake hearts she has scattered tell something of Suttree instead. Suttree does not listen, and does "not go back."[49]

Instead he undertakes what can only be described as a spirit quest in the mountains, pulling up his fishing lines in late fall and wandering alone into the forest without supplies. As he is beaten by the elements and wasted by hunger, he begins to hallucinate and can "scarce tell where his being ended or the world began nor did he care."[50] Having passed through a children's cemetery, Suttree begins

> to feel that another [goes] before him and each glade he enter[s] seem[s] just quit by a figure who'd been sitting there and risen and gone on. Some doublegoer, some othersuttree elude[s] him in these woods and he fear[s] that should that figure fail to rise and steal away and were he therefore to come to himself in this obscure wood he'd be neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling with his ghostly clone from sun to sun across a hostile hemisphere forever."[51]

This one who goes before him must be his twin, the one summoned by the passage through this cemetery, who has preceded him in birth and who precedes him also in death. Suttree wanders in these galleried woods – perhaps once more the wood of the suicides? – chasing a doppelganger he

[47] Ibid., 361.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 282.
[50] Ibid., 286.
[51] Ibid., 287.

hopes never to meet. The strong sense is that this spirit quest will lead to some self-discovery (though any intention apart from eluding Mother She remains unclear), but this discovery remains one Suttree is terrified to make. Later, in another wood, this time an apple orchard, Suttree cries out to the night and rain and commands the lightning to "char these bones to coal. If you can, if you can."[52] Then he slumps against a tree and asks the darkness, "Am I a monster, are there monsters in me?"[53] Tellingly, in his hallucinated haze with Mother She, after the envisioned rape, Suttree pictures a little girl taking a dead baby from a coffin and playing with it like a doll, calling to "consciousness the key event of his mental life . . . the stillbirth of this twin brother."[54]

It is not entirely clear how and why the dead twin so troubles Suttree. That his identical twin is dead seems somehow to press death upon him; these two are so alike that the death which has claimed his brother now encroaches upon him as well. He cannot reconcile his own living uniqueness while an identically embodied copy lies buried in Woodlawn Cemetery. Dying lends uniqueness to identity: no other can die for me, my death is my own uniquely. But Suttree's identical other has already experienced Suttree's death, he has already laid claim to that uniqueness. Suttree hopes to posit a self that can stand against the nothingness he knows awaits him in death, but the memory of the twin, that they were bodily bound in the womb, fetters him to death in a manner he cannot bear. This may be as much as one can say about Suttree's identity crisis; the text offers little else to interpret.[55] But it's all one needs to say, perhaps. For Suttree, his fear of death, the decay and corruption of the flesh, and his morbidly divided identity all tangle towards the suicidal impulses he shows.

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[52] Ibid., 366.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Thomas Young, "The Imprisonment of Sensibility: *Suttree*" (*Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Edwin Arnold and Dianne Luce, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 101.

[55] That is, apart from the clearly ambiguous racial and gender identity issues which loom so large in these novels.

What's more, the literary style and narrative technique McCarthy embraces in *Suttree* elaborates this frustrated sense of identity. In *Suttree,* it's hard to discern any reliable means of knowing a person – even oneself – at all. In the end, all relations reduce to distantly observed moments and static reifications. Notably, all the characters of McAnally Flats use false names or nicknames. The history of each of these characters is obscured from both the reader and from fellow characters in the novel. As Suttree flips through the paper at a lunch counter one day, he sees his friend "Hoghead's picture. He was dead. Hoghead was dead in the paper . . . His name was James Henry."[56] Like Hoghead, each character in the novel hides a story behind his name but McCarthy makes no attempt to excavate and explain those multiple narratives. Indeed, he seems at times willfully to confuse them, refusing in almost every instance to reconcile persons with their multiple appellations, so we cannot tell if "James" refers to Hoghead or J-Bone or perhaps an unknown other. Suttree himself is known by at least four names: Suttree, Cornelius, Youngblood, and most frequently the perfectly anonymous nickname Buddy.

Suttree's own history is perhaps the most obscure and mysterious of all. The great dramatic moments and motivations of the novel are Suttree's dual estrangements from his wife and child and from his parents. Although McCarthy gestures toward these circumstances, he gives no cause or background to them. They haunt the novel like ghosts, always present but rarely visible, never narrated. Whereas in another novel the emotional significance of such conflicts might function as engines to drive the plot, here they are mere facts, mentioned only in passing and without any extensive exposition by the narrator. Even in the most emotional moments of the novel, McCarthy steps back from his scenes and renders his characters as narratively obscure, agents whose actions

[56] Ibid., 403.

remain mysteriously unexplained, identities apparently fraught with background, to borrow a phrase from Erich Auerbach.[57]

At the funeral of Suttree's son, for example, McCarthy never explains why or how the child has died and offers only terse descriptions of Suttree's actions.

> Suttree heard no word of what [the preacher] said until his own name was spoken. Then everything became quite clear. He turned and laid his head against the tree, choked with a sorrow he had never known . . . The mother cried out and sank to the ground and was lifted up and helped away wailing. Stabat Mater Dolorosa. Remember her hair in the morning before it was pinned, black, rampant, savage with loveliness. As if she slept in perpetual storm. Suttree went to his knees in the grass, his hands cupped over his ears.[58]

The problem of identity rises here again: it is his name (or perhaps the name of a possible namesake son?) that breaks Suttree and opens his ears to clarity. Notably, despite the omniscience of our narrator – indeed, when McCarthy shifts to the imperative mood he achieves a technique almost of free indirect speech, of identity with his character's memory – nonetheless here we are offered only declarative, verbal descriptions of Suttree's acts: he heard, he choked, he remembered, he went to his knees. To be sure, the florid memory of the boy's mother is a rich interior insight. McCarthy's style does not deny interiority, but neither does it dwell there. The narrator resists the interior while directing our attention towards actions, and these acts somehow say enough. There isn't an expansive profile of our protagonist's inner thoughts or emotions and yet the scene is emotionally rich. The text turns away from a fleeting thought towards Suttree's collapse in the grass. We only glimpse a passed moment without any benefit of context. The only sign of that troubled past is Suttree's hands over his ears as he falls. What's more, this internal moment is almost entirely isolated in the novel, and made more mysterious in its uniqueness. Its richness lies in its mystery. We may only imagine Suttree's despair, grief, perhaps his guilt (though we can't be sure) through his described actions, this fleeting memory; McCarthy will not convey them to us in any more direct

[57] See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
[58] Ibid., 153.

way. Suttree's feelings remain unaccounted, unsayable, unknown, and yet revealed. All we observe are his movements and memory but they tell enough of the story.

In another scene, Suttree's estranged mother visits the workhouse where he is imprisoned.

> He made his way along the edge of the table. She had her purse in her lap and she was looking down. She was still wearing her hat from church. He sat down on the bench across the table from her and she looked up at him. She looked old, he could not remember her looking so. Her slack and pleated throat, the flesh beneath her jaws. Her eyes paler.
>
> Hello Mother, he said.
>
> Her lower chin began to dimple and quiver. Buddy, she said. Buddy . . . .
>
> But the son she addressed was hardly there at all. Numbly he watched himself fold his hands on the table. He heard his voice, remote, adrift. Please don't start crying, he said.
>
> See the hand that nursed the serpent . . . Here is the anguish of mortality. See the mother sorrowing.
>
> Suttree began to cry nor could he stop.[59]

Note how the distance of the reader from Suttree follows Suttree's distance from his own weeping mother. The passage begins from Suttree's point of view, then steps back to a general third person observation of "the son," then even further back again into the imperative mood which appears to locate Suttree himself as an observer of this scene. Again, the status of the interior is here ambivalent: is it the narrator or this character who solicits the reader to "see the hand that nursed the serpent"? This ambivalence, I think, is precisely the point. McCarthy does not deny interiority, but he does render its position unclear, consistently shifting perspective and turning the reader's attention outwards. It bears emphasis once again: the scene here described and the previous passage comprise nearly every reference to the emotional heart of this novel – Suttree's estrangement from his family – in the book's nearly 500 pages. McCarthy deliberately obscures this aspect of his protagonist's history, and what he does reveal he offers without any of the benefit of a narrator's omniscience. We come to know Suttree mainly as we might any other person: through outward actions, with intentions and emotions realized primarily in acts.

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[59] Ibid., 61.

Several critics have read this technique for characterization as a potential weakness in McCarthy's writing, or rather, as a means of reifying the humans in McAnally Flats in much the manner the industrial waste and police force around them has objectified them. In the novel, such critics say, persons are rendered always as objects. Despite McCarthy's "recentering of the marginal [figures of McAnally Flats, he] does not achieve a rehumanization of his fugitives, nor does this rehumanization seem to be his ultimate goal."[60] This is not to say that these characters are not complex, only that the complexity of their lives is never explicitly described. McCarthy "contextualizes the human subject first and foremost in this world of things, treating even living individuals as archeological finds, as odd birds whose petrific bones are immune even to the chisel, whose stories are nothing more than tracks in mud even as they speak."[61] But I believe these critics have neglected a deeper and more crucial concern in the development of *Suttree*'s characters and in the style of their narration. The result of McCarthy's attention to acts and his near indifference in flatly recounting their feelings is that the characters in this novel are always richly, if mysteriously, rendered. In a way that mimics the biblical writings as Erich Auerbach reads them, we see here in great detail exactly what these characters do, if not explicitly what they think or feel, and these doings serve as complex but sufficient signs for the thought and felt mysteries of these figures. The result is not a list of archeological finds, but a rich and complex collation of characters, always fraught with mystery and history and nonetheless quite revealing. Indeed, if Suttree is bound bodily to death by his twin and if his identity remains either doubled or divided beyond himself, then this technique points toward a resolution of Suttree's crisis, a resolution which might be better illustrated following a preface in feminist theory.

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[60] D. S. Butterworth, "Pearls as Swine: Recentering the Marginal in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*", *Sacred Violence*, ed. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995), 95.
[61] Ibid., 96.

Feminist accounts of identity

The notions of promise and forgiveness as remedies to fate and chance are in fact generated as part of a larger discourse that Hannah Arendt undertakes in *The Human Condition*. For Arendt, what constitutes the human as human is the capacity to act – and in particular, to act with unpredictable novelty in human affairs, to initiate new trajectories of action and reaction in the social and plural reality of human interests. This is how she comes to regard the critical importance of promise and forgiveness in particular as hedges against the unpredictability of chance and the determinations of fate. But action is more than a hedge against such insecurities; for Arendt, action establishes the human itself, and so notions of human identity (as feminist thinkers in Arendt's wake will illustrate and elaborate) must be grounded upon a proper understanding of the manner by which human acting constitutes human being.

Cornelius Suttree is troubled by identity and uniqueness. Although it's not altogether clear why estrangement and the memory of this twin so trouble him, Valerie Cooper's interpretation is perhaps most persuasive: his "rejection of his family for their moral decadence and his obsession with his dead twin are just manifestations of a pride that has resulted in his being blind about the importance of human community."[62] Suttree sees his uniqueness in isolation and finds this uniqueness compromised by his dead brother. He thus spends much of the novel relentlessly plumbing his own isolation in a vain attempt to locate himself. Arendt (and others influenced by her) claim that this as exactly the wrong strategy to adopt towards the realization of identity.

Arendt takes the uniqueness of each human as the starting point for her reflections on action and plurality. Although some readers of *Suttree* see in the novel a complete reification of the human, a reading of Arendt will suggest that a more subtle reading of McCarthy's characterization may be available. The things of the world, Arendt writes, of course exhibit variations and differences, but

[62] Cooper, *No More Heroes*, 65.

this does not necessarily distinguish them. Humans in a world of things are able singularly to "express [their] distinction and distinguish [themelves], only [they] can communicate [themselves]."[63] And "speech and action reveal this unique distinction."[64] That is, what's important about the distinctive uniqueness of the human is that it may be communicated, revealed, in word and deed to other humans.

> With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as in the Greek work *archein*, "to begin," "to lead," and eventually "to rule," indicates), to set something in motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*).[65]

Word and deed initiate a kind of birth, beyond the "naked fact" of our appearance. This is not to disparage the naked fact of physical appearance. The words and deeds of the human are always necessarily embodied. It is only to distinguish identity as that which is revealed by the particular words and actions of the bodies which appear in plurality.

Unlike things, human bodies communicate themselves as distinct identities in what they say and do, and as such give rise to new possibilities, they give birth to new realities. As I argued in chapter two, fate may at times present "overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty,"[66] and so a new act and a distinctive new birth may remain unlikely. But improbability is not the same as dead impossibility. The "fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to

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[63] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 176.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 176-7.
[66] Ibid., 178.

perform what is infinitely improbable."[67] The birth of this new thing, this human identity, is realized by its communication in word and deed, in speech and action.

> In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. The disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does.[68]

Speech and action – or better, acts in general, including the act of speaking – discloses identity in a basic way. Indeed, Arendt wants to take specific exception to materialistic or reified conceptions of the human for their failure to "overlook the inevitability with which men disclose themselves as subjects, as distinct and unique persons."[69]

Crucially, because these identities are disclosed to others through action, they depend upon human community. A person who speaks or acts in isolation discloses nothing; identity depends upon the sociality and plurality Arendt elsewhere insists upon. For Arendt, to "be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act. Action and speech need the surrounding presence of others . . . action and speech are surrounded by and in constant contact with the web of the acts and words of other men."[70] This plurality is critical to the notion of natality, because the novel actions of distinct humans "act in a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes."[71] Since the human actor "always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer . . . Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries."[72] It's no surprise, then,

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., 179
[69] Ibid., 183.
[70] Ibid., 188.
[71] Ibid., 190.
[72] Ibid.

that Arendt's argument eventuates in ethical acts of promise and forgiveness. Given the fundamental sociality of identity on Arendt's account, ethical questions must of necessity be incurred through the disclosure of human agents and human identity.

It is notable, therefore, that Suttree's deepest crises of identity occur in isolation. One might read his estrangement from his family as a basic form of this willful isolation, and his wandering in the lonely mountains certainly fits this pattern also. Regarded in light of Arendt, Suttree seems to have things backwards. Suttree feels isolated in his uniqueness, and so he plumbs this isolation in an attempt to search deeper within himself for an essential identity. But Arendt argues that the identifiable uniqueness of humans is a result of their sociality and plurality, against their isolation. It is in acting among humans and initiating these chain reactions and webs of relationships that persons communicate and realize their unique identities. And of course, despite his best and occasional efforts, Suttree is not finally isolated. On the contrary, he participates in a robust community of outcasts, and his "constant contact with the web of the acts and words" of all the others derelicts of McAnally sets the foundation for the eventual assertion of his identity. But Arendt's arguments do not press quite far enough here; others will carry her line of thought deeper, articulated in the ethical implications of intersubjectivity. This will help me to establish the moral and social foundation for Suttree's ultimately enacted, embodied identity.

In her 1997 book *Relating Narratives*, Adriana Cavarero relies on Hannah Arendt to provide an expanded account of human action in which to be human is to be exposed. Quoting Arendt's *Life of the Mind*, Cavarero writes provocatively that "Being and appearing coincide . . . [that] appearing is indeed not the superficial phenomenon of a more intimate and true essence. Appearing is the whole of being."[73] Cavarero elaborates by writing that "who each one is, is revealed to others when he or she acts in their presence in an interactive theater where each is, at the same time, actor and

[73] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.

spectator."[74] The echoes of Arendt are clear, but Cavarero stresses the ontological. If being and appearing coincide in that interactive theater, then the only way to answer the question, "who are you?" is to consider what you have done. One's being, one's identity, is shown, exposed to others through one's actions. Cavarero insists that there is no ghost in the machine of identity, no essential self waiting to be expressed by one's actions out into the world and among others. Indeed, that idiom of 'personal expression' fails for Cavarero precisely because on her account humans do not "express (that is, press out) something internal, the deep and intimate" and unchanging "identity of the self."[75] Instead, our identities are constantly in process, constantly being formed and developed in and through our interactions with others. Who we are is shown, exhibited, through our acts, through what we do. "No one," Cavarero therefore maintains, "can know, master, or decide upon identity" prior to the exhibited act. "Each one of us is only capable of exhibiting [our identity],"[76] among a community of others who can interpret those action and identify us at last. That is, if being and appearing do in fact coincide, and if we cannot fully appear to ourselves, then our relation to others will become constitutive of our identity in a fundamental way. The self, on Cavarero's account, is thus basically relational and revealed in action. As Cavarero writes most provocatively,

> The self . . . has a totally external and relational reality. Both the exhibitive, acting self and the narratable self are utterly given over to others. In this total giving-over, there is therefore no identity that reserves for itself protected spaces or a private room of impenetrable refuge for self-contemplation. *There is no interiority that can imagine itself to be . . . inexpressible.*[77]

In other words, to be human is to be exposed to others. There is no internal identity hiding within us. The answer to Suttree's shouted question for the heavens, "Are there monsters in me?" is no. He might still be a monster, but they don't hide within him at least. Identity is exhibited, revealed,

[74] Ibid., 22.
[75] Ibid., 23.
[76] Ibid., 24.
[77] Ibid., 63.

enacted, and thus (in a curious way) resides outside of ourselves, in the web of relations our actions engage and in the chains of reaction our actions initiate.

This language of human being as an act of exposure, as the handing over of ourselves to others, is made further explicit in Judith Butler's 2005 book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Butler contends that, not only are we constituted by the narrations of others, but the narrations we attempt of ourselves are also fundamentally indebted to norms and narratives we inherit and cannot escape. Butler worries that the picture Cavarero paints is too simple, that on her account human identity arises as a simple self-other dyad realized through the exchange between persons. In fact, Butler contends, the reality of our exposure is infinitely more complex and more profoundly implicated by otherness. "We are not mere dyads on our own," Butler writes, "since our exchange is conditioned and mediated by language, by conventions, by a sedimentation of norms that are social in character and that exceed the perspective of those involved in the exchange."[78] In other words, Cavarero can well argue that our identities arise as they are exhibited to others, but Butler sees that even these exhibitions are always already regulated by sets of rules and social norms which condition their emergence. Following Adorno and Foucault, Butler insists that social convention determines the manner (and to a significant degree the meaning) of our actions. She writes,

> There is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no 'I' that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning . . . When the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration . . . The 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation - or set of relations - to a set of norms.[79]

It's not just others to whom we are exposed. We are exposed to the social norms and conventions too that we encounter and assume in our interactions with others.

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[78] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 28.
[79] Ibid., 7.

This is clearly, but not exclusively, demonstrated in language. However unique and singular the experience of my subjectivity, they must be given to both myself and to others under a set of common, sometimes clumsy signs I have inherited and over which I have no control. Following Jacques Lacan (and perhaps Derrida too), Butler contends that the "I" is always already vulnerable to a host of arbitrary and unreckonable meanings, situations, and others. And of course, with Foucault, Butler sees linguistic convention as exemplary of other social and gender and racial conventions, too. To expose ourselves in the manner Cavarero describes, therefore, we must submit to a whole host of norms we inherit by necessity, however much we seek to resist them in practice. As Butler contends, the "very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our singular stories are told."[80] The condition of our emergence, Butler therefore argues, is one of vulnerability. Our identities arise not just in exposure but in vulnerability both to others and to the norms which determine all our relations. This is a

> vulnerability from which we cannot slip away, which we cannot finally resolve in the name of the subject, but which can provide a way to understand that none of us is fully bounded, utterly separate, but, rather, we are in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation we do not choose . . . We did not create it, and therefore it is what we must heed . . . We could wish ourselves to be wholly perspicacious beings. But that would be to disavow infancy, dependency, relationality, primary impressionability; it would be to wish to . . . dwell in the pretense of being fully knowing, self-possessed adults. Indeed, we would be the kind of beings who, by definition, could not be in love, blind and blinded, vulnerable to devastation, subject to enthrallment.[81]

To be human is to be vulnerable to others, and this vulnerability is primarily a result of our depending on other persons in order to generate our identities in the first place. As Butler perhaps most compellingly contends (and as Cornelius Suttree I believe comes to learn), to "be undone by

[80] Ibid., 21.
[81] Ibid., 101-2.

another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession."[82]

This is why Suttree's late encounter with Trippin Through the Dew exposes some persisting troubles. In seeming to discern an authentic or essential 'John' underneath the embodied acts of Trippin Through the Dew, Suttree demonstrates a continued reluctance to locate the self as exhibited by, rather than hiding somewhere behind, embodied actions. Butler and Cavarero would argue that Trippin Through the Dew's drag persona is not a false self pasted over the real John, like the sizing caulk Joyce slathers over herself before having sex with Suttree. Trippin Through the Dew's exhibited drag identity is his real identity, even as it negotiates and challenges all the conventions of gender and race that Butler has shown will be constitutive of any such self-assertion. Though at this point in the novel we're meant to understand Suttree as fundamentally changed and cured of his loathing for himself and for his body, nonetheless hints of his despair at the exhibited, embodied self remain prominent in this final McAnally encounter.

To be sure, Arendt, Cavarero, and Butler have much more to say. In particular, the exposed vulnerability of the exhibited self has implications for storytelling and narration, issues that are crucial to McCarthy too and which will be further investigated in the chapter to follow. For now, however, what's important for me with respect to *Suttree* has less to do with story and more to do with sociality. Suttree's crisis of identity is, in truth, a crisis of sociality. He cannot be reconciled to himself because he resists or denies his own identity as exposed, vulnerable, and exhibited to others. His estrangement from his family has estranged him from himself. His rejection of the flesh is a rejection of relation. But even if hints of this rejection remain at novel's end, it is clear something has changed in Suttree. For the better portion of this novel, Cornelius Suttree has not been able bear

[82] Ibid., 136.

his own undoing, to use Butler's felicitous phrase. He has been wracked by the suicidal drives linked to his obsession with his own identity, its uniqueness, and its finitude. But somehow, in the novel's final pages, Suttree has (almost sentimentally) discovered peace with himself and with others. In spite of himself, it seems, Suttree has begun – perhaps haltingly – to move, to address himself, to vacate the self as a sort of possession, in Butler's words. Arendt, Cavarero, and Butler might not be surprised to find that this will happen through his several of acts of vulnerability and exposure in McAnally, through the many hospitable ministrations and works of mercy he undertakes among the derelicts and ne'er-do-wells of Knoxville.

Corporal works of mercy

Suttree's identity crisis has to do with his obsession with locating a self beyond his mortal body. His twin weighs him down in Woodlawn, having preceded him in death and now summoning him there to follow. But somehow, this crisis passes. After typhoid nearly kills him, Suttree wakes up renewed and, with all his friends either dead or in prison and McAnally being torn down to make room for an expressway, he says goodbye to Trippin Through the Dew and departs Knoxville. The final fever and his departure will be further examined below, but I want to preface that reading with a consideration of Suttree's position within his outcast community. Suttree loathes his mortal flesh and searches for an identity freed from its bounds. I contend that the resolution of this crisis over corporality proves decidedly (if unwittingly) corporal. That is, Suttree ultimately locates himself in his acts of mercy, in the humble, often flawed, ministrations of material kindness and mercy which constitute his life along the river in Knoxville.

Relationships between humans is constantly frustrated in *Suttree* by the reification of humans or by the drive toward self-annihilation; but relation does not entirely fail in the novel either. Indeed, despite all the wretchedness of the Knoxville McCarthy creates, humans here still manage to care for

one another, to reach out to one another and meet each other's needs. None of these miscreants really knows one another (whatever that means); they don't know one another's names, they barely know themelves, but this doesn't prevent them from demonstrating simple kindnesses and performing gracious favors. And among all of them and despite all his self-annihilating fears, Suttree is perhaps most ministerial, his travels around McAnally comprising a comic compendium of the corporal works of mercy. Indeed, Suttree's "initial action in the novel is one of sharing: to Harrogate, who has just been imprisoned, he offers his meager store of tobacco. Although this act is important, it should be remembered that as the novel progresses, it is followed by other, almost countless demonstrations of thoughtfulness and care."[83] Living in his

> shantyboat, [Suttree] ekes out a minimal living selling fish he catches on his trotlines in the river . . . His daily rounds comprise a kind of ad hoc ministry. Doing what little he can, he gives small change to panhandlers and visits his aged neighbors, bringing the ragpicker under the bridge a fish for his dinner, and checking up on the old railroad man, Daddy Watson, who lives in a sidetracked caboose. Generous, tactful, polite, he moves among the destitute in search of answers to the metaphysical questions that haunt him.[84]

Andersen's reading here is sound, though it remains important not to romanticize Suttree's behavior. Suttree does care for others, but he also fails them miserably. His service is never valiant; it is often flawed and humble and small. Despite his best efforts, for most of the novel he remains a coward, a petty criminal, and a vagrant. If he visits those in prison, it is usually because he's been confined there too. When he sees his sick aunt in the mental ward of the hospital, he recognizes his old friend Daddy Watson across the room and makes eye contact, but averts his gaze and hustles out of the room. He has "nothing to give. He'[s] come to take."[85] When he goes to his son's funeral, he keeps the gravediggers at bay and buries the boy himself, but he also gets into an altercation with his in-

[83] William Prather, "Absurd Reasoning", 111-2.
[84] Anderson, *Mythos*, 141.
[85] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 438.

laws and kicks his mother in law in the head. "You ghastly bitch," he says.[86] When Leonard asks Suttree for help burying his father in the river to avoid insurance fraud, Leonard solicits a prayer from Suttree. He replies, "the only words I know are the Catholic ones," and as they come "back up the river . . . Suttree rowing [says] no word."[87] His acts are small and feeble and human and flawed, but they are acts of kindness nonetheless, and the fish he shares with the ragman or Reese, the visits he makes to his police-beaten friends, and the company he keeps with the aged and imprisoned among McAnally all become material signs of his humanity and of theirs.

This, then, is the humble hope McCarthy posits alongside the difficulty of human relation and identity in *Suttree*. The criticisms and problems his difficult text engender unapologetically remain, but against them stand these flawed, humble, human actions, these meager attempts at kindness and friendship in an urban wasteland of want and exploitation. Moving "among the destitute in search of answers to the metaphysical questions that haunt him,"[88] Suttree finds that this movement itself may be his best answer. What McCarthy contends, and Suttree discovers, is that this little is perhaps enough. When he is thrown out of town by the sheriff after his son's funeral, Suttree speaks out of despair to the sheriff, "No one cares. It's not important."[89] And the sheriff responds with words Suttree himself will deem true:

> That's where you're wrong my friend. Everything's important. A man lives his life, he has to make that important. Whether he's a small town county sheriff or the president. Or a busted out bum. You might even understand that some day. I dont say you will. You might.[90]

As the narrator crucially asserts, "in the act is wedded the interior man and the man as seen."[91] Hannah Arendt or Adriana Cavarero might have written this line (or might resist the notion of

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[86] Ibid., 152.
[87] Ibid., 252.
[88] Anderson, *Mythos*, 141.
[89] Ibid., 157.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., 375.

interiority at all), but this is what Suttree discovers through the course of the novel. Whatever can be known of humans will be known in their acts, and so even these barely significant actions, so brokenly enacted and conveyed, can take their stand against the confusions and complications of human identity. Being and appearing coincide; speech and act realize identity among others; the "what" of our bodies becomes a human "who" in words and deeds, however humble.

Unsurprisingly, this is a critical consensus to which much of the scholarship around McCarthy also arrives. Even though Suttree lacks "a meaningful paradigm" for making sense of the world, some claim, at least "he preserves the search for order."[92] The existentialist readings see Suttree's suicidal drive as abated through his actions, his will towards human solidarity. In a manner that might link this text to *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, and which certainly fits the critique of Gene Harrogate's and Suttree's instrumentally acquisitive relationships with women that I have given, those who want to read this text through Camus see the novel as resolving "in an act of will rather than an act of rational thought."[93] Suttree achieves the posture of revolt, such readers argue: in the end Suttree embraces "shared human nature, human worth, and potential for solidarity, and empowered with consciousness, freedom, and defiance, Suttree departs Knoxville and his houseboat on the river."[94] When the novel concludes, Suttree has learned how "existence precedes essence – of how human feeling and the necessary physical action of getting up and going on, putting one step in front of the other, are prior to thought and ideas."[95] Bell expands upon this valedictory reading, urging that novels

> that are as extravagant and as visionary and yet as fundamentally democratic and simple as *Suttree* restore to American literature a grounding in the humanistic value that the extremes of modernism continue to threaten to dissipate and obscure. For McCarthy a belief in the reality of other people is the first principle of responsible

[92] Matthew Guinn, "Ruder Forms Survive" in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 112.
[93] Frank Shelton, "Suttree and Suicide," 712.
[94] Prather, "Absurd Reasoning," 113.
[95] Bell, *Achievement*, 114.

> existence, that is not a theory for him but a vision, complete in itself, expressed not in discourse but in the creation for a world that we are compelled to believe in.[96]

Though Bell's reading is potentially sustainable, I think these heroically individualistic tones overstates the case. What Suttree does among the outcasts of McAnally Flats doesn't feel much like revolt or rebellion or heroism (although Camus' revolt against absurdity is not easily described as heroism, either).

Other readings arrive at similar ends by way of a sympathetic sort of postmodern nominalism. As Matthew Guinn densely argues, in the end Suttree abdicates

> an empty formalism that is ultimately . . . little more than anthropocentric self-delusion. McCarthy's atavism continuously pushes the reader towards the same conclusion. By emptying the past of transcendent significance, he stresses the contingency of existence . . . The iconoclasm of this approach subverts all traditional means of ordering experience . . . While conventional means of imposing form on existence are familiar and certainly understandable, McCarthy's atavistic vision constantly thwarts our compulsion to privilege such efforts. His focus isolates the individual in the present moment . . . The effect of such muted narrative structures . . . is to discourage the reader's urge to simplify an existence which is ultimately contingent and mysterious. McCarthy makes it clear that his fiction, like the vision of life it contains, resists reductive forms.[97]

I believe Guinn overstates the virtue of individual isolation, but this resistance to reductive forms and the insistence upon contingency and mystery seem to me right. In any case, it's clear that the Arendtian and existentialist readings of this text overlap at important points, though they also remain at odds in important ways. Yet it's still not clear how and why action itself redeems Suttree in the end. To complete my interpretation of Suttree's development in this novel, then, I must return to the theology of Christian incarnation and must review the (mis)understandings of religion at play in *Suttree* and in the critical literature around the novel.

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[96] Ibid.

[97] Guinn, "Ruder Forms," 114.

The incarnational logic of *Suttree*

So far, much of my argument is relatively well trodden in the scholarship around *Suttree*. Although the relevance of Arendt and of recent feminist theory has not elsewhere been acknowledged, the existentialist readings of the novel do arrive at similar conclusions: Suttree is death obsessed, haunted by a confused sense of his own unique identity, but he resolves this crisis through the acts of kindness he shows to others in McAnally Flats. What does all this have to do with the religious? Critics almost universally regard this novel as unchristian and/or gnostic. To be sure, the church comes under severe critique in this novel and other readers – Dianne Luce in particular – have ably shown the influence of so-called gnostic Christianities upon this work. My contention, however, is that the conflict in this novel is far more basic. What feminist theory and my focus upon the feminine body in *Suttree* shows us is that Suttree's suicidal drive, which is exposed as loathing for the human body, stems from a general dis-ease or disgust with the material world. Indeed, gnostic references in this work are certainly consistent with this material disgust. Suttree's search for identity is a search for a spiritual permanence outside the finite strictures and inevitable sicknesses of the flesh. But in discovering his identity precisely in the corporal works that constitute his identity in McAnally , *Suttree* in fact develops an extended critique of the gnostic impulse in Christianity, not an endorsement. By eventually discerning something like holiness in the material world about him, and by condemning the Christian practices of his Knoxville upbringing for disregarding the material in favor of the spiritual, Suttree's final resolution embraces a theme one might reasonably declare largely congruent with Christian theologies of incarnation and sacrament.

Much like *Blood Meridian*, *Suttree* shows little patience for the institutional practices of Christian religion, though here in eastern Tennessee evangelical Protestant traditions will come under as much critique as Roman Catholicism. In the prologue in which the hunter and his hounds are introduced, McCarthy paraphrases the history of eastern Tennessee:

> Where hunters and woodcutters once slept in their boots by the dying light of their thousand fires and went on, old teutonic forebears with eyes incandesced by the visionary light of a massive rapacity, wave on wave of the violent and the insane, their brains stoked with spoorless analogues of all that was, lean Aryans with their abrogate semitic chapbook reenacting the dramas and parables therein and mindless and pale with a longing that nothing save dark's total restitution could appease.[98]

That abrogate semitic chapbook is, of course, the bible, and here it contributes to, or colludes with, the violence and insanity of the Anglo-Saxon pioneers who annex the area in their "massive rapacity." Suttree lives skeptically among "wild street preachers haranguing a lost world with a vigor unknown to the sane," and he stands at the edge of their crowds listening "for some stray scrap of news from beyond the pale."[99] The most prevalent representative of religion in the novel is a crazy, self-mutilated eunuch who screams mindless, vile perdition down onto passersby in McAnally Flats. No magical account of ritual is sufficient to Suttree, either. When passing an evangelical river baptism, Suttree stops to watch with some other observers for a few minutes.

> The preacher had the man up by the collar. He was sputtering and reeling about and he looked half crazy. The preacher steadied him by the forehead, intoning the baptismal service.
>
> Suttree rose and dusted the grass from his trousers.
>
> You aint fixin to leave are ye? The old man asked.
>
> I sure as hell am, said Suttree.
>
> You better get in that river is where you better get to, said the one in overalls.
>
> But Suttree knew the river well already and he turned his back to these malingerers and went on.[100]

As is customary in this novel, Suttree's voice merges with the narrator's here and it is unclear who refers to the catechumens as malingerers. But the source of the insult is irrelevant; Suttree obviously has no patience for this faith. The scene is rendered with specific details that should not be disregarded. Prior to leaving, a lay preacher observing the baptism does his best to encourage Suttree to join. When they ask if he's been baptized, he responds, "Just on the head."[101] The lay preacher

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[98] *Suttree*, McCarthy, 4.

[99] Ibid., 66.

[100] Ibid., 124-5.

[101] Ibid., 122.

responds, "That aint no good. It wont take if you dont get total nursing. That old sprinkling business wont get it, buddy boy . . . Sprinklers, [says] the lay preacher in disgust. I'd rather to just go on and be infidel as that."[102] Wryly, Suttree asks, "what do you think about the pope and all that mess over there?" The preacher responds, "I try my best not to think about it at all."[103] It is only after all this that Suttree departs the malingerers and moves on.

Certainly some of Suttree's impatience has to do with his irritation at the sort of instrumental regulations and demarcations that govern it. Suttree thus similarly dismisses his Catholic grammar school education as a form of "christian witchcraft."[104] This witchcraft – the manipulation of the supernatural through material means – seems most to draw Suttree's ire. And yet, Suttree seems somehow compelled towards the religious; he is not entirely dismissive. He does not dismiss all preachers (as will be shown shortly) and he finds himself wandering into his old church or Catholic school upon occasion. After a late night drinking, for example, Suttree falls asleep in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, the parish of his childhood, and is awakened by a priest.

> Were you waiting for confession?
> No.
> The priest looked at him. Do I know you? he said.
> Suttree placed one hand on the pew in front of him. An old woman was going along the altar rail with a dusting rag. He struggled to his feet. No, he said, you don't know me.
> The priest stepped back, inspecting his clothes, his fishstained shoes.
> I just fell asleep a minute. I was resting.
> The priest gave a little smile, lightly touched with censure, remonstrance gentled. God's house is not exactly the place to take a nap, he said.
> It's not God's house.
> I beg your pardon.
> It's not God's house.[105]

Suttree's rationale for this final provocation – "It's not God's house" – is justified in the scenes around his final typhoid fever, which will be examined shortly. But what's clear for now is that these

[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 304.
[105] Ibid., 255.

institutions – the offices and obligations of priests and of preachers – carry nothing of the holy as far as Suttree is concerned.

To some degree, then, the several critics who regard *Suttree* as anti-religious appear justified in their opinions. Vereen Bell is perhaps the most subtle of these readers. And it is hard to deny the critical rumors of gnosticism when Suttree visits his Aunt Martha, sees a photo of a baby in a casket (echoing again the twin, and foreshadowing his Mother She dream vision) and asks himself, "What deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of hydrophobia could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky wormbent tabernacle."[106] So the critics who see *Suttree as* opposed to orthodox Christianities – most notably Dianne Luce, whose *Reading the World* does this most cogently and carefully – seem to have good cause for their positions as well. But Bell's and Luce's (among other's) readings of the Christian religion here are frankly too unnuanced.[107] William Prather, for example, believes that "like Camus, Suttree clearly rejects the recourse of religion," while reductively seeing the novel depict religion only "in two distinct forms: one a primitive brand of Protestantism and the other, orthodox Roman Catholicism."[108] As John Rothfork has noted, it is interesting that these readers who so heavily indebt themselves to existentialism seem oddly to ignore "Kierkegaard's . . . would-be child killer, Abraham, [who suggests] that religion may not be so easily elucidated or dispelled."[109] To be sure, McCarthy does not ignore Abraham – at least not in *No Country for Old Men*, nor again in *The Road*. That another religious possibility remains in *Suttree* may be shown through close readings of two essential scenes: the encounter with the goatman, and Suttree's final typhoid fever.

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[106] Ibid., 130.

[107] Bell doesn't write in the terms of religion, preferring to speak of the novel as anti-metaphysical. I think Bell is likely right about this, but as my argument below will show, it seems to me that the "desanctified Logos" Bell reads in *Suttree* probably misses some of the subtleties of Christian theology.

[108] Prather, "Absurd Reasoning," 105-6.

[109] John Rothfork, "Redemption as Language in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*" in *Christianity and Literature* 53 no.3 (Spring 2004): 390.

Suttree's gnostic question – "what deity in the realms of dementia" – is central to the novel. As William Campbell notes, in many ways, the overriding religious problem of *Suttree* concerns not so much the fact of God's existence but the nature of that God who exists.[110] At times – as when noticing the photo of Aunt Martha's dead infant son – Suttree is convinced of God's mercilessness and cruelty. And he's not the only one. After the old ragman whom Suttree befriends and who eventually wills himself to death complains to Suttree that he's sick of living, Suttree asks him what will happen when he dies. The ragman replies,

> Dont nothin happen. You're dead.
>
> You told me once you believed in God.
>
> The old man waved his hand. Maybe, he said. I got no reason to think he believes in me. Oh I'd like to see him for a minute if I could.
>
> What would you say to him?
>
> Well, I think I'd just tell him. I'd say: Wait a minute. Wait just one minute before you start in on me. Before you say anything, there's just one thing I'd like to know. And he'll say: What's that? And then I'm goin to ast him: What did you have me in that crapgame down there for anyway? I couldnt put any part of it together.
>
> Suttree smiled. What do you think he'll say?
>
> The ragpicker spat and wiped his mouth. I dont believe he can answer it, he said. I dont believe there is an answer.[111]

For the ragman, God's existence is a given fact, but an insignificant one. A God so distant and removed as to allow existence to devolve into this "crapgame" cannot offer any security or meaning to the players of that game. As the ragman concludes, "I aint no infidel. Dont pay no mind to what they say . . . I always figured they was a God . . . I just never did like him."[112]

The goatman, meanwhile, is an eccentric Christian preacher who wanders the south with a herd of goats, preaching the gospel, carrying a large sign that reads JESUS WEPT atop his wagon. He comes to Knoxville and sets up camp near Suttree's, and Suttree receives him with the

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[110] William Campell, "Resisting the Urge to Believe Terrible Things: Cormac McCarthy's Quest," (PhD diss. University of Virginia, 2002), 65.

[111] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 258.

[112] Ibid., 147.

hospitality he usually offers visitors and new neighbors. Their initial conversation is crucial, and so I will cite it at length. The goatman asks,

> You aint got any catfish today have you?
>
> I might. You want some?
>
> I wouldnt care to have just a mess for myself.
>
> I'll see what I can do. It'll be this evening. I usually run my lines late on Sundays.
>
> The goatman turned to him. On the sabbath?
>
> The fish dont know the difference.
>
> The goatman shook his head. Cant say as I hold with that.
>
> They sat silently for a moment. The old man smelled of goats and woodsmoke. The boys were going from goat to goat down the field by the river.
>
> Why did Jesus weep? said Suttree.
>
> Eh?
>
> He pointed to the sign. Why did Jesus weep?
>
> Dont know scriptures?
>
> Some.
>
> He wept over folks workin Sundays.
>
> Suttree smiled.
>
> Jesus wept over Lazarus, said the goatman. It dont say, but I reckon Lazarus might of wept back when he seen himself back in this vale of tears after he'd done been safe and dead four days. He must have been in heaven. Jesus wouldnt of brought one back from hell would he? I'd hate to get to heaven and then get recalled what about you?
>
> I guess so.
>
> You can bet I intend to ask him when I see him.
>
> Ask who?
>
> Jesus.
>
> You're going to ask Jesus about Lazarus?
>
> Sure. Wouldnt you? Oh I intend to have some questions for him. I'm goin to be talking to him some day just like I'm talking to you. I'd better have something to say.
>
> Suttree rose and swiped at the seat of his trousers and looked off down the river. Well, he said. I'll bring you a catfish if I get one.
>
> I dont require a big one.
>
> No. It's okay if it's caught on Sunday?
>
> Just dont tell me about it.
>
> All right.
>
> I wouldn't want to aid and abet.[113]

The goatman's humor around the rules of religion distinguish him from the lay preacher Suttree leaves at the baptism. The goatman will receive a catfish caught in sin with a wink and a smile, and

[113] Ibid., 199-200.

when Suttree delivers that supper later, the goatman is less concerned with Suttree's everlasting salvation than with his everyday loneliness on his houseboat. Like the ragman, the goatman has some questions for God too. He wants to find the meaning behind this vale of tears, but – unlike the ragman – the goatman trusts that God will have an answer. In each case, God's existence hides a mystery: the ragman suspects the mystery obscures a divine indifference or impotence, but the goatman shows faith in the face of that mystery. Again, the questions that the ragman, the goatman, and Suttree – all three – want to pose to God have to do with the nature of God's existence, not the fact of it.

Identifying the nature of God is a problem that has been central to Christian theology for centuries, and I don't hope to plumb the considerable depths of that problem in this chapter. But a theological consensus in the tradition has generally been established: for Christian theology, God is known by humans in God's acts. Whether or not these acts are ontologically exhaustive as well as epistemologically revelatory remains a matter of dispute. Thomas Aquinas' notion of God as *actus purus* and the Palamite distinction between God's energies and his essence represents the technical and major divide around this question. But even if the ontology remains undecided, epistemologically East and West, Roman and Reformed all agree: humans know God in God's acts. Reformed thinkers of the twentieth century – Karl Barth and those influenced by him, in particular – have married this epistemological commitment to a Christology to the one I outline in my introduction. For Karl Barth, "God is who He is in His works."[114] Indeed, if there is a consistent ontological scheme which undergirds the winding, intense reflections of the *Church Dogmatics*, it is Barth's emphasis on the acts of God. It is in God's works specifically, Barth contends, that God "is Himself revealed as the One He is."[115] For Barth (as for the ancient advocates of Nicaea), "there is no gap conceivable between God as he acts towards us – as the Father of Jesus Christ – and that

[114] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.1, §28-30 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 4.
[115] Ibid.

activity in and by which God is eternally what he is . . . If he acts, he acts eternally and he acts consistently, and since nothing beyond him can determine his action, what he does cannot be other than the 'enactment' of what he is."[116] For the Christian theologian this means that we cannot discern the being of God in any other way than by looking at what God has done. As Barth forcefully declares, "to its very deepest depths God's Godhead consists in the fact that it is an event – not any event, not events in general, but the event of His action."[117] So if someone wishes to speak of God that person may only speak of what God has done or is doing.

But towards which works must we look? How do we read the signs? How should Suttree or any other interpret acts of God like a stillborn brother or a tragic rockslide? For Barth, the answer is clear: the first and foundational act of God for Christian theology is God's becoming human in Jesus. For Barth, if we are to look at what God has done in order to determine who God is, then we must look first to what God has done in Christ, to how God has acted in the man Jesus. In Barth's own word, "we shall encounter [God] either at the place where God deals with us as Lord and Saviour, or not at all."[118] The act of God by which humans come to know God is in Jesus.

Cavarero insists with Arendt that acts are what expose human identities to others; Barth meanwhile contends that God's acts as a human are what uniquely expose God to humans. Of course, these frameworks do not entirely converge; Barth's concern is primarily epistemological, whereas Cavarero's interest has to do with ontology. That is, for Barth, God's being is *in* act, but God is not only act, while for Cavarero all of human being arises and is exhausted in exhibited actions. But Cavarero and Barth can remain in fruitful conversation. If the foundational act of God for humans is the assumption of a human identity in the man Jesus of Nazareth, then God must thereby be exposed in Jesus to all the vulnerabilities that Cavarero and Butler have outlined as

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[116] Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 238.
[117] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 7.
[118] Ibid., 5.

constitutively exhibitive of human identity. If we know God in God's act, and God's act is uniquely revealed in the human being Jesus, then we know God only as vulnerable. Jesus wept.

McCarthy does not pursue these theological questions, of course, but it is undeniable that this notion of the holy as hidden in the triumphs and tragedies of everyday life, as revealed in the vulnerabilities and exposures of ordinary humans, that this echo of the Christian incarnation undergirds some of the complex religious sensibilities of this novel. Witness most tellingly Suttree's memories of altar service at the Church of the Immaculate Conception and of attending the Catholic grade school.

> Or cold mornings in the Market Lunch after serving early Mass with J-Bone. Coffee at the counter. Rich smell of brains and eggs frying. A dead roach beneath a plastic cakebell. Lives proscribed and doom in store, doom's adumbration in the smoky censer, the faint creak of the tabernacle door, the tasteless bread and draining the last of the wine from the cruet in a corner and counting the money in the box. This venture into the world of men rich with vitality, these unwilling churched ladling cream into their cups and watching the dawn in the city, enjoying the respite from their black clad keepers and half scorched muslin that they wore. Grim and tireless in their orthopedic moralizing. Filled with tales of sin and unrepentant deaths and of semitic damnation for the tacking up of the paraclete. After eight years a few of their charges could read and write in primitive fashion and that was all.[119]

The close detail here, these rich smells and faint creaks, signify that these men are "rich with vitality" and stand for Suttree against all the dead "orthopedic moralizing" of the priests and nuns. Many critics have read McCarthy's description of the crucifixion as "the tacking up of the paraclete" as a sign of Suttree's sacrilege, but it is not. For the paraclete is the Holy Spirit, and what was nailed to the cross at Golgotha was not a wispy ethereal spirit but the man of flesh and blood, Jesus. What these grim and tireless nuns profess is the docetic – perhaps even some version of a gnostic (*pace* Luce) – heresy, that God could not have suffered in body and so God only appeared to anguish and die as a man: that the agony was a trick; the pain and death only illusions. This teaching rejects the material body of Jesus in the same manner that Suttree's suicidal obsession with death and his

[119] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 254.

loathsome misogyny rejects human flesh. It is only when Suttree finally locates the holy in the bodily, in the material, in these "mawky wormbent tabernacles," that he emerges from his fever somewhat renewed.

I've made reference to this final fever, which occasions Suttree's transformation, and my reading of it suitably closes this chapter. Here Vereen Bell offers some unwitting assistance to my reading. I have noted how the rich detail of Suttree's cold morning at Market Lunch after acolyting with J-Bone signifies the vitality of the everyday, material world. Bell agrees that detail in *Suttree* is "etched and dense and yet proliferates far past the requirements of conventional realism. The effect of this care is gratifying and entrancing, for though the world is radically desacralized in the process, it is somehow also magically present to us."[120] On Vereen Bell's account, the obvious profanity of the fallen world nonetheless hides a deeper, inarticulable, mysterious presence. As he further argues, entering "a world so manifest and substantial, so unresponsive to metaphysics, and yet so complex and mystifying and unstable, one can understand the need to reckon with it on its own terms and perhaps conclude, as Suttree will, that on those terms it is sufficient unto itself . . . This is not about reaching a religious faith that overreaches the world but about reconciliation to the world itself."[121] Bell here aims to restrain a religious reading of the novel, reading in the text a "Logos rudely desanctified."[122] But reckoning with the world on its own terms while recognizing the mystery that world hides echoes the sacramental tradition. And in any case, there is no need for Bell to be so wary of the Logos, since with his final pages McCarthy himself writes the Logos into McAnally.[123]

During Suttree's hallucinatory typhoid fever, after which he wakes up renewed and assured both of himself and of his relation to others, he envisions a trial in which he is prosecuted for

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[120] Bell, *Achievement*, 74.

[121] Ibid., 76.

[122] Ibid., 108.

[123] Bell, of course, know this, though his reading of the Logos insists that its worldliness must desanctify it. I argue that the Christian tradition retains an openness to the hidden but undeniable holiness of worldly things like, for example, bread and wine.

communing with the "thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, topers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees"[124] of McAnally Flats. Suttree cries out a pathetic word of defense: "I was drunk." But then he is

> seized in a vision of the archetypal patriarch himself unlocking with enormous keys the gates of Hades. A floodtide of screaming fiends and assassins and thieves and hirsute buggers pours forth into the universe, tipping it slightly on its galactic axes. The stars go rolling down the void like redhot marbles. These simmering sinners in their cloaks smoking carry the Logos itself from the tabernacle and bear it through the streets while the absolute prebarbaric mathematick of the western world howls them down and shrouds their ragged biblical forms in oblivion.[125]

The Logos does not move among the sanctimonious priests or evangelical river preachers, nor in churches or mansions or tabernacles; rather the Logos moves through the streets, held aloft by "simmering sinners" in the "maugre sinks and interstitial wastes that the righteous see from carriage and car."[126] Meanwhile the logic of western knowledge, the "prebarbaric mathematick of the western world" howls down these humiliated subalterns and "shrouds" the incarnational logic of "their ragged biblical forms." Against the oblivion of western logic and its rigid instrumental reason (recall here Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh), against the Enlightenment's cruel and crumbling knowledge, gather only these ragged biblical forms: the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the outcast. It is among these shrouded, simmering sinners, McCarthy argues, that we can assert the mysteries of our being through the mercy of our acts.

Thus emerges the significance of Suttree's rare given name, Cornelius. Cornelius the Centurion is the first gentile Christian in the Acts of the Apostles, the prototypical outsider to the chosen people of faith. As Elisabeth Andersen has noted, Pope Cornelius ruled from 251 to 253 CE and "in opposition to the antipope Novatian, proponent of an early Christian doctrine holding that

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[124]McCarthy, *Suttree*, 457.
[125] Ibid., 458.
[126] Ibid., 4.

those who had fallen from grace were forever banished from the church and hence from salvation."[127] The Novationists were declared heretical because they could not fathom the reach of God's grace among sinners, just as the gnostics could not conceive it within the material. The derelicts of McAnally, meanwhile, know better than both. Akin to his namesakes, Cornelius Suttree locates and celebrates the sacred as it is carried through the streets by and among Knoxville's outcast. When Suttree wakes and the priest who has already offered him last rites visits, he asks,

> Would you like to confess? . . .
> I did it, said Suttree.
> A quick smile.
> I'd like some wine.
> Oh you cant have any wine, said a nursevoice.
> The priest bent and opened his little leather case and took out a cruet. You had a close call, he said.
> All my life. I did.
> He tipped winedrops from the birdtongue spout down Suttree's throat. Suttree closed his eyes to savor it.
> Do you have any more?
> Just a drop. Not too much, I dont think.
> That works, Suttree said.
> Are you feeling better?
> Yes.
> God must have been watching over you. You very nearly died.
> You would not believe what watches.
> Oh?
> He is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving.
> Is that what you learned?
> I learned that there is one Suttree and one Suttree only.
> I see, said the priest.
> Suttree shook his head. No, he said, you dont.[128]

Suttree has determined the nature of his God, and that God is the one wrenched from the grasp of unworldly tabernacles and made real, material, embodied as flesh among simmering sinners like himself: indeed, what better description of the crucified and entombed victim Jesus than as a "wormbent tabernacle?" And for Christian theology, what other avenue for resurrection? Suttree's God manifests in his acts – "He is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving" – as indeed does Suttree

[127] Andersen, *Mythos*, 130.
[128] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 461-2.

exist in his acts, his movement and ministrations around McAnally coming to constitute him as human.

Suttree's common judgment alongside all his fellow McAnally sinners finally resolves his identity crisis. "There is one Suttree and one Suttree only." Rather than regard this statement as a proclamation of the heroic individualism Bell and others posit, I read these words in light of Adriana Cavarero. In *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero argues that uniqueness arises out of intersubjectivity. Since our identities are realized in exposure, that unique set of others to whom each of us has been, is, and will be exposed uniquely constitutes our identities.[129] That unique set of relations makes us who we are. In attending humbly, brokenly, badly to the real needs of real human bodies, in performing the corporal works of mercy among the destitute and hirsute buggers of Knoxville, Suttree finds the holy as well as himself. No "set of Greek principles [can] redeem our subjective experience and emotion."[130] Rather, he is redeemed by responsive action. The gesture of communion here – Suttree's reception of the wine, which is not really wine by the priest's reckoning and which therefore evades the nurse's instruction – points towards the implications of such an incarnational theology for a theology of the sacraments. I will have much more to say about the nature of sacrament and its function in these novels when I read *The Road*, but if God's being is in God's acts, then any understanding of God's presence in the sacraments must wrestle with these rituals as acts of God. The wine, to use Suttree's word, *works*. I wrote earlier that Suttree's acts serve as complex but sufficient signs of the mysteries behind and beneath them. In the same manner will the sacramental acts of the God-made-man so function.

The sacramental bears final mention because the novel ends on its most dramatically sacramental image. Suttree has left McAnally Flats and is leaving Knoxville too. While hitchhiking on the side of the road in the heat, Suttree watches a construction gang toiling in a ditch.

[129] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 22-3.
[130] Rothfork, "Redemption," 394.

> A boy was going along the works with a pail and he leaned to each, ladling out water in a tin dipper. Suttree saw hands come up from below the rim of the pit in parched supplication. When all these had been attended the boy came down along the edge of the ditch and handed up the dipper to the backhoe operator . . . Then he was coming down across the clay and over the ruts and laddered tracks of machinery. His dusty boots left prints across the black macadam and he came up to Suttree where he stood by the roadside and swung the bucket around and brought the dipper up all bright and dripping and offered it. Suttree could see the water beading coldly on the tin and running in tiny rivulets and drops that steamed on the road where they fell. He could see the pale gold hair that lay along the sunburned arms of the waterbearer like new wheat and he beheld himself in wells of smoking cobalt, twinned and dark and deep in child's eyes, blue eyes, with no bottoms like the sea. He took the dipper and drank and gave it back. The boy dropped it into the bucket. Suttree wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Thanks, he said.[131]

The hands reaching from the pit in parched supplication; the angelic appearance of the waterbearer's pale gold hair, like wheat; Suttree's recognition of himself in the eyes of the child and this simple act of kindness; his simultaneous realization of the bottomless mystery there too; the humble gratitude for this simple act offered in the miserable heat: indeed, this passage is *Suttree* in miniature, resolving all the dilemmas of identity, action, knowledge, and mystery in the humble offering of a cool drink of water by a child.

This is not to say that this image is uncomplicated. If it is *Suttree* in miniature, then it bears the frustrations and problems of the novel too: questions of bodily desire remain, here again given in uncomfortably pedophiliac terms, and the reflection of Suttree in those eyes signifies that twinned identity remains a complicated question for our protagonist. Furthermore, water is a rich and multivalent symbol in this novel. This is not the first appearance of a waterbearer: when Suttree visits the home of his Anglo-Saxon forebears he envisions a feast in which they all wait for a waterbearer who "does not come, and does not come."[132] Dianne Luce has shown how water might function gnostically in the novel, while J. Douglas Canfield has demonstrated a possible relation to

[131] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 470-1.
[132] Ibid., 136.

New Age religious movements.[133] And though I don't mean to deny these potential references, in a novel so clearly aware of Christian theologies of incarnation, I wonder if the New Testament might not also serve as background to this scene. Recall Llewellyn Moss's risky and fateful act of mercy in *No Country for Old Men*: the offering of a cool drink of water. This humble act is the prototypical work of mercy in all the synoptic gospels, so much so that whoever offers a drink to a disciple is understood to be aligned and allied with Jesus.[134] This is not to claim Cornelius for the gospel; far from it. But if *Suttree* is a novel in which complicated issues of identity and holiness are reconciled by simple ethical acts, what better work of mercy to signify Suttree's new life than the foundational ethical sign of scripture, a cup of water freely offered to a stranger? No wonder then that the hounds that haunt the wood of the suicides come too late for Suttree. When that "enormous lank hound" arrives, he has already moved on and it can but sniff "the spot where Suttree had stood."[135]

McCarthy ends *Suttree* with a final paragraph of mystery too.

> Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them.[136]

McCarthy reframes that final scene lest we regard Suttree's rebirth too triumphantly. The temptation towards suicide remains in a post-metaphysical world. These hounds tire not. Suttree may have awakened from his sickness, but this departure should not be read as an act of heroic escape. Though McAnally has been razed and many of Suttree's friends have been lost to imprisonment or death, he leaves behind his community, the one I have just been at lengths to argue constituted his identity and catalyzed his recovery. There is more than a little tension in this sudden exit. But whatever Suttree's lasting flaws and however slaverous the hounds of hell remain, death and despair

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[133] Diane Luce, *Reading the World*, and J. Douglas Canfield, "The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius: Abjection, Identity, and the Carnivalesque in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*."
[134] Mark 9:41.
[135] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 471.
[136] Ibid.

can yet be resisted. Those rich final words – "Fly them" – carry countless ambiguities, since "fly" denotes nothing directly or semantically here, but might connote all manner of mysteries: that we must flee these hounds, but perhaps also (archaically) that we might chase them down, or release them from ourselves, or even potentially transcend them. As in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* the world is unchanged, its tragedies as inexorable as ever. But a human response remains, enacted in signs as worldly (or as holy) as a cup of cold water for a stranger.

Story

Real characters

In the 1990s, Cormac McCarthy emerged out of obscurity into wide commercial and critical acclaim. *Blood Meridian* gathered increasingly favorable attention among writers and scholars in the late 1980s, but when *All the Pretty Horses* was published in 1992, literary awards, significant sales figures, and popular film adaptations began routinely to be associated with McCarthy's works. This attention has continued and not without some cause, as most critics would agree that McCarthy's work including and after *All the Pretty Horses* is more accessible in form and content than any prior writing. And indeed, the border trilogy itself – the series of three interconnected novels initiated by *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992, expanded by *The Crossing* in 1994 and completed with *Cities of the Plain* in 1998 – offers perhaps McCarthy's most conventional work in form and content. These books are still violent, but not with the gratuity and prurience of *Blood Meridian*. In the trilogy there are knife fights and cruel killers and exploding dogs, but not the sustained massacres of Glanton or the Comanches. Questions of identity, character, and subjectivity again arise, but with less formal experimentation and sustained attention than in *Suttree*. John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, the main characters of the trilogy, struggle against heroic and essentialist conceptions of themselves, but without Suttree's suicidal ideations or fever dreams. Genre concerns around the American western are again raised, but the critique of the Romantic and Enlightenment ideals undergirding the genre is more subtle in the trilogy. John Grady and Billy are indeed cowboys and these are indeed western novels, even if the possibility for either of these boys to become "the all-american cowboy" is severely undermined.[1]

This is not, however, to say that these books are more simplistic or less artful than the remainder of McCarthy's corpus, nor even to claim that McCarthy has become any less concerned

[1] Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), 3.

with the questions of violence, knowledge, fate, agency, and identity. Indeed, these questions remain as much at hand here as anywhere else in McCarthy's work; these three books might be taken as microcosm for McCarthy's work as a whole. If the border trilogy should indeed by classed McCarthy's magnum opus (as some critics have done), then it will be as much for McCarthy's sustained attention to the overarching themes which dominate all his other work as for any other reason. In other words, the border trilogy represents McCarthy's largest literary project in terms of character, setting, and plot development but also his most sustained engagement with the postmodern philosophical issues so far raised. The border trilogy renders all McCarthy's heretofore demonstrated concerns in three fairly straightforward novels of romance and quest. But I will argue that the trilogy adds an important dimension to the consideration of these questions, especially issues of subjectivity, agency, and ethics. If *Blood Meridian* hints at forgiveness as a hedge against violence; if *No Country for Old Men* presents promise as a protection from fate; if *Suttree* offers action as a ground for (inter)subjectivity: then the border trilogy sets narrative as a loose, shifting, but viable foundation for morality. In doing so, McCarthy enters into a complicated contemporary ethical question around the relation of narration and ethics. I will contend that the border trilogy makes this entry in a way that carries forth many of the feminist approaches to exposure, vulnerability, and dispossession that I've already detailed in Arendt, Cavarero, and Butler, while simultaneously standing aside from and seeking to avoid other recent appeals to narrative as a source for character or virtue in contemporary philosophical conversation.

Revisiting Old Themes

Of course, the border trilogy is a significant work simply in terms of the length and the scope of its setting, the attention to character and plot development. Thus, although the concepts of character and plot are crucial to my understanding of how storytelling and narrative should be

understood to function in the novels, the trilogy itself offers far too much by way of characters and plot events for me reasonably and sufficiently to review them in a single chapter. Instead, I will focus upon how these works – *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain* – expand upon themes I've already uncovered in other of McCarthy's works, and then I will show how the particular notion of story – especially as articulated in these books – can be read to illuminate, amplify, and advance arguments I've already established. I will begin by showing how these three novels restate some familiar questions; I'll then expand the Arendtian perspective I've already recounted in response to those questions, this time including Arendt's notion of narrative. Following this, I will examine the two protagonists of the trilogy, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, and examine how storytelling inflects the ethical as realized in their characters. Finally, I will show how this critical, ethical sense might be married to the sustained sacramental image with which the trilogy concludes.

That these three books – *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* – aim to incorporate and supplement McCarthy's other work is clear from the outset. *All the Pretty Horses* begins where *Blood Meridian* ends, with John Grady Cole walking from his grandfather's wake out into the southwestern darkness and listening to a train "creating out of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness."[2] The last published word of McCarthy prior to *All the Pretty Horses* is the puzzling image of postholes dug for a fence, the imposition of order in a western world in *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue. At the outset of the border trilogy, a fenceline is recalled, meant somewhat oddly as a metaphor for the passing of a train – although the metaphorical association becomes more clear if we recall *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue and read the train as a sign of the advance of reasoned progress into the west. *The Crossing* likewise recalls *Blood Meridian*'s beginning, hearkening back in its first

[2] Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 3-4.

paragraphs to Billy's childhood in the early part of the twentieth century, when one "could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence."[3] After the funeral that sets the initial scene in *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady saddles his horse and rides west, where "the sun [sits] blood red and elliptic under reefs of bloodred cloud before him," another recollection of that evening redness in the west, the subtitle of *Blood Meridian*.[4] *Suttree* is also immediately referenced in *The Crossing* in an inversion of the earlier novel's final lines. In the first scene, a young Billy and his brother Boyd come upon an Indian drifter camping on the Parham's land. In that drifter's eyes Billy sees himself "twinned in those dark wells with hair so pale, so thin and strange, the selfsame child."[5] Whereas the vagrant Suttree sees himself in the eyes of a pale-haired child, here Billy's pale hair appears in the eyes of a drifting wanderer.

These references recall a question that becomes explicit again in *All the Pretty Horses*. As the Dueña Alfonsa, the great aunt of John Grady's romantic interest Alejandra, tells him, "the question . . . was always whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact."[6] A fundamental question in these novels is one of fate and of agency – though tellingly, here that question is given in narrative terms. Do we write our own stories, or is it already written? The particular example Alfonsa remembers from her father is

> of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed, cara y cruz. No matter through whatever turnings nor how many of them. Till our turn comes at last and our turn passes . . . that anonymous person at his workbench has remained with me. I think if it were fate that ruled our houses it could perhaps be flattered or reasoned with. But the coiner cannot. Peering with his poor eyes through dingy glasses at the blind tablets of metal before him. Making his

[3] Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 3.
[4] Ibid., 5.
[5] McCarthy, *Crossing*, 6.
[6] McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 230.

> selection. Perhaps hesitating a moment. While the fates of what unknown worlds to come hang in the balance.[7]

Here we see the coiner of *Blood Meridian* return, passing his wares in the marketplace of reason, but we also recognize a foreshadowed image of how Chigurh's fateful coin will recast Judge Holden's coiner towards questions of fate and determinism.

Throughout all three books of this trilogy, the status of human agency comes again and again under scrutiny. John Grady's companion, Lacey Rawlins, complains in *All the Pretty Horses* that "[e]ver dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I'd made before it."[8] A rancher tells Billy and Boyd Parham in *The Crossing* that there is no "act that does not assume a future that is itself unknown," that one "must be sure that the intention in [one's] heart is large enough to contain all wrong turnings, all disappointments."[9] And in another echo of other works, the heart's capacity to weather the unpredictabilities of the future through promise or pardon shows forth in these novels in a way that will resonate in *No Country for Old Men* and elsewhere. After Rawlins has chased John Grady's romantic choices towards the very "dumb thing" about which he has warned, Rawlins reflects to John Grady alongside the campfire:

> You ever think about dyin?
> Yeah. Some. You?
> Yeah. Some. You think there's a heaven?
> Yeah. Dont you?
> I dont know. Yeah. Maybe. You think you can believe in heaven if you dont believe in hell?
> I guess you can believe what you want to.
> Rawlins nodded. You think about all the stuff that can happen to you, he said. There aint no end to it.
> You fixin to get religion on us?
> No. Just sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't be better off if I did.
> You aint fixin to quit me are you?
> I said I wouldnt.

[7] Ibid., 231.
[8] Ibid., 79.
[9] McCarthy, *Crossing*, 202.

John Grady nodded.[10]

The two are embarking upon a mess dangerous enough to invite some religious reflection, but their fear of the future is assuaged not by metaphysical speculation but by the promise they've made to one another. And when things turn drastically worse, when John Grady's pursuit of Alejandra has lands them both in a Mexican prison with their lives under threat, John Grady pleads with an impatient Rawlins that

> some things aint reasonable . . . all I know how to do is stick. I never even promised you you wouldnt die down here. Never asked your word on it either. I dont believe in signing on just till it quits suitin you. You either stick or you quit and I wouldnt quit you I dont care what you done. And that's about all I got to say.[11]

In reply, Rawlins says tersely, "I never quit you."[12] Later, when they are safe again but after Rawlins has been knifed and nearly killed, the sanctity of promise is set forth again. "I could of run off from where they had me. It was just a hospital ward," Rawlins says.[13] John Grady replies,

> Why didn't you?
> I dont know. You think I was dumb not to of?
> I dont know. Yeah. Maybe.
> What would you of done?
> I wouldnt of left you.
> Yeah. I knew you wouldnt.
> That dont mean it aint dumb.[14]

Before separating they speak of sin and regret and fate as punishment, then wordlessly allude to John Grady's murder of an assailant in the prison and the possibility for forgiveness.

As was barely hinted in *Blood Meridian* and will be more dramatically conveyed in *No Country for Old Men*, in these novels actions – and in particular natal acts such as promise and forgiveness – are presented as shelters from the vagaries of fate. Acts have unpredictable consequences and cannot be undone; they are no sure respite from doom. But new acts always remain possible

[10] McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 91.
[11] Ibid., 155-6.
[12] Ibid., 156.
[13] Ibid., 210.
[14] Ibid.

nonetheless, the half-blind coiner can always cast a new slug and hope for the best. Though there are no guarantees, the human acts that do directly confront the challenges of irreversibility and unpredictability become that much more precious.

Acts of mercy and hospitality are rendered sympathetically in the novel in a way that recalls *Suttree*, and although such actions barely manage to resist the world's violence, they nonetheless do make their meager difference. There is great cruelty in these novels and mercy is not a common virtue, but simple gestures of kindness appear that recall Suttree's river ministry. School girls offer John Grady and Lacey cigarettes in jail; by-standing migrant workers risk themselves to rescue Billy's brother Boyd in the middle of a shootout; Mexican families welcome strange American cowboys into their homes without question. As the cowboy Travis recalls to Billy, these acts seem somehow indirectly – if barely – to resist precisely the history McCarthy's characters so often worry over:

> I rode all over Chihuahua and a good part of Coahuila and some of Sonora. I'd be gone weeks at a time and not have hardly so much as a peso in my pocket but it didnt make no difference. Those people would take you in and put you up and feed you and feed your horse and cry when you left. You could of stayed forever. They didnt have nothin. Never had and never would But you could stop at some little estancia in the absolute dead center of nowhere and they'd take you in like you was kin. You could see that the revolution hadnt done them no good. A lot of them had lost boys out of the family. Fathers or sons or both. Nearly all of em, I expect. They didnt have no reason to be hospitable to anybody. Least of all a gringo kid. That plateful of beans they set in front of you was hard come by. But I was never turned away. Not a time.[15]

Despite the damage history has done, these meager acts of mercy still stand, like Suttree's corporal works among the ne'er-do-wells of McAnally Flats. They cannot undo the past, but they may in fact bear fruit in the world to come, as Billy shows in *Cities of the Plain* when he stops on the roadside in the middle of the night to help some Mexican workers with a flat tire. The cowboy Troy asks Billy if he has stopped because of "some religious thing."[16] Billy replies that it "aint nothin like that. It's just the worst day of my life was one time when I was seventeen years old and me any my bud – my

[15] McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain*, 90.
[16] Ibid., 36.

brother – we was on the run and he was hurt and there was a truckload of Mexicans just about like them back yonder appeared out of nowhere and pulled our bacon out of the fire."[17] As elsewhere in McCarthy's work, religion is pictured as either irrelevant or insufficient to the moral demands of the world. But acts of kindness do subsist in memory long enough to spur other similar acts later on and keep the violence of the world at bay. This scene in particular seems to incorporate the lessons we have gleaned from *No Country for Old Men* and *Suttree*.

Recall, however, that in my reading of *Suttree* I asserted that these kindnesses do not simply make a cruel world bearable; they fundamentally constitute human selfhood. This more assertive claim regarding human identity and agency is also considered and affirmed by the border trilogy, I believe, but the account of subjectivity here is complicated by the additional concept of narrative. As Dueña Alfonsa has stated, the question of fate has to do with whether our lives are ordered all along or whether we impose order upon it by reflection, by narration. As many other characters will argue in various ways throughout the course of the trilogy, action and narrative arise inseparably. "Acts have their being in the witness . . . In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all."[18] The remainder of this chapter will explore this complex relation among action, identity, and narration, and will require that I briefly and critically revisit in the next section Cornelius Suttree and Erich Auerbach.

Checking backgrounds

In the previous chapter, I detailed a manner of character construction in *Suttree* that attends primarily (though not exclusively) to the outward acts of characters rather than to their interior feelings and thoughts. I argued that the critical tendency to interpret this characterization as a means of reifying or commodifying or "petrifying" human identities in McAnally is misguided. On the

[17] Ibid.
[18] McCarthy, *Crossing*, 154.

contrary, when considered in light of some feminist accounts of intersubjectivity, I show that these techniques can be read as contributing to the humanization of Suttree, as a means of drawing him into meaningful relation with others through attention to his actions as constitutive of his subject formation. And I have noted that this technique bears something in common with the way Erich Auerbach describes the techniques of biblical narration in his masterful *Mimesis*. I'd like now to examine Auerbach a bit more closely in order to draw some distinctions between his description of biblical narrative and what I see at play in McCarthy. I will argue that, although McCarthy mimics a style *Mimesis* details, he does so towards different ends. This conclusion will allow me to resume my conversation with Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero in a way that fully considers the ontological import of their claims for narrative, and thereby to document the ethical relevance of storytelling for the border trilogy.

Auerbach's thesis in the opening chapter of *Mimesis* is that biblical narrative stands in contrast to Greek epic insofar as it avoids narrative detail in the interest of preserving a background sense of mystery. For the Greeks, "men and things stand out in a realm where everything is visible; and not less clear – wholly expressed, orderly even in their ardor – are the feelings and thoughts of the persons involved."[19] Minor details, such as a scar on Odysseus' thigh, or an implement introduced into the midst of a fight, or the road a particular deity traveled to arrive at a battle, cannot be permitted "to appear out of the darkness of an unilluminated past; [they] must be set in full light."[20] Scenes and situations are "brought to light in perfect fullness; so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by, and never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed parts."[21] Homer spares no verses in fully accounting for each detail of every moment and describing the complex relations

[19]Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2003), 3.
[20] Ibid., 5.
[21] Ibid., 6-7.

among them. In the biblical narrative, meanwhile, details are few. We know little about the thoughts and feelings of the central characters of the early books of the Hebrew bible, and even less about their God. The text offers "only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity."[22] Whereas the Homeric style is "of the foreground," rendering through the specificity and extent of its detail the impression that it is "pure and without perspective," the biblical style remains mysterious and "fraught with background."[23] The God of the bible is "not comprehensible in his presence, as is Zeus . . . he always extends into depths."[24] Indeed, Auerbach argues that the opaque ineffability of the biblical God is the result, rather than the condition, of the text's opacity. The Israelite "concept of God . . . is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things."[25] Biblical metaphysics arises out of, rather than giving rise to, biblical narrative, because humans in these writings bear the same sense of mystery as the deity. Human characters are fraught by the same backgrounds, they hide similar depths. They "are not so entirely immersed in [the text's] present that they do not remain continually conscious of what has happened to them earlier and elsewhere; their thoughts and feelings have more layers, are more entangled."[26] Whereas the Homeric hero's "destiny is clearly defined and . . . [his] emotions, though strong, are simple and find expression instantly," the biblical hero's "silent obedience is multilayered, has background."[27]

Whether or not biblical metaphysics conditions or comes as consequence of this narrative technique, the style's complicity with metaphysics is clear. The biblical stories

> are not, like Homer's, simply narrated "reality." Doctrine and promise are incarnate in them and inseparable from them; for that very reason they are fraught with "background" and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning . . . Since so

[22] Ibid., 11.
[23] Ibid., 12.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 8.
[26] Ibid., 12.
[27] Ibid.

> much of the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon. Doctrine and the search for enlightenment are inextricably connected with the physical side of the narrative – the latter being more than simple "reality"; indeed they are in constant danger of losing their own reality, as very soon happened when interpretation reached such proportions that the real vanished.[28]

God is hidden, and God's hiddenness in the text invites interpretation. It summons the reader to look beyond the foreground of the text toward a deeper meaning, towards a reality more real than the reality described directly by the text. There is a deeper reality that the immanent obscures.

Auerbach's reading of the Homeric and Hebrew traditions is wise and incisive and I won't challenge his insights here. But these insights do challenge the reader of McCarthy. If, as Auerbach claims, these two styles – foreground and background – represent the "two basic types" of Western literature and culture, then McCarthy's work at the very least frustrates the background sense of that second style. As I have argued, McCarthy seems to write with a biblical narrative style. In *Suttree*, for example, we are offered very few details regarding the characters' histories, tragedies, memories, or backgrounds. We puzzle through their motivations and speculate over their mysteries. We know nothing of the kid's interior life in *Blood Meridian*, we have only a few paragraphs of his history. Indeed, he disappears from the text for long sections. But even though we rarely see any depths in detail, we are routinely shown that such things continue to haunt our (anti-) heroes.[29] If McCarthy certainly favors this style (though the border trilogy does foreground detail in a manner largely uncommon to his work), he simultaneously challenges the metaphysics such background mystery it escorts, according to Auerbach. As I've noted in *Suttree* as well as *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian*, there is a Nietzschean consistency among these works, an unrelenting refusal to locate value or meaning or worth at some ascetic or ideal depth beyond the real. Although McCarthy takes

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[28] Ibid., 15.

[29] *Suttree* is not alone in this aspect, either. Although McCarthy's latest work, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* do provide some "foreground" detail, they still solicit the background sense and leave most questions unanswered. And some early works – *The Orchard Keeper* and Child *of God* most notably – take the impossibility of accounting for another's history as a central theme.

up a narrative technique beholden to background, he works simultaneously to undermine any attempts to overlook the present, to deny the real for the sake of an ideal, or to overburden the given with background meaning.

The question the border trilogy therefore poses is how the sense of mystery McCarthy's characters always carry, as well as McCarthy's reluctance to smuggle any metaphysical background into their characterization, can be held together. Indeed, the extended experimentation with the Western genre that this trilogy represents seems especially interested in troubling a Romantic notion of the self as a real essence only mysteriously expressed in bodies and actions. When Billy Parham calls John Grady Cole the "all-american cowboy" it is a joke to him but only partly so for the reader. John Grady, the main protagonist of the trilogy, caricatures a Romantic hero: he has a magical knack for horses, an unquestioned sense of chivalry, a reckless sort or courage, and a limitless tolerance for pain. But the novels are also "suffuse with evidence of his immaturity, his romanticism, his grandiosity, his disappointed sense of entitlement."[30] The failure of John Grady's romances and the tragedy of his end are clearly meant to undercut the grandiosity of his romanticism. But mystery does remain with and among these characters, as it does at last for Suttree, the kid, and most of McCarthy's other characters. To show how McCarthy does this, how he retains and elaborates a sense of mystery while resisting metaphysics, I must pursue a more extensive study of narration and identity in Hannah Arendt and her followers, to which I will now turn. The upshot of my argument will be that through both his articulation of narrative's role in subject formation and in his narrative technique, McCarthy offers a critique of the metaphysics of an ideal or essential self while yet preserving the mystery such metaphysics elicits. In revealing subjectivities as realized in embodied actions that may only be recounted, accounted, described, and mediated relationally through language, McCarthy shows subjectivities to be fraught, not by background, but by relation. The

[30] Dianne C. Luce, "'When you Wake': John Grady Cole's Heroism in *All the Pretty Horses*," in *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, eds. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995), 155.

mystery of identity is realized in relation – that is, relation understood in both its senses, as both sociality and as storytelling. If there is surplus meaning to our selves, that surplus does not hide beneath or behind our bodies and our actions: rather, it waits in such places to be related to and narrated by others.

The Moral of Stories

As one critic has noted, the border trilogy "is structured from stories, and from fragments of stories."[31] This is perhaps obvious; most novels could be described as structured from stories. But the critic's point here is nonetheless well taken: not only does the trilogy as a whole depend upon the weaving together of three distinct novels, each of which itself gathers several plotlines, but they are also filled with characters who tell tales and recall anecdotes and remember loved ones and who, perhaps most importantly, reflect upon the act of storytelling itself. As another critic claims, the novels are thus "not about 'truth' or so-called 'reality' so much as [they are] about writing, McCarthy's own craft, which he lays bare for the reader to decipher and understand."[32] My own reading will modify this claim. I believe writing in particular is less at stake for McCarthy than is storytelling in general. If McCarthy's interest is more specific, then it is in the relation of storytelling to the self, and the ethics this relation implies. What we shall see, with help again from Hannah Arendt, Adriana Cavarero, and Judith Butler, is that stories and subjectivity arise together. Notably, this is not to assert that selves are simply stories. The distinction may be subtle, but will have ethical implications. In any case, my contention is not that these novels remain indifferent to truth or reality or that they privilege stories above other things. It is rather that an external, exposed subjectivity will

[31] John Scaggs, "The Search for Lost Time: The Proustian Theme in Cormac McCarthy's *Cities of the Plain*," in *Cormac McCarthy: Uncharted Territories/Territoires Inconnus*, ed. Christine Chollier (Reims: Presses Universitaires de Reims, 2003), 73.
[32] Jean-Michel Verdun, "Hybridization in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*," in *Cormac McCarthy: Uncharted Territories/Territoires Inconnus*, 163. Verdun in this quotation in fact is only referring to *The Crossing*; I've expanded his sense to include all of the border trilogy.

inevitably summon stories, along with any concomitantly narrative claims as to the nature of our responsibility and accountability.

Disclosure, Exposure, and Accountability

In previous chapters, I have enlisted Arendt, Cavarero, and Butler in order to articulate the interplay among action, fate, and identity in McCarthy's novels. I argue in chapter three that for Arendt humans realize their identities in what they say and what they do. But it is also appropriate to say that this realization is a revelation, because word and deed are essentially communicative distinctions of the subject, and the subject is realized in these disclosures. Revelation and realization coincide. This means, as I've noted, that identity requires relation. If disclosure is fundamental to human identity then it depends upon human community. But because there is no internal identity waiting to be expressed, disclosure by word and deed becomes a revelation not just to one's audience but also to one's self. And since "nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed and word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure."[33] There thus remains a fundamental ineffability, an essentially inexpressible quality around the subject – though this mystery does not lie behind the subject. Rather, it waits to be articulated by others. The subject cannot know beforehand what her words and deeds will disclose; simultaneously, that subject is the sum of all her disclosures and cannot readily be paraphrased or described. The "manifestation of who the speaker and doer unexchangeably is, though plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal expression."[34] For reasons that will become important later in this chapter, Arendt demands that we resist letting our descriptions of "*who* somebody is" wander "into saying *what* he is," that we avoid getting "entangled in a description of qualities" or describing "a type or 'character' in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness

[33] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 180.
[34] Ibid., 181.

escapes us."[35] Indeed, if we aim to give an adequate account of another's actions – that is, of who someone is – we must avoid merely listing attributes regarding what someone is like. Character traits do not sufficiently attend to the uniqueness of the human. The "who" is more singular than such descriptors can bear.

If we cannot catalog a subject's virtues or vices in hopes of determining her identity, we can still given an account of another through narrative. We still have recourse to stories. The disclosure of word and deed happens in the midst of a web of human relationships. This plurality or sociality inevitably confounds our intentions and often condemns our actions to unpredictability at best or futility at worst. But the sociality of all our disclosures also creates the opportunity for storytelling, for our acts and words to be reflected back towards us in the words of others. The public realm "in which action alone is real . . . 'produces' stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things."[36] That is, acts do not emerge from agents and then establish some freestanding, autonomous identity in empty space. Rather, such actions pass between subjectivities in plurality, and are recognized, understood, interpreted, and recounted in that public context. Stories – and so identities – develop with further disclosures and are amended by new understandings. The stories which our disclosures occasion thus

> tell us more about their subjects, the "hero" in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it, and yet they are not products, properly speaking. Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer . . . The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the "hero" of the story, we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome."[37]

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 184.
[37] Ibid., 184-5.

The agent occasions the story that reveals her identity, but she creates neither her identity nor her story through those disclosive actions. The agent initiates, but neither authors nor authorizes, her story.

The point here is that Arendt is parsing out a fundamental opacity to the enacted stories which reveal human identity: the revealed agent does not produce or create herself, and in fact the sociality of her disclosure severely limits any control she retains over it at all. Although an identity is clearly revealed in the story, none of us can know how our story will end, and we cannot attribute autonomy to the identity we have discerned in that story, the identity disclosed by it. Although we might like to locate a stable author behind our acts, the "invisible actor behind the scenes is an invention arising from a mental perplexity but corresponding to no real experience."[38] In other words, there is no subjective background to action. Actions are not deployed by a hidden subject and the stories of such actions are not scripted by a secret author. Rather, stories arise in perplexity and sociality and draw attention to an agent whose identity as emerges arises in the complicated matrix of that sociality rather than from the inspiration of an already present author. The subject is entirely disclosed in word and deed and although the public stories of those acts reveal an agent, they do not point to a more deeply real identity or to any truer self behind the agent's words and deeds. The realization and the revelation of the subject coincide, and the tale simply points towards this telling coincidence.

Narration is not central to Arendt's philosophical argument about action, but Adriana Cavarero carries the concept further and makes its implications clear. As I noted in chapter three, Cavarero affirms the perplexity and intangibility of identity in Arendt's account, writing that no one "can know, master, or decide upon identity" prior to the exhibited act.[39] To reiterate my argument in

[38] Ibid., 185.

[39] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 24.

the last chapter, she agrees that the self "has a totally external and relational reality."[40] But she more carefully pursues the distinction between an exhibited, acting self and what she terms the "narratable" (as opposed to the narrated or narrative) self. What then constitutes the narratable self for Cavarero? Using the same 'foregrounded' Greek texts that Auerbach has studied, Cavarero recognizes a different sort of mystery in these works. It's true, as Auerbach has written, that the detail of these texts seems fully to present the whole of reality to the reader. But it's also clear that the characters in these stories remain obscure to themselves. Odysseus only comes to recognize his own story when it is sung to him by a rhapsod of the Phaecians. Oedipus meanwhile only knows himself "in soliciting the external tale of his own life-story" rather than through "an exercise of introspection."[41] For Oedipus, *who* (rather than what) he is "is the result of the life-story that others tell him."[42] That is, the actions which disclose an identity must be collected, collated, interpreted by others and rendered in narrative, such that one's subjectivity always waits to be narrated by others. Thus, Arendt's disclosed identity and Cavarero's narrated one are equally indebted to alterity. If, as Arendt and Cavarero claim, being and appearing coincide, then who one appears to be will be revealed in the stories told by others.

For Cavarero, following Arendt, action

> thus has the merit of highlighting the constitutive coinciding of *being* and *appearing* that defines the totally exhibitive character of identity. This is an identity that, far from corresponding with a substance, is entirely expressive . . . [B]eneath this identity, before it or beyond it, there is nothing else. Arendt makes clear that identity does not express (that is, press out) something internal, the deep and intimate identity of the self. Identity expresses nothing other than "itself and what is shown or exhibited."[43]

The mystery of identity is not hidden in the background, beneath or beyond the exhibition; subjectivity is not some secret inspiration or silent motivation expressed through one's actions.

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[40] Ibid., 63.
[41] Ibid., 12.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 23.

Rather, one's actions realize one's identity. If there is mystery attendant upon every "who," it is the mystery of the identifying story that one's actions have disclosed, a story that waits to be told and that one cannot rightly tell by oneself. To return to a passage of Cavarero's cited in the last chapter with different emphasis: "Both the exhibitive, acting self and the narratable self are utterly given over to others. In this total giving-over, there is therefore no identity that reserves for itself protected spaces or a private room of impenetrable refuge for self-contemplation."[44] In fact, the giving-over of oneself is so total that the one "who is revealed never knows *whom* he reveals. Given that everyone's identity lies completely in the exhibitive character of this *who* – *who* the agent reveals is, by definition, unknown to the agent himself."[45] This is most obvious of course when one considers the obscurity of one's own birth and death. The "first and fundamental chapter of the life-story that our memory tells us is already incomplete . . . autobiographical memory recounts a story that is incomplete from the beginning. It is necessary to go back to the narration told by others."[46] Neither can one tell the story of one's own death. The story of a life is always a story others must tell, and that identifying story can only be entirely told after death. Life "cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards, it results; it is unforeseeable and uncontrollable, just like life."[47] The existent always "constitutes herself in relation to another" as "exposable and narratable."[48] The actions that accumulate to generate an identifying life-story are not accessible to the self except when exposed to others and then narrated back to that self.

Cavarero is careful to describe the self as narratable rather than as narrated or as narration. To call the self a narration or to describe the self as narrated would be merely to add a narrative attribute to that mysteriously essential, interior sense of self that she and Arendt aimed to critique. In

[44] Ibid., 63.
[45] Ibid., 23.
[46] Ibid., 39.
[47] Ibid., 3.
[48] Ibid., 40.

other words, it leaves too much of a "background" behind the exhibited self. The attribution of a narrative structure to identity assumes an essential self, the constitution of which will depend upon its likeness or relation to narration. Cavarero wants to leave behind this sort of interiority. For Cavarero, it is not that interiority bears the attributes of narrative; rather, our disclosures and exposures are fundamentally subject to the narrations of others. Narratability, for Cavarero, is thus deeply related to the idea of the self as an exposure, it affirms the wholesale externalization of the self. The acts through which we are realized constitute a tale others can tell, rather than revealing a self that already has a narrative pattern or shape. For Cavarero, narration fundamentally involves "the complex *relation* between every human being . . . It consists . . . in the anomalous notion of a self that is expressive and relational, and whose reality is symptomatically external in so far as it is entrusted to the gaze, or the tale, of another."[49] The self "does not plan her destiny, nor does she follow it; rather, she finds it in the tale of others, recognizing with surprise the acts of her life."[50] To say that one is narratable is therefore to reaffirm that the self is both disclosed and exposed to others. Narratability embraces this sense of exposure and then marries it to traditional understandings of the self as both unified and unique. The cumulative exposures of the self (which in fact constitute subjectivity) can be told as a story, and the unique set of others to whom one has been exposed and who are equipped to tell that story give the self a unity and a uniqueness that is constructed relationally, rather than interiorly.

The ethical implications of this understanding of stories and selves are important and contravene the dominant understanding of the role of narrative for ethics. As I've already noted, Judith Butler extends Cavarero's argument and shows how even the stories we tell about ourselves are ultimately given over to others by virtue of the social, historical, and linguistic norms under which those stories must be told. In any account of ourselves, whether offered by ourselves or by

[49] Ibid, 41.
[50] Ibid., 137.

others, we are "in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy."[51] But this raises a potential problem for any traditional sense of ethical accountability. Butler phrases the problem succinctly: "Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?"[52] Indeed, this is a question that has lingered since my first chapter, in which I critiqued Jay Ellis' reading of Chigurh as a moral teacher. If any figures in all of McCarthy's wok attempt to be entirely self-grounding, Anton Chigurh and Judge Holden do. That ethics have lost ground is a settled question for McCarthy, Ellis, and me; but whether the groundlessness of ethics can itself offer some ethical footing is the more interesting question, and it is the one Butler (and McCarthy) ultimately pursue.

Interestingly, this sense of a subject as grounded outside of itself, leads to an understanding of the role of narrative in ethical reflection that might be at odds with other accounts. This is the import, I think, of Cavarero's narratable, rather than narrated or narrative, self. In other words, whatever the moral status of natal acts such as promise or forgiveness, the groundlessness of the subject, its essential and inevitable giving-over to others, seems to frustrate other narrative approaches to ethical reasoning. This tradition is represented primarily by figures such as Alasdair MacIntyre in philosophy and Stanley Hauerwas in theology, although it includes many others and several variants. But what is primarily at stake for ethics in this virtue tradition is a notion of character, and its allied idea of virtue. Like Arendt, Caverero, and Butler, these thinkers also presume a good degree of nonfoundationalism, but they regard narrative as a suitable foundation for morality in a way Cavarero and Butler will regard as problematic. Human beings, on MacIntyre's account, "have a specific nature; and that nature is such that they have certain aims and goals, such that they move by nature towards a specific *telos* . . . The virtues are precisely those qualities the possession of

[51] Butler, *Giving Account*, 101.
[52] Ibid., 19.

which will enable an individual to achieve *eudaimonia* and that lack of which will frustrate his movement towards that *telos*."[53] In other words, the work of ethics is to generate a rigorous set of practices that at once describe and constitute the good life for humans. The practice of ethics is the cultivation of virtues, and the development of character. This work is possible precisely because of "the narrative unity of a human life and of a moral tradition."[54] In other words, in light of the *telos*, aims, and goals we know of humans, we can render their character in unified narrative form: beginning, middle, and end. But this is a unity that is conditioned upon a fundamental sense of human nature, itself resting upon a specific *telos*. These thinkers already claim to know the end of the story. The opacity of the subject, the mystery of a narrated character, is one that essentially hides identity behind the subject's actions; MacIntyre specifically notes this narrative relation between action and intention.[55] And so, although he will agree with Caverero that stories "are lived before they are told," how the story should end and the character which stirs it is always narratively discernible to the ethicist.[56]

Though epistemologically modest in its own way, conceptions of responsibility that arise on this scheme assume that the unity and uniqueness of an interior self can be grounded in narrative traditions and revealed as a story. They continue to assume a discrete and narratively unified (rather than narratably unique) self that will resist any so fundamentally groundless concept of subjectivity. We know the end of the story, these systems assert, and so we can generate a coherent account of the self and the virtues and the good life. But if we acknowledge that we cannot know the story's end, that we arise in the midst of a fundamental incoherence; indeed, that we are always given over to others rather than narratively coherent within ourselves, another ethical possibility arises.

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[53] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 148.
[54] Ibid., 258.
[55] Ibid., 208.
[56] Ibid., 212.

Butler brilliantly employs precisely the groundlessness of the subject towards the development of a different form of moral reasoning. As she argues, it is true that "the way in which we are, from the start, interrupted by alterity may render us incapable of offering narrative closure for our lives," that we cannot coherently argue our own *telos*.[57] But this essential incoherence, and the irreparable damage it does to the discrete and undivided subject, "establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us."[58] The task of ethics is not to know oneself, and narrative is not some newly discovered but ancient means of acquiring such knowledge. Rather, narrative "means the breakage, the rupture, that is constitutive of the 'I.'"[59] It is exactly because narrative yields an incoherent subject, rather than some fundamental, teleological coherence, that it serves an ethical purpose. I can "never provide the account of myself that . . . certain forms of morality . . . require, namely, that the self deliver itself in coherent narrative forms."[60] But Butler contends that the "very meaning of responsibility must be rethought on the basis of this limitation."[61] As she contends, if

> the subject is opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself, it is not thereby licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its obligations to others. The contrary is surely true . . . If we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us, then that opacity seems built into our formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency.
>
> This postulation of a primary opacity to the self that follows from formative relations has a specific implication for an ethical bearing towards the other. Indeed, it is precisely by virtue of one's relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one's ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds.[62]

Narrative, in other words, does not ground us in ourselves, it grounds us in others, and that is its primary ethical relevance. I "become dispossessed in the telling, and in that dispossession an ethical

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[57] Butler, *Giving Account*, 64.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., 69.
[60] Ibid., 79.
[61] Ibid., 83.
[62] Ibid., 19-20.

claim takes hold, since no 'I' belongs to itself."[63] Ethics thus "requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human."[64] Through narration, we can begin to discern how the realization of the self in embodied actions gives our selves over to others, how acts like promise or forgiveness can literally hand us over into risk and uncertainty, but also into a realized sort of external selfhood.

According to Erich Auerbach, the characters of the Hebrew Bible, both human and divine, are fraught with background. There is a metaphysics implicit in this characterization. We identify God or Abraham by how these characters act. We surmise their untold depths through reading their story. But when metaphysics is left behind, and narrative comes to be understood as a giving-over rather than as a ground, we can see this literary technique as operating differently and establishing perhaps a different sort of moral understanding, one based on dispossession rather than virtue.[65] For Arendt, Cavarero, Butler – and for McCarthy – narratability is an attribute of the exhibited, external self. It is because the self is realized through one's acts, through word and deed, that it remains available for telling by others. Disclosure and exposure by their very nature invite narration. Selves and identities are fraught by narrative, not by background, but this burden is one that facilitates rather than frustrates the ethical. The narratability of the self is a product of its relation to and through others – an externality of identity that only others can fully witness and that only others can narrate back to us as subjectivity.

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[63] Ibid., 132.

[64] Ibid., 136.

[65] The notion of dispossession here described might be understood as a "virtue" using MacIntyre's definition quite broadly. However, I contend that the opacity and uncertainty implicit in such dispossession undermines MacIntyre's sense of virtue fundamentally. It's also worthwhile to note here that theology has deep and ancient resources for thinking of the giving-over of God in the crucified Jesus as constitutive of who God is. This theological description will be pursued in the next chapter.

Signs and Wonders

In some ways, the border trilogy presents a more entirely postmodern picture than the one I've here drawn out of Arendt, Cavarero, and Butler. As has been widely documented, it is not just human identity that remains deeply indebted to language and narration in these books. McCarthy offers a picture of reality itself as constructed out of history and language.[66] Of the three novels that comprise the border trilogy, *The Crossing* most explicitly engages the postmodern implications of a linguistically grounded reality. It achieves this primarily through several dialogues Billy Parham shares with mysterious, fleeting, and remarkably similar characters at various points in the novel. Somewhat ironically, these conversations are highly expository and primarily essayistic; McCarthy seems to abandon narrative at precisely those moments when he is most at pains to give an account of it. The speeches given these strange storytellers rephrase and reinforce each other in sometimes repetitive ways, so I will not take great pains to separate the various discourses here. This is not to claim these discourses do not bear subtle and perhaps important differences, only that such differences are studied elsewhere and remain of little import to my peculiar concerns. From sextons, gypsies, Indians, and other marginal figures, Billy Parham learns that "[t]hings separate from their stories have no meaning," that "this world also that seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but a tale," and that "the tale has no abode or place of being except in the telling only and there it lives and makes its home and therefore we can never be done with the telling. Of the telling there is no end."[67] Billy hears that identity has "no meaning except in its history" and that "what endows anything with significance is solely the history in which it has

[66] See especially David Holloway, "'A false book is no book at all': the ideology of representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy," in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2001), 185-200, and Dianne C. Luce, "The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*," *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (ed. Edwin Arnold and Dianne Luce, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 195-219.

[67] McCarthy, *Crossing*, 142-3.

participated," and yet "wherein does that history lie?"[68] He is told that "because what can be touched falls into dust there can be no mistaking these things for the real. At best they are only tracings of where the real has been. Perhaps they are not even that. Perhaps they are no more than obstacles to be negotiated in the ultimate sightlessness of the world."[69]

Again, this theme is fairly explicit and has been thoroughly discussed in the secondary literature, so I don't claim to be breaking any critical ground by citing it briefly again here. What's important to this study is not the overarching linguistic or even narrative structure of reality, but how that construction specifically involves questions of human identity, action, and – by extension – ethics. These ethical issues are the ones most critics have mainly ignored in favor of the more obvious epistemological and ontological ones, but they represent what I believe to be the heart of these novels. They therefore demand further examination. What's more, these ethical questions relate intimately to the sacramental imagery that adorns the final passages of the trilogy, the meaning of which I will begin to address at the conclusion of this chapter and will fully explore in chapter five.

John Grady Cole

If the postmodern crisis of representation dominates these books in a general sense, John Grady Cole in particular attempts romantically (that is, both through a devotion to romantic love and a commitment to an ideal truth) to overcome that crisis. From the outset, he is shown to be "naïve about the relationship between word and real."[70] True to his romanticism, he searches for some essential truth or reality beyond what is written and uttered. When *All the Pretty Horses* begins,

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[68] Ibid., 405.

[69] Ibid., 294.

[70] Linda Townley Woodson, *"De los herejes y huérfanos*: the sound and sense of Cormac McCarthy's border fiction," in *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Rick Wallach (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2001), 201-208.

for example, an ex-girlfriend meets John Grady on the street and tells him, "I just thought we could be friends."[71] "It's just talk Mary Catherine," he responds.[72] "What if it is just talk?" she replies, "Everything's talk isnt it?"[73] "Not everything," he insists.[74] Later, under more dire circumstances, John Grady attempts to tell his story to the Mexican police captain holding Lacey and him captive, but the captain is only interested in having his own version of events confirmed. In an attempt to elicit a confession, the captain tells John Grady,

> You have the opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to Saltillo and then you will no have this opportunity. It will be gone. Then the truth will be in other hands. You see. We can make the truth here. Or we can lose it. But when you leave here it will be too late. Too late for truth. Then you will be in the hands of other parties. Who can say what the truth will be then? At that time? Then you will blame yourself. You will see.
>
> There aint but one truth, [says] John Grady. The truth is what happened. I aint what come out of somebody's mouth.[75]

But of course, the events of the trilogy and the storytellers who appear in these tales do their best to convince John Grady that the captain and Mary Catherine's are right.

The Butlerian sense of self as an exhibited dispossession becomes progressively realized in *All the Pretty Horses* as John Grady develops a practice of confession. That is, as John Grady learns to give an account of himself, he comes to understand himself as given over to the judgment of others. I've noted already that John Grady speaks indirectly of his murder of another prisoner, that he and Lacey only allude to it but never speak of it explicitly. John Grady also feels an acute sense of guilt for not having done more to keep a boy named Jimmy Blevins from being murdered by the Mexican captain. Jimmy Blevins is in all likelihood a false name (further troubling the stability of identities in the novel) but John Grady visits the world famous radio evangelist the Rev. Jimmy Blevins after returning from Mexico in the hopes of finding a clue to little Jimmy's true identity and perhaps

[71] McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 28.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., 168.

returning little Jimmy's horse to its rightful owner. The Rev. Blevins turns out to be too much of a self-important blowhard to listen to a word of John Grady's story, and so the story remains again untold, the confession unmade, a religious institution again rendered impotent. But when John Grady is accused of horsetheft in Langtry, Texas, he is called upon to tell his story in the judge's chambers. Once the judge has heard John Grady's tale and seen his wounds, the judge tells him, "Son, you're free to go and the court thanks you for your testimony. I've sat on the bench in this county since it was a county and in that time I've heard a lot of things that give me grave doubts about the human race but this aint one of em."[76] The confession is incomplete, however; John Grady has withheld his deeper fears. Later that evening, John Grady visits the judge's home and confesses to the judge that he doesn't feel as if he's "in the right about everything," that he doesn't "feel justified."[77] Then he admits his guilt over betraying the trust of Alejandra's father, and over killing the assassin in prison, and most of all over not protesting when the captain walked little Jimmy Blevins into the woods to kill him. The judge receives John Grady's story with mercy. "There's nothing wrong with you son," he says kindly. "I think you'll get it sorted out."[78]

Lest my own account become too romantic, this judgment is not final. The story has been told, but it resists finalization or easy completion. John Grady is no less haunted by his own failings after confessing, and not every telling is received with such mercy. Prior to any of this, in his final plea for the heart of Alejandra, John Grady tells her

> about Blevins, and about the prisión Castelar and . . . about what happened to Rawlins and finally he [tells] her about the cuchillero who had fallen dead in his arms with his knife broken off in his heart. He [tells] her everything. Then they [sit] in silence.
>
> Tell me, [John Grady says].
>
> I cant.
>
> Tell me.

[76] Ibid., 289.
[77] Ibid., 290.
[78] Ibid., 293.

> How do I know who you are? Do I know what sort of man you are? . . . Do you drink whiskey? Do you go with whores? . . .
>
> I told you things I've never told anybody. I told you all there was to tell. What good is it? What good?[79]

John Grady gives himself over to Alejandra with his story and then asks her, "tell me." He wants to hear her story now, but also to hear his own in her words, to hear that she loves him. But she will not reward his risk. The giving over of oneself, as Butler has said, is a form of undoing, a dispossession over which we retain little – if any – control. It need not, and often will not, return to us in the form we hope.

Nonetheless, these confessions show a romantic John Grady Cole gradually giving himself over to others in *All the Pretty Horses*, such that he can no longer feel self-"justified" by his own intentions or desires at the story's end. He stands on uncertain ground, dispossessed in a way Butler would appreciate but also in a manner that mingles troublingly with the difficult grace of mercy. John Grady has made himself vulnerable in his confessions but that vulnerability has not justified him or eased his mind. In a final scene, John Grady, wholly given-over and weeping, turns

> his wet face to the wind and for a moment he [holds] out his hands as if to steady himself or as if to bless the ground there or perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for the struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living and the dead.[80]

When we meet John Grady again in *Cities of the Plain* he has thoroughly rediscovered own romanticism. Adriana Cavarero argues that life cannot be lived like a story, but John Grady still continues to believe he can and should script his version of events. In *Cities of the Plain* John Grady pursues another impossible love, this time with a Mexican prostitute (somewhat heavy-handedly named Magdalena). After seeing her once at a brothel in Ciudad Juárez he determines to rescue and marry her. His obvious but earnest naïveté is clear not only to the reader, but also to his fellow

[79] Ibid., 249-50.

[80] Ibid., 301.

characters, friend and foe alike. Billy resignedly travels to the whorehouse in order to help his young friend by buying Magdalena from the pimp Eduardo. Eduardo of course declines the offer, telling Billy,

> Your friend is in the grip of an irrational passion. Nothing you say to him will matter. He has in his head a certain story. Of how things will be. In this story he will be happy. What is wrong with this story?
>
> You tell me.
>
> What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story. Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of. Do you believe that? . . .
>
> . . . I dont know, [Billy said]. I guess probably I do. I just dont like to say it.
>
> Why is that?
>
> It seems like a betrayal of some kind.
>
> Can the truth be a betrayal?
>
> Maybe.[81]

The status of truth and what truth stands for is complicated in this passage. Eduardo bears some of the fatalism of Anton Chigurh. Whatever the value of that fate or his truth, however, what's clear from what I've argued thus far is that the best resistance to such fatalism is not the imagined happiness of John Grady. That is, John Grady has once again scripted a story in his head and has convinced himself of its truth. He acts recklessly on behalf of himself and Magdalena for the sake of his story, but – as Eduardo knows – he cannot write that story. His project is doomed because it depends too much upon a truth he has invented through desire, rather than one given over to others in unknowing and uncertainty.

Of course, I've argued at length that the offering of a promise in the face of unpredictability is exactly the ethical act necessary in face of a fatalism like Eduardo's. Against all odds, John Grady has made a promise to Magdalena. Indeed, I think Billy's sense of betrayal in doubting John Grady's truth must have something to do with Billy's unwillingness to believe John Grady's promise, to accept his story, Billy's reluctant agreement with Eduardo. But the promise John Grady offers

[81] McCarthy, *Cities*, 134.

Magdalena is not without its own problems. Shortly after Billy fails in his mission to buy Magdalena, John Grady and Magdalena rendezvous by a river. In an echo of Maundy Thursday, somewhat heavy-handed here yet again, John Grady washes Magdalena's feet and then asks if she loves him. She says she does, and then she begins to tell him her own story, a horrifying history of physical and sexual torture, neglect, abandonment, sickness, and forced prostitution. John Grady cannot listen to it. Early in her narrative,

> [h]e had bent forward weeping with his arms around her. He put his hand over her mouth. She took it away. Hay más, she said.
>
> No.
>
> She would tell him more but again he placed his fingers against her mouth. He said that there was only one thing he wished to know.
>
> Lo que quieras, she said.
>
> Te casas conmigo.
>
> Sí, querido, she said. La respeuesta es sí. I marry you.[82]

John Grady cannot bear Magdalena's story. Indeed, he wants only her promise of marriage but not the burden of her horrible history. Arendt's sense of promise soberly assesses the world as it has been and is and then acts in defiance of how it may prove to be. John Grady is also defiant, but wildly and irrationally rather than soberly. He denies any story that does not match the one he has already written. He is not willing to give his own future over to others and he will not witness Magdalena's story back to her. The virtue of his truth must triumph. Ironically, he holds so fast to his own sense of himself that he can neither give himself over to Magdalena nor receive the gift she gives. In this sense, he reinscribes Alejandra's earlier rejection of him; he turns upside down the sort of storytelling we encounter in Cavarero and Butler, a storytelling in which the giving over of the self to others becomes the basis for a fundamentally forgiving ethics. What John Grady pursues here has more of the assured certainty of a self-justified truth. Magdalena's murder and John Grady's painful death at the end of the trilogy tragically rebut the stalwart stand he makes in the name of his virtuous, romantic ideal.

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[82] Ibid., 139-40.

Billy Parham

We encounter Billy Parham in *The Crossing* when he is roughly the same age as John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*. (Billy is several years older than John Grady, and so although Billy's story comes first chronologically, it isn't told until the second volume of the trilogy.) Billy has dreams similar to John Grady's, and they inspire similar stories. Rather than the daughters of hacendados or prostitutes or horses, Billy loves his little brother Boyd and a wolf he traps in New Mexico. We learn that Billy "would lie awake at night and listen to his brother's breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life that they would have."[83] Later on, Billy tells the captured wolf "what [is] in his heart. He [makes] her promises that he [swears] to keep in the making. That he [will] take her to the mountains where she [will] find others of her kind."[84] Soon enough, however, Billy's story will be written for him, he too will be chastened. He will ultimately kill the wolf himself to save her from torture. Boyd will wordlessly abandon Billy to join the Mexican revolution and Boyd will die in that war, never seeing Billy again. As folk songs and tales gather around the memory of his dead brother, Billy will return to Mexico to gather up the bones and take them home, but he will learn that even "if the güerito in the song is your brother he is no longer your brother. He cannot be reclaimed."[85]

Perhaps this is why Billy knows John Grady's pursuit of Magdalena in *Cities of the Plain* is doomed. Indeed, the poignancy of the third novel derives largely from Billy's attempts to save John Grady in a way that he could not save his brother Boyd. Billy is told in *The Crossing* that he "should have cared for [Boyd] better," and *Cities of the Plain* documents Billy's failure to save John Grady too.

[83] McCarthy, *Crossing*, 3.
[84] Ibid., 105.
[85] Ibid., 386.

The main narrative of both the novel and the trilogy ends with Billy carrying John Grady's dead body in his arms through the streets of Juárez:

> He was crying and the tears ran on his angry face and he called out to the broken day against them all and he called out to God to see what was before his eyes. Look at this, he called. Do you see? Do you see? . . . The dead boy in his arms hung with his head back and those partly opened eyes beheld nothing at all out of that passing landscape of street or wall or paling sky or the figures of the children who stood blessing themselves in the gray light. This man and his burden passed on forever out of that nameless crossroads.[86]

But a short epilogue follows this tragic scene, during which the reader follows Billy quickly through several decades into the early years of the twenty-first century. Billy wanders from job to job, but nearing death, he finds himself homeless, sleeping under an overpass in Arizona, recalling vivid memories of his long-dead sister and brother, and reflecting that in "everything that he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong."[87] He wakes one morning and sees a solitary figure across the turnpike whom he believes may be death. The man asks if Billy has any food and Billy offers him a few crackers. When the man asks what sort of man would share his crackers with death, Billy jokingly asks what sort of death would eat them, but then admits that, although he has come in recent days to look forward to his own death, he "wasnt trying to figure anything out. De todos modos el compartir es la ley del camino."[88] Sharing is the rule of the road. The stranger offers a dense discourse to Billy, restating many of the arguments about the elusive nature of reality and the groundless ground of narrative that other mysterious figures in *The Crossing* have already voiced. But this stranger takes the basic conflict of the trilogy – the impulse to write one's story, and the inability to realize that story in the world – as his explicit problem.

"In the middle of my life," the stranger tells Billy, "I drew the path of it upon a map and I studied it a long time. I tried to see the pattern that it made upon the earth because I thought that if

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[86] McCarthy, *Cities*, 261-2.
[87] Ibid., 267.
[88] Ibid.

I could see that pattern and identify the form of it then I would know better how to continue. I would know what my path must be. I would see into the future of my life."[89] The stranger then recounts a complicated dream he claims once to have had in which another dreamer slept and dreamed his own dreams of human sacrifice and blood offerings. Dream upon dream, reality interpreted and generated and constructed: at stake once again is the nature of reality itself. The visitor provokes Billy, implying that "a dream inside a dream might not be a dream," pressing the question of what constitutes the real for himself or for the man whom he has dreamt, or for that man's dream.[90] Billy, quite possibly like the reader, soon finds himself lost in this story. "It just sounds like superstition to me," Billy replies. When the stranger asks what counts as superstition, Billy replies,

> I guess it's when you believe in things that dont exist.
>
> Such as tomorrow? Or yesterday?
>
> Such as the dreams of somebody you dreamt. Yesterday was here and tomorrow's comin.
>
> Maybe. But anyway the dreams of this man were his own dreams. They were distinct from my dream. In my dream the man was lying on his stone asleep.
>
> You could still have made them up . . . It's like that picture of your life in that map.
>
> Cómo?
>
> Es un dibujo nada más. It aint your life. A picture aint a thing. It's just a picture.
>
> Well said. But what is your life? Can you see it? It vanishes at its own appearance. Moment by moment. Until it vanishes to appear no more. When you look at the world is there a point in time when the seen becomes the remembered? How are they separate? It is that which we have no way to show. It is that which is missing from our map and from the picture that it makes. And yet it is all we have.[91]

There is no way to distinguish the representation of life from the living of it. One cannot determine the point at which a life as lived becomes a life remembered, recalled, or represented. A picture of that life is also somehow of a piece, yet distinct, from the given life as lived. The project of picturing one's own life is a narrative demand, since the "events of the waking world . . . are forced upon us

[89] Ibid., 268.
[90] Ibid., 273.
[91] Ibid.

and the narrative is the unguessed axis along which they must be strung. It falls to us to weigh and sort and order these events. It is we who assemble them into the story which is us. Each man is the bard of his own existence."[92] On the other hand, this narrative assemblage signifies a sort of pride since the events of the waking world are imposed upon us and we retain no control over those events once we are called upon to pattern them into coherence. We must draw a map but have no knowledge of the terrain that lies ahead. Thus the dreaming stranger determines that his map project is both demanded and doomed. He tells Billy that

> this life of yours by which you set such store [is not] your doing, however you may choose to tell it. Its shape was forced in the void at the onset and all talk of what might otherwise have been is senseless for there is no otherwise . . . the probability of the actual is absolute. That we have no power to guess it out beforehand makes it no less certain. That we may imagine alternate histories means nothing at all . . . there are no crossroads. Our decisions do not have some alternative. We may contemplate a choice but we pursue one path only.[93]

The Dueña Alfonsa's question from *All The Pretty Horses* – "whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact" – appears finally to be answered in this penultimate dialogue of the trilogy, and the answer is both. The shape is always there, only invisible to us since the actuality of the future is indiscernible to us but no less absolute. So we construct stories and establish patterns as hollow bulwarks against our own unknowing.

This sounds like a gentler version of Chigurh's or Holden's fatalism – or better, a truer version of Nietzsche's. Indeed, when the stranger subsequently tells Billy that his life is therefore "composed not of bone or dream or time but of worship," I take him to be restating the Nietzchean *amor fati*: to accept the real, to accept life as it is and not the ideal one hopes it will be, is to love fate, to worship this life rather than some imagined but transcendent one.

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[92] Ibid., 283.

[93] Ibid., 285-6.

The stranger bids Billy farewell, and Billy journeys on, drinking "one evening from a spring beneath a cottonwood," and using a cup that hangs from a stob there for passing travelers, an anonymous act of hospitality resting expectantly always there on the broken branch of a tree. Billy holds "the cup in both hand as had thousands before him unknown to him yet joined in sacrament."[94] Billy is eventually taken in by a family "just outside of Portales New Mexico and he [stays] in a shed room off the kitchen that was much like the room he'd slept in as a boy."[95] He teaches the children of the family to ride their colt but mostly he just sits with them after supper and plays cards with them or recalls memories of Mexico. The trilogy concludes with the following scene.

> One night he dreamt that Boyd was in the room with him but he would not speak for all that he called out to him. When he woke the woman was sitting on his bed with her hand on his shoulder.
>
> Mr Parham are you all right?
>
> Yes mam. I'm sorry. I was dreamin, I reckon.
>
> You sure you okay?
>
> Yes mam.
>
> Did you want me to bring you a sup of water?
>
> No mam. I appreciate it. I'll get back to sleep here directly.
>
> You want me to leave the light on in the kitchen?
>
> If you wouldnt mind.
>
> All right.
>
> I thank you.
>
> Boyd was your brother.
>
> Yes. He's been dead many a year.
>
> You still miss him though.
>
> Yes I do. All the time.
>
> Was he the younger?
>
> He was. By two years.
>
> I see.
>
> He was the best. We run off to Mexico together. When we was kids. When our folks died. We went down there to see about getting back some horses they'd stole. We was just kids. He was awful good with horses. I always liked to watch him ride. Like to watch him around horses. I'd give about anything to see him one more time.
>
> You will.
>
> I hope you're right.

[94] Ibid., 290.

[95] Ibid.

> You sure you dont want a glass of water?
>
> No mam. I'm all right.
>
> She patted his hand. Gnarled ropescarred, speckled from the sun and the years of it. The ropy veins that bound them to his heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God's plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world. She rose to go.
>
> Betty, he said.
>
> Yes.
>
> I'm not what you think I am. I aint nothin. I dont know why you put up with me.
>
> Well, Mr. Parham, I know who you are And I do know why. You go to sleep now. I'll see you in the morning.
>
> Yes mam.[96]

This final scene rebuts the dreaming stranger's discourse, it gives another answer to Alfonsa's old question. Stories are more than just an imaginative salve that resists the certainty of fate. Billy dreams, but then he offers his dreams and memories of his own life to another, to this hospitable stranger Betty. Betty responds with an act of generosity and care – that recurrent New Testament image of a cup of water to which McCarthy so often turns – and listens to Billy's brief, sad story. That story is offered in unknowing and vulnerability: "I'm not what you think I am. I aint nothin. I dont know why you put up with me." Homeless, aged, alone, and hoping for death, Billy submits himself in vulnerability and loss to Betty's judgment. He is not the bard of his own existence; it does not fall to Billy to weigh and order his own existence. Rather, it is Betty who is given this responsibility. But she does know him, better than he can know himself; or at least she knows enough of him to render a good judgment, to pattern and order his life gently and with care: "I know who you are. And I do know why."

Here is the risk and vulnerability of which Arendt, Caverero, and Butler speak, establishing in this instance an ethic of accountability like that they have suggested. The probability of the actual may be absolute, but it is in our relations with others that new possibilities may be actualized. Most crucially, in the wake of the odd stranger's discourse and his surreal description of the failed map of

[96] Ibid., 290-292.

his own life, Betty takes up Billy's hand and sees in the "ropy veins" that bind his hand to his heart "map enough for men to read." She reads written on the wear of his very body, in the bloodlines of his hand, "God's plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape," to "make a world." Here, in this tender touch and this earnest, uncertain relation, is rendered a worship that gathers up and attends to both bone *and* dream: to Billy's own plenty of signs and wonders, his beaten hands, his broken heart, his tragic story. This act embraces both bone and dream rather than rejecting them for some new narcissistic nihilism. Of course that stranger whom Billy mistook for death could not have plotted his own life as a map. As Butler reminds us, "the 'I' who seeks to chart its course has not made the map it reads, does not have all the language it needs to read the map, and sometimes cannot find the map itself."[97] It is the other to whom we are always given over who will read the map which is written upon our bodies and realized in our acts. The other sees this patterned picture that we cannot see ourselves, because it is legible only to others and so our only hope is that it will be pictured back to us as promise or as pardon. Despite the bleak and tragic fatalism which drives so much of the trilogy, once again McCarthy concludes this work with a moment of tenderness, a fleeting scene of grace that worries all the fatal certainty he has taken such elaborate and poignant pains to plot over three volumes.

The stranger's final discourse is dense and difficult to follow, but it seems clear that the map written on Billy's hands and bound to his heart must somehow resists that dreamer's teachings. What I find most curious about these final, touching pages of the border trilogy are the odd but deliberate eucharistic images I've noted in passing but have left aside until now: the sharing of wafers with that puzzling stranger who resembles death, the cup by the spring which sacramentally unites Billy with unknown, unseen thousands. How does the image of eucharist function here, and why does it so adorn the tender, modestly redemptive end to this tragic series of novels? This is a

[97] Butler, *Giving Account*, 110-1.

question the final chapter of this study will pose before pursuing some possible answers in theology and then concluding with a reading of Cormac McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road*.

Sacrament

Crossings and cannibalism

I concluded the previous chapter with a question: why should the border trilogy's epilogue, which tempers the tragedy of the work as a whole with a moment of grace in which "God's signs and wonders" are written on the hands of an aged homeless man, be framed by images of eucharist? To answer that question I will turn to sacramental theology, as well as pursue the eucharist into McCarthy's most recently published work, *The Road*. I will argue that this last of McCarthy's novels most thoroughly employs and investigates the sacramental imagery that has appeared at moments in the other novels. Although I have so far only briefly characterized the Christian theology of sacraments, here I will show how the Christian sacramental tradition at once to signifies and realizes the fundamental vulnerability and dispossession at the heart of God. By invoking this tradition *The Road* summons forth an ethics that fully reckons with vulnerability and is deeply rooted in dispossession. In other words, it will be an ethics much like the one I have been discerning in McCarthy's works. But the theological questions with which I must begin are ones posed by McCarthy himself in the border trilogy. I will therefore begin by revisiting the trilogy we have just finished, before proceeding towards *The Road* and some contemporary sacramental theology.

The Crossing

As I noted in the previous chapter, *The Crossing* most deeply investigates the nature and implications of storytelling through Billy Parham's conversations with several characters during his many passages across the border. The most important of these conversations for my purposes takes place at the ruins of a church, with an ex-Mormon, ex-Catholic, ex-priest, and present caretaker of the ruined church in an abandoned town. The caretaker came to the town in search of evidence for God, though evidence of a unique sort. He tells Billy that he "was seeking evidence for the hand of

God in the world" and that he "had come to believe that hand a wrathful one and [he] thought that men had not inquired sufficiently into miracles of destruction."[1] He thought, interestingly for the reader, that he might see the trace of God in destruction as in the "cities of the plain."[2] In particular, he tells Billy, he followed the story of another man's destruction. This other man's young son had been killed in an earthquake, and after a long period of grief and withdrawal, this man had retired from his work in the capital and come to the ruins of this church. The grieving man had dreamed of a "God who seemed a slave to his own selfordained duties. A God with a fathomless capacity to bend all to an inscrutable purpose. Not chaos itself lay outside of that matrix. And somewhere in that tapestry that was the world in its making and in its unmaking was a thread that was he and he awoke weeping."[3] So he traveled to a half-collapsed church, "threw down his pallet and made his fire and there he made ready to receive that which had deluded him."[4]

The people of the town called for the priest, whom we later learn is the storyteller himself. The priest and the man argue over the nature of God, the priest standing outside the ruin, the man calling out from within. The grieving man's purpose is to prosecute God to this priest. He has come to condemn God, to "pore over [God's] record not for the honor and glory of his Maker but rather to find against Him. To seek out in nice subtleties some darker nature. False favors. Small deceptions. Promises forsaken or a hand too quickly raised. To make cause against him."[5] It bears saying that this particular deity bears a close resemblance to the gnostic deity I referred to elsewhere, the demiurge who creates a broken material realm out of indifference, ineptitude, or cruelty. The

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[1] McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 142.

[2] Ibid. Interestingly, Jakob Boehme, whose epigram opens *Blood Meridian* and who is referenced in *The Road*, also assumes the search for God in destruction as his mystical task. The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah is one that recurs throughout McCarthy's work. The title of the third volume of the trilogy of course also recalls Sodom and Gomorrah, but the dead earth of *The Road* could also be read this way, and Suttree's glance back toward the razed, smoking neighborhood of McAnally also seems to invoke Lot's wife. Indeed, the 'miracle of destruction' and Sodom and Gomorrah's prototypical instantiation of it in McCarthy invites further study.

[3] Ibid., 149.

[4] Ibid., 150.

[5] Ibid., 153.

grieving man means to draw evidence of this corrupt deity from the scriptural record and from the literal and emotional ruin that surrounds him. The priest, meanwhile, sees a different God in the world. He tells Billy that he was

> a man of broad principles. Of liberal sentiments. Even a generous man. Something of a philosopher. Yet one might say that his way through the world was so broad it scarcely made a path at all. He carried within himself a great reverence for the world this priest. He heard the voice of the Deity in the murmur of the wind in the trees. Even the stones were sacred.[6]

This generous natural theology does not carry the priest very far, however. The storyteller immediately admits to Billy that he

> was a reasonable man and he believed that there was love in his heart. There was not. Nor does God whisper through the trees . . . Trees and stones are no part of it . . . He believed in a boundless God without center or circumference. By this very formlessness he'd sought to make God manageable. This was his colindancia. In his grandness he had ceded all terrain. And in this colindancia God had no say at all.

In other words, the broad, scarcely evident path he plotted in the word was mimicked by his idea of God. Without border – without colindancia – the priest's God had "ceded all terrain." This God's boundlessness functioned as his boundary in the mind of this priest, because through this omnipresence the priest could serve to manage an idea of him. "To see God everywhere is to see Him nowhere."[7]

The priest comes to this paradoxically nihilistic conclusion because be believes that "[a]cts have their being in the witness."[8] Concurring with the linguistic and philosophical themes I read in the novel in chapter four, the ex-priest tells Billy that "the act is nothing, the witness all," that in the world "[o]nly the witness stood firm. And the witness to that witness . . . If the world was a tale who but the witness could give it life? Where else could it have its being? This was the view of things

[6] Ibid., 152
[7] Ibid., 152-3.
[8] Ibid., 154.

that began to speak to him."[9] The priest's broad natural theology, when paired with this notion of the world as tale, subsequently puts his borderless notion of God at peril. The expriest tells Billy that

> he began to see in God a terrible tragedy . . . That for God there could be no witness. Nothing against which He terminated. Nothing by way of which his being could be announced to Him. Nothing to stand apart from and to say I am this and that is other. Where that is I am not. He could create everything save that which would say him no.[10]

Some fairly traditional theological disputes are at play here, though they have been complicated by a postmodern understanding to language. The priest and the pensioner offer two sorts of so-called natural theology, that theological tradition which discerns signs of God in the world around us through the operations of the senses and the rational consideration of human experiences. The priest, moved by the natural beauty of stones and trees, sees God in those stones and trees; the pensioner, devastated by disaster and death, sees God in nature too, only in its terrible and inscrutable power. The gods they see, of course, bear no resemblance to one another. These are caricatures of natural theology; the priest is more of a pantheist, the pensioner (as I've noted) something of a gnostic. Nonetheless, the inspirations here do seem rooted in the natural theology tradition. But as the priest begins to believe that "narrative itself is no category but is rather the category of categories," that "all is telling," the breadth of his idea of God comes more and more to hamper that idea.[11] If being is realized in witness, then a God too expansive to be witnessed – a God without boundaries – cannot rightly be.

The grieving man, whom the ex-priest now refers to as an anchorite, falls ill and as he dies the priest enters the ruined church. The old man takes "the priest's hand as of the hand of a comrade and he [speaks] of his life and what it had been and what it had become. He [tells] the priest what he [has] learned," that "in the end no man can see his life until his life is done," that "the

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 155.
[11] Ibid.

flesh is but a memento, yet it tells the true," that "all men are one and there is no other tale to tell."[12] In this pastoral encounter, the priest reaches an agreement with the old man that he only recognizes once the man has died. In his final words to Billy, the ex-priest says what he finally concluded from his argument with the anchorite:

> [T]he lesson of a life can never be its own. Only the witness has power to take its measure. It is lived for the other only. The priest therefore saw what the anchorite could not. That God needs no witness. Neither to Himself nor against. The truth is rather that if there were no God then there could be no witness for there could be no identity to the world but only each man's opinion of it. The priest saw that there is no man who is elect because there is no man who is not. To God every man is a heretic. The heretic's first act is to name his brother. So that he may step free of him. Every word we speak is a vanity. Every breath taken that does not bless is an affront. Bear closely with me now. There is another who will hear what you never spoke. Stones themselves are made of air. What they have power to crush never lived. In the end we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his grace.[13]

The first line here echoes Cavarero or Butler; we cannot tell our own stories. We are entirely given over to others. Our lives are "lived for the other only." The next lines are perplexing and contradict the ex-priest's earlier words, but I do not take the claim that "God needs no witness" to be a reassertion of the broad natural theology that the priest has already abandoned. There's a subtle shift in the meaning of the word "witness" here, I think, signaled by the next sentence, "Neither to himself nor against." The priest is rather saying that God defies an accounting to reason, that God perplexes natural theology of the sort these men have been engaged in, that God demands neither prosecutor nor defender, that God passes outside the adversarial roles the priest and pensioner have assumed in their argument over the nature of God.

The rest of this passage provokes significant thought and my exegesis of it can only be provisional, as my reading will depend upon the argument of the remainder of this chapter for my rationale to become clear. But the primary Christian alternative to what I've characterized here as

[12] Ibid., 156-7.
[13] Ibid., 158.

natural theology is revealed theology, which claims to recognize God neither directly in nature nor rationally through reflection upon our own experiences, but rather in revelation, which is usually (though not exclusively) understood to be the story of scripture. Indeed, one of the essential tenets of the Protestant Reformation was Luther's *sola scriptura*, his claim that the knowledge of God could only be derived from scripture, from the witness and testimony of God made there, rather than through any rational consideration of the natural world. I don't aim to hew too closely to Luther's own account of revealed theology, but I will argue is that the ex-priest's earlier claim – that "for God there could be no witness" – misses a crucial aspect of the Christian theological tradition: that whether or not God needs any witness, God does consent to be witnessed, to be given over to others, to be stood apart from and to be told "no" dramatically by others, and that God does so in the life of the man Jesus. Indeed, the Christian sacramental tradition extends Jesus' dispossession such that Christian theology describes God as that one so entirely given over to others that God is both signified and realized in the act of that dispossession: the crucifixion of the historical man, the sharing of the scriptural story, the distribution of the sacramental sign. The theological and ethical claims at which the ex-priest arrives – that "if there were no God there could be no witness" and that "the heretic's first act is to name his brother" so he "may step free of him" – follow directly from this sacramental understanding of the dispossessed God. Indeed, the crossing to which the title of this novel refers seems to me to connote crucifixion, the supreme act of God's dispossession in Jesus. The borders of which this trilogy speaks might also imply exactly the colindancias the ex-priest seeks for God. At present these are only provocations. Before progressing to the Christian theological tradition to clarify my reading, allow me to render these provocations somewhat more acute by introducing *The Road*.

The Road

Cormac McCarthy's popularity exploded when his most recent novel, *The Road*, won the Pulitzer Prize and was selected by Oprah Winfrey for her book club in 2007. The *Road* is a fairly straightforward novel in terms of plot. It follows the wanderings of an unnamed man and boy through a post-apocalyptic American southeast. Some unspecified catastrophe has struck the earth – "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" – and something like a nuclear winter has descended upon the world.[14] The sky is constantly clouded with ash and it is always cold. Vegetation has almost entirely died and animal life has followed. All that remains is a handful of humans fighting over the decaying remnants of a lost civilization, foraging in abandoned homes and barren fields for food. In a world like this, it's no surprise that eating takes on a sense of the sacred. McCarthy presents scenes of the man and the boy sharing a can of coke, or a cup of cocoa, or a handful of dried apples with reverence and deliberation. A sacramental tone begins to emerge in the sheer gratitude with which food is given and received. But the competition for scarce resources in this world also means that violence is everywhere and cannibalism has become commonplace.

Of course, cannibalism is not the same as eucharist, and I'll have more to say about other references to Christian sacrament – and eucharist in particular – in a few moments. For now I want just to convey a sense of the violence and terror of the world McCarthy writes. The heart of the novel really is this basic terror. It really is just the story of this man and this boy, "shuffling through the ash," "in the gunmetal light," moving along the ruins of the interstate highway system, walking instinctively towards the sea, trying to stay alive and keep each other alive and to avoid danger, "each the other's world entire."[15] To make matters worse, the man is dying from some unspecified respiratory ailment and he knows his time with his child is limited. His greatest anxiety is the boy's protection – "he knew only that the child was his warrant. He said, if he is not the word of God

[14] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 52.
[15] Ibid., 6.

God never spoke."[16] But the man knows one other thing: that he is dying, and that even if against all odds he can ward off the marauders and cannibals on the road for a time, even if he can scrounge sufficient scraps to keep the boy alive until he himself dies, he will ultimately succumb to his sickness and he will abandon his young son to the road. The man and the boy are always at risk and always freezing and always hungry and always afraid. And this is where the central drama of the novel emerges, in the harrowing matrix of their mutual love and terror.

Early in the novel, there is a flashback of the final conversation between the man and the boy's mother. "Sooner or later," she says to the man, "they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant."[17] She then walks into the darkness and opens her veins with a flake of obsidian. Before she leaves, she says to the man, "I'd take him with me if it weren't for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do."[18] She tells him, "The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself . . . A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable host. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart."[19] That odd advice and that curious phrase – "you won't survive for yourself" so "cobble together some passable host" – are statements I will return to later in this chapter.

This is the peculiar terror of this novel, not only the man's terrifying dilemma: should he remain alive when all around is death and a violent death seems certain? But also the additional and ethically terrifying dilemma: should he kill his son and spare the boy the violence that almost indubitably awaits him? The man wonders continuously if his son's survival is in fact for the best, if

[16] Ibid., 5.
[17] Ibid., 56.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 57.

it doesn't just delay the inevitable at some unknown, terrible cost. The man is always asking himself if he will have the nerve to kill his son in the moment of crisis. In one case, as the man and the boy flee and hide from some pursuing cannibals, the man says to himself. "Now is the time. Curse God and die." But then a moment of doubt: "What if [the gun] doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly."[20] The man and the boy are caught in this double bind, and as they continue advancing down the road, the only justification they can give each other for every forward step is that they must keep trying, that they – in their own words – are "carrying the fire." But that's all they can say, and privately they doubt whether any of it means anything at all.

What might the theology of sacrament bring to bear upon all this? If it were only for the scarcity of food and the fear of cannibals, probably not much at all. But the novel presents far more direct reference to sacrament. To mention a few: the man watches the ash fall like snow and land in his palm and we are told it looks like "the last host of christendom."[21] The man looks out over the road and sees "the salitter drying from the earth."[22] In a coughing fit we find the man "kneeling in the ash like a penitent,"[23] the taste of blood in his mouth. Late in the novel, after another fit of coughing, again tasting blood, the man looks up and through his weeping eyes sees the boy "standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle."[24] But by far the most obvious references to the sacramental tradition occur in two pairs, two sacramental "diptychs," two sets of coupled images placed closely together and

[20] Ibid., 114.
[21] Ibid., 16.
[22] Ibid., 261. Salitter is an archaic German form for saltpeter. Apart from being a crucial ingredient in Judge Holden's devil's batter, Jakob Boehme uses the word salitter to refer to the material presence of God on earth.
[23] Ibid., 54.
[24] Ibid., 273.

clearly not meant to be separated. Early in the novel, filthy from ash, the man and boy find a secluded waterfall filling a clear, cold pool in the woods.

> [The man] unzipped his parka and let it fall to the gravel and the boy stood up and they undressed and walked out into the water. Ghostly pale and shivering. The boy so thin it stopped his heart. He dove headlong and came up gasping and turned and stood, beating his arms.
>
> Is it over my head? the boy called.
>
> No. Come on.
>
> He turned and swam out to the falls and let the water beat upon him. The boy was standing in the pool to his waist, holding his shoulders and hopping up and down. The man went back and got him. He held him and floated him about, the boy gasping and chopping at the water. You're doing good, the man said. You're doing good.[25]

There is a heartrending tenderness to this scene, perhaps because the boy's fear of this shallow pool seems so innocent in the face of the manifest dangers around him. But something about the father's patience, his cradling the boy carefully in the water, the gentle support and the words of comfort – you're doing good, you're doing good – reveal the love and trust between these characters, while distinctly recalling baptism. Shortly after this scene, the boy is taken at knifepoint by a cannibal. The man responds by shooting the assailant in the head. They run, the boy "covered with gore and mute as stone."[26] Safe in the woods a short time later, the man attempts to wash his son's head and hair of the blood and tissue caked there.

> When they'd eaten he took the boy out on the gravelbar below the bridge and he pushed away the thin shore ice with a stick and they knelt there while he washed the boy's face and his hair. The water was so cold the boy was crying . . . This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire . . . he sat holding him while he tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.[27]

Here the narrator directly calls forth baptism, an ancient anointing, but he also calls this a ceremony of air, recalling the language of his wife before her suicide: "cobble together some passable host,

[25] Ibid., 39.

[26] Ibid., 66.

[27] Ibid., 74-5.

breath it into being and coax it along with words of love." These are clearly sacramental images, but how should we read these two baptisms, these ceremonies of air, together?

Baptism isn't the only ceremony constructed of air. Eucharist figures prominently in *The Road* as well. Near the beginning of their journey, while searching for something to eat, the man and the boy enter an old farmhouse. Discovering a locked root cellar, they pry open the hatch and descend the wooden stairs into darkness. This is what they find:

> [The man] crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous.
>
> Jesus, he whispered.
>
> Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us.
>
> Christ, he said. Oh Christ.[28]

The horror of this scene defies first glance; to be clear, these prisoners are being kept and harvested for food. The father and son flee the farmhouse and leave the prisoners behind, only to come soon after upon another covered cellar in the backyard of another abandoned house. Despite his sons hysterical protests, the father descends again. "This is what the good guys do," he tells his son, they "keep trying. They don't give up."[29] Underground, they discover a bomb shelter fully stocked with food and supplies. In the safety of the shelter, surrounded by an abundance they could not have dreamt, the boy asks his father to wait a moment before they begin their first meal. This is what the boy says during that pause:

> The boy sat staring at his plate. He seemed lost. The man was about to speak when he said: Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God.
>
> He looked up. Is that okay? he said.
>
> Yes. I think that's okay.[30]

[28] Ibid., 110.

[29] Ibid., 137.

[30] Ibid., 146.

The invocation of Christ, the remembrance of the dead, the repentance of sins, the consumption of human flesh, thanksgiving to God: all signs point to eucharist. But again, how are we to read these two scenes, one tender, the other terrifying, and each indubitably paired to the other? How should we interpret the tensions so central to these stories? The answer, I contend, lies in the theological tradition I outlined in the introduction and which I have already invoked in my reading of *The Crossing*. Indeed, I contend that this theological traditional is specifically called forth by these disturbing sacramental diptychs. To answer the questions I have so far raised, allow me to briefly account for some Christian understandings of the doctrines of revelation, narration, incarnation, and sacrament.

Divine dispossession

As I noted earlier, one of the fundamental tenets of Christian doctrine is that God is revealed through scripture in an exclusive and uniquely exhaustive way. In this section of the chapter, I will trace out how that theological understanding of revelation has been reconsidered in light of narrative, and how it demands further consideration given the postmodern accounts of identity and narrative I have discussed. The result will be the confluence of a particular sort of narrative theology with the theology of sacrament, and a Christological insight into the dispossession signified and realized in the identity of Jesus Christ. This will in turn illuminate how the sacramental imagery of *The Road* serves to summon the ethic of dispossession that seems so subtly to arise everywhere in McCarthy's work.

Narration and incarnation

The reliance of Christian theology on narrative – and in particular, the scriptural narrative of the bible – begins with a problem of modern epistemology. At the high point of Enlightenment

thought, Kant famously argues that metaphysics definitionally transcends the bounds of experience. But thought never relents in pressing against those experiential boundaries, and indeed, the abutting of reason against those boundaries necessarily infers some transcendental concepts as grounds for thinking. Whatever the status of this transcendental inference, Kant philosophically limits the possibilities for natural theology. One could easily read much of the Protestant theology which follows in Kant's wake as wrestling with the boundaries of reason in an attempt to place theology upon stable philosophical ground. Karl Barth, in the early twentieth century, takes a different position. Barth embraces the problem posed by Kant and instead leans upon the traditional doctrine of *sola scriptura* in order to evade Kant's critique. Christianity rests upon scripture, not experience, says Barth, and this commitment causes him to pay particular attention to the shape and import of scriptural narrative. When considering the mystery of God, Barth "looks to the story for a solution. He says the identity of God and man in Jesus Christ cannot be a postulate but must be derived from 'what took place in this man,' choosing to 'form his concept of who God is from this story."[31] To be more accurate , for Barth Christianity rests on Jesus Christ, but the only access the Christian has to Jesus is the witness of him given in scripture. Crucially, for Barth the scriptural narrative is not meant to present an exhaustive account of historical events; it is meant singularly to describe God in Jesus Christ. The meaning of the text is the identity of God, not the circumstance of history. Barth never "denies that the Gospels refer to historical events," of course, "but he does deny that critical investigation of the events should be coordinated with exegesis of the biblical text in order to arrive at the text's meaning."[32] The meaning of the text, for Barth, is theological, not historical, and so although the historical may illuminate the theological, it must not obscure it. The meaning of the text is God in Christ.

[31] David Ford, *Barth and God's Story* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1985), 35-6.
[32] Ibid., 51-2.

Attention to the narrative meaning of the gospels is implied and alluded to in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, but Hans Frei pursues this distinction between the theological and historical in an exhaustive way. In his comprehensive *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei documents the shift in scriptural hermeneutics since the Reformation, discerning a move away from the "realistic, literal reading of the text" towards "an attempt to reconstruct critically the events recounted."[33] Instead of looking to the text to identify Jesus Christ, hermeneuts now look to the text to construct history.

> The confusion of history-likeness (literal meaning) and history (ostensive reference), and the hermeneutical reduction of the former to an aspect of the latter, meant that one lacked the distinctive category and the appropriate interpretative procedure for understanding what one had actually recognized: the high significance of the literal, narrative shape of the stories for their meaning. And so, one might add, it has by and large remained ever since.[34]

Again, for Frei, the literal meaning of the narrative is the identity of Jesus, not the circumstance of historical reference. We read the bible to know Jesus Christ, not to generate a historical account. The major theological project of Frei's career thus becomes the identification of Jesus Christ in this narrative. If the foundation for Christian theology is Jesus Christ, then "in the Gospels, which tell us most of what we know about Jesus, his identity is grasped only by means of the story told about him . . . The identity of the Christian savior is completely revealed by the story of Jesus in the Gospels and by none other."[35] This is Luther's *sola scriptura*, though chastened somewhat by Kant. Frei means to inquire "into the shape of a story and what it tells about a man, in contrast to metaphysical explanations that would tell us what sorts of things are or are not real and on what principles they cohere."[36] This story reveals a man, not a dogma. The dogma is the story of this man. Again, the foundation for Christianity is Jesus Christ, and since this is the sole surviving account of that man, it's meaning is the description of that man's identity over and above any metaphysical claim.

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[33] Ibid., 50.
[34] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 29.
[35] Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 133.
[36] Ibid., 134.

What, then, constitutes identity for Frei? According to Frei, identity descriptions answer two related questions: "Who is he?" and "What is he like?"[37] These questions can be answered through attention to a person's actions, because a "person is what he *does* centrally and most significantly."[38] Here we see telling resemblances between Frei and Arendtian thought. But there are differences too. For Frei, in "asking what a person is like, it is essential to grasp the intimate unity of intention and action."[39] Thus, in reading the gospel accounts, Frei contends that the "identity of Jesus in that story is not given simply in his inner intention, in a kind of story behind the story. It is given, rather, in the enactment of his intentions . . . his identity is given in the mysterious coincidence of his intentional action with circumstances partly initiated by him, partly devolving to him."[40]

As may be obvious by now, Frei's approach is heavily indebted to Erich Auerbach's description of biblical narrative. We read Jesus' actions in this story, but these acts are laden with meaning and reveal something deeper. Yet Frei resists any discursive move towards that background. When we examine the identity of Jesus, we are

> thrown back on the story simply as a story . . . It does *not* light up the motives, the decision-making process, the internal ambiguities, or the personality of the story's chief protagonist. Nor is there, precisely at those point in the story where claim is laid to a knowledge of Jesus' intentions, any evidence whatever that there were others present or that he had shared his thoughts with them.[41]

Frei insists that the story does not describe any background intention; but he's also confident that the actions reveal a background identity. Like Auerbach's Abraham, Frei reads Jesus as a bare story, fraught with background. He focuses on the narrated acts of Christ: "Jesus was what he did and

[37] Ibid., 136.
[38] Ibid..
[39] Ibid.,
[40] Ibid., 138.
[41] Ibid., 103.

suffered, the one whose identity was enacted in his passion and death."[42] There remains "about the person," in this case Jesus, "a certain elusive and unfinished, but also persistent, quality."[43]

I've pursued this extended excursus into the nature of scriptural narrative because of the ways it both conforms with but also confounds the narrative theory I've outlined elsewhere. Frei looks to the narrative of Jesus to recognize Jesus' identity, and he locates that self in the acts of Jesus. But what if this theological devotion to Jesus' narrated identity in the gospel left behind of the metaphysical background that it inherits from Auerbach (as Frei sometimes seems to imply might be possible)? What if it troubled the intention-action binary that so closely aligns with McIntyre? What if the name "Jesus" did "not indicate an identifiable 'character,' but [was] rather the obscure and mysterious hinge which permit[ted] shifts from one kind of discourse to another"?[44] What if the meaning of this story were not hiding behind the story, but waiting to be realized by the sharing of it? What if the narrative of this man Jesus were like all other such human narratives, as described by Arendt, Cavarero, and Butler? In other words, what if the story of Jesus both signified and realized the dispossession of Jesus as a human subject? What if, rather than the discovery of a background identity, the story signified the giving-over of that identity to others? What if the identity of Jesus Christ were dispossession itself?

Signification and dispossession

Indeed, some contemporary theology has begun to think through precisely these question, especially as they relate to language. It asks how to begin with the same Christological commitment that Barth and Frei hold – that the foundation of Christianity is the man Jesus – while understanding the human identity of Jesus to be as troubled, deferred, and displaced by the complications of

[42] Ibid., 155.
[43] Ibid., 165.
[44] John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 149.

postmodern theories of representation, signification, and narration as that of any other human. As Rowan Williams writes, there is indeed

> one authorized "sign" which for once we cannot mistake as anything *but* a sign. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are *res* in the world's history, yet they are *signum* in a unique sense . . . the incarnation manifests the essential quality of the world itself as 'sign' or trace of its maker. It instructs once and for all that we have our identity within the shifting, mobile realm of representation.[45]

The incarnation is a sign; that is, the humanity of Jesus is given in the instability of signs as is any other human identity. When we apply Arendt, Cavarero, and Butler to the story of Jesus, we see that the humanity of Jesus Christ is realized in a dispossession like any other human identity. Thus it's no wonder that Williams concludes that "God is present in the world . . . in a death, in weakness, in activity, negation, the *infirma divinitas* … the weak God lying at our feet . . . it is this emptiness of meaning and power that makes Christ supremely *signum*."[46] What's especially important here is the coincidence of signification and realization in Christ. God is both signified and realized in negation, death, and emptiness of Jesus. Jesus' identity is given in a story, in signs; this does not indicate a surplus of meaning behind the story as Auerbach suggests. Rather, it reveals and realizes the emptiness of meaning in Christ as the supreme sign, the sign of what signs are and do. The meaning of this embodied sign, like any other, does not lie behind the sign. It lies in wait, among the others to whom it has been given over. And the crucified Jesus signifies and realizes this fundamental giving over, this essential dispossession, entirely. The "Word incarnate and crucified represents the absence and deferral that is basic to *signum* as such, and represents also, crucially . . . the fact that absence and deferral are the means whereby God engages our desire so that it is freed from its own pull towards finishing, towards presence and possession."[47] On this model, the sign of Christ is a sign that defers our own subjectivities too. Christ is entirely given over, and we are also, incapable or finishing or

[45] Rowan Williams, "Language, Reality, and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*," *Journal of Literature and Theology* (July 1989, 3.2), 140-1.
[46] Ibid., 144.
[47] Ibid., 148.

possessing ourselves. On "the cross (in its 'textual' positioning, which at once includes, without exhausting, the physical event of the cross and extends to the cross elevated into a figure of meaning), Jesus is 'substituted' for us, because here (as the accounts of the last supper suggest) he becomes totally a sign."[48]As supreme sign, Jesus resists presence and completion in a way that models our own human deferral of identity and dispossession.

This incarnational, cruciform theology has implication for the theology of sacraments. The sacraments are signs, but as Williams writes, "signs are signs of what they are not."[49] So if sacraments are signs of Christ, how can they bear the full presence of that which they are not, that is, of Christ? Only if Christ were realized in dispossession, only if the presence in the bread and wine is of a God who is negated and undone, a Christ who consents to death. Indeed, Williams sources the Augustinian tradition of sacraments as actions rather than mere objects to illustrate that the holy does not hide behind or beyond signs as a distant referent; rather, it is realized in the acts of signification.[50] Again, identity is enacted, and this identity enacts Jesus' absolute dispossession. The "act of new creation is an act of utter withdrawal. Death is the beginning of the new order, and this divine dispossession points back to questions about the very nature of the creative act itself, as more like renunciation than dominance."[51] Nor should we be surprised at the kenotic self-humiliation of Christ on the cross, because this is precisely what faith also claims God consents to in Christ. Sacrament is an extension of incarnation. In the sacraments, Williams writes, "there is indeed a sense in which we meet God in emptiness and silence, in the void of Good Friday and Holy Saturday."[52]

[48] Milbank, *Word Made Strange*," 160.
[49] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 207.
[50] Ibid., 206. "The sign that is Christ and the signs of Christ are equally God in act."
[51] Ibid., 216.
[52] Ibid., 207.

As Simone Weil says in her notebooks, "He emptied himself of his divinity by becoming man, then of his humanity by becoming a corpse (bread and wine), matter."[53]

As John Milbank's reference to the last supper suggests, the link among incarnation, signification, and the cross can be especially fruitful for sacramental theology. Williams only gestures at the implications. But nowhere is this threefold link more thoroughly pursued than in the work of Louis-Marie Chauvet. Chauvet attempts to read the relation among incarnation, sacrament, and the cross through a Lacanian lens. Jacques Lacan articulates a form of dispossession in signs that recalls what we've already encountered in Butler:

> I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realized in my history is not the past definite or what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.[54]

Following Lacan, Chauvet maintains that human subjectivity only ever arises through the mediation of language, through the mediation of signs and symbols. "Like the body," Chauvet writes, "language is not an instrument [of the human] but a mediation [of the human]; it is in language that humans as subjects come to be. Humans do not preexist language; they are formed in [the] womb [of language]. They do not possess it like an 'attribute'. . . they are possessed by it."[55] The analogue here is the body. Humans are not human unless embodied; likewise, humans come to be in language, too. Flesh and blood and speech and sign are media of human beings, not attributes or instruments of human beings. They are what we are, not just the tools we use to express what we are. For Chauvet, we are never able to leave this mediation behind. The mediation of the symbolic order, of language, "always-already precedes human beings and allows them to become human because they

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[53] Quoted in Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 218.

[54] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 86.

[55] Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*: *A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan S.J. and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 87.

start from a world already humanized before them and passed on to them as a universe of meaning."[56]

Following Lacan, Chauvet warns that these signs "play a double and paradoxical function: they constitute the mediation for the advent of the subject, to the extent that the subject is represented in them; but also, and simultaneously, they constitute the mediation of the *exclusion* of the subject, to the extent that the latter is *only* represented in them . . . it is precisely this lack, this lack-in-being, that saves the subject."[57] Chauvet calls this a presence in absence; it is only in consenting to arise as a representation, in "consenting to never being able to leave mediation behind," in consenting to presence in absence, that the human subject comes to birth.[58] I can only represent myself through signs, so I depend upon that representation for my selfhood. But that signed selfhood is only a re-presentation. In Chauvet's words, language "breaks forever the imaginary coincidence of the self with itself."[59] As Terry Eagleton eloquently paraphrases, the self "can be detected only negatively, in the lack which stirs at the heart of language."[60] Subjectivity arises as a negation, a mediating re-presentation of the self through signs. The theological implications for incarnation are immediately clear and resound with Williams and Milbank even as they complicate and enrich Frei: if God wills to be human in Jesus, then God wills to be mediated as a body and through signs. If we want to say that the word becomes flesh in Jesus, we must also say it remains entirely indebted to words in Jesus too. Like any human being, the being of Jesus is realized in the flesh but also in signs, and Chauvet marries this mediation through both the body and through language to the theology of the cross.

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[56] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 98.
[57] Ibid., 96.
[58] Ibid., 98.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Terry Eagleton, *The Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 84.

Luther asserts that the cross of Christ is the supreme revelation of God, and Williams echoes Luther's sentiment using a semiological vocabulary. Following Luther and Williams, Chauvet also asserts that "God is nowhere more divine than in the humanity – the subhumanity - of the Crucified."[61] We learn about God's divinity from Jesus' humanity, and among the wounds that the crucified Jesus bears are those uniquely human ones, the wounds of subjectivity, the lack-in-being of re-presentation. If the presence of God is singularly revealed in the humanity of Jesus, a Jesus who lives "human existence to its very end, that is, [to] death, [to] a death lived in the silence of God," then that divine presence arises in and with a human subjectivity that itself has arisen only mediately as representation.[62] The divine presence is revealed as human presence, which itself is always-already mediated symbolically, with no transcendent subject behind the symbol. Put more directly, Chauvet complains that too many traditional accounts of God fail to commit entirely to the human subjectivity of the man of Jesus, a humanity ultimately realized in dereliction and abandonment on the cross, in a death that wholly exemplifies and fulfills the lack-in-being of human subjectivity.

Theology demands a metaphysics of presence, a God who is above and beyond the cross of Christ, a transcendent presence impervious to passion. But for Chauvet this reversion to a metaphysics of presence, to onto-theology, is just a form of Nestorianism, a fifth century heresy condemned for separating the human and divine persons in Christ.[63] We need a new, "meontological" notion of God says Chauvet, a "non-tology," if I may coin a translation of his neologism. Starting "from the 'simple notion' of God and all of God's essential attributes as Supreme Being, classic onto-theology [can] not conceive the magnitude of the self-renunciation of God" on the cross, a renunciation so complete that it is realized as lack, as want and absence.[64]

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[61] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 493.
[62] Ibid., 498.
[63] Interestingly, Chauvet accuses Barth of just this Nestorian tendency, a theological reticence around the degree to which God is empties entirely into Jesus, even into his suffering and death.
[64] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*., 532.

Chauvet begins not with an onto-theological idea of God, but with Jesus, and with the dying Jesus in particular. The cross "crosses out" the traditional notion of God. And since human subjectivity – including the human subjectivity of Jesus – comes to be through a lack in being, when the divine consents to be present in the life and death of the human being Jesus, the divine likewise consents to that absence, too.

Such presences in absence are mediated in signs, through symbols, and Chauvet regards sacraments as the supremely suitable symbols for the crucified. God empties Godself into the crucified; the crucified empties into signs; these signs bear the full presence of the crucified one as an absence. "The mystery of the sacraments are the great symbols of this mystery of God taking flesh in humanity . . . The fact that we can confess the very glory of God in the sub-humanity of him whom human beings have reduced to less than nothing revolutionizes every representation of 'God.' The crossing out thus executed over the majestic [Being] of 'God' is the trace of an historic and symbolic meontology to think of God in God's mystery as the One who is 'crossed out' in humanity . . . and who thus gives to the former the possibility of becoming the 'sacramental' place where God takes on a body."[65] No wonder, then, that Chauvet so closely reads the Emmaus encounter, during which the disciples realize Christ is present only as he breaks the bread and vanishes from their sight. According to Chauvet, theology strains to "conceive the magnitude of the self-renunciation of God" on the cross, a renunciation so complete that it is realized – made real – as lack, as want and absence.[66] A theology of incarnation that adequately reckons with the symbolic structure of human subjectivity will discern the human being of Jesus as broken in both body and sign. "The mystery of the sacraments are . . . precisely the major symbolic 'expressions' of God's effacement . . . in the flesh."[67]

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[65] Ibid., 536.
[66] Ibid., 532.
[67] Ibid., 536.

I have some misgivings about Chauvet's theological method. I prefer Williams or a Arendtian-inflected Frei, who begin with Christ as the primordial human subject, structured by signage and dispossession, and who then model the dispossession basic to all humans upon the dispossessed nature of Christ. Chauvet begins with Jacques Lacan and then structures Jesus' identity around a psychoanalytic account of subjectivity. But this reflects broader methodological disputes between rival (that is, Reformed versus Roman) theological traditions and is not pertinent to my reading either of sacramental theology or of Cormac McCarthy. Whatever other theological commitments one holds, if one agrees that human identity is realized through the act of signification, then the identity of God – if it be a fully human identity – will be realized in the same way. And if, as Chauvet, Williams, and the *theologia crucis* tradition insist, the humanity of God – especially the humanity of the crucified one, Jesus – is the singular event of revelation and the revelatory event of incarnation, then we see that God in Christ is the one who is emptied into human subjectivity, who arises in self-dispossession, whose presence is represented and re-presented as absence, whose being is realized (made real) through a lack-in-being. The sacraments, the signs of Christ, re-present the self-abnegation of God in Christ. In other words, as Rowan Williams stirringly concludes, if these signs will speak of God in Christ at all, then "let them . . . speak of nakedness, death, danger, materiality, and stubborn promise."[68]

Sacramental acts

Nakedness, death, danger, materiality, and stubborn promise return us to the world of Cormac McCarthy. Let me to return again to those troubling scenes I've already recounted: the tender moment in the swimming hole, the child's head cleaned of gore in a dirty ditch; the humble thanks of a hungry child, the horrid cries of a tortured amputee. And let me offer one more jarring

[68] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 221.

pair before proceeding. I've mentioned that the only justification the man and boy give each other for continuing their walk down the road is that they are "carrying the fire." Like most critics, when I first read this novel I thought this was just a generally meaningless phrase meant to convey a sense of persistence or endurance. But a fellow reader of *The Road* informed me that this must be a biblical reference, because the book of Genesis tells us that when Abraham ascended Mount Moriah to slay Isaac, he carried the fire for the sacrifice while Isaac carried the kindling.[69] In a novel where the central dilemma is at what point you shall murder your son, this cannot be accidental. Remember the mother's assertion that the only morally justifiable act in her world is to give a death and to die. Her argument is irreproachable, but immediately after this argument is presented in the text, the narrator recalls the boy's birth: "Gloves meant for dishwashing. The improbable appearance of the small crown of the head. Streaked with blood and lank black hair. The rank meconium . . . He held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and cut the cord with kitchen shears and wrapped his son in a towel."[70] The preciousness of this scene is offset internally against the commonplace, sometimes dirty details of the birth – the gloves, the meconium, the kitchen shears. But the birth is also set in a larger context against the case for murder-suicide the mother has just given.

Why this juxtaposition of birth and death, why these three disjunctive pairings? The poet and writer Kathleen Norris has written of childbearing and childrearing that "at the deepest level, a pregnant woman must find the courage to give birth to a creature who will one day die, as she herself must die. And there are no promises, other than the love of God, to tell us that this human round is anything but futile."[71] To give birth is to guarantee death. It is to give death to one's own beloved, who can only come into being through the gift of that death. Bearing a child is a sacrifice of love, made worthwhile only by virtue of the loving promise that the birth signifies. But that birth,

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[69] I owe this crucial insight to a student I never met, Dale Stinchcomb, but upon whose perceptive reading so much of this study depends.

[70] McCarthy, *The Road*, 59.

[71] Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy, and Women's Work* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 86.

for Norris and for the man in *The Road* also, is not merely the sign of promise. It realizes that promise also. The man has no rational argument with which to counter his wife, but he moves forward and carries the fire of his son's inevitable death, armed only with this stubborn promise: that the certainty of death does not diminish the preciousness of his everyday acts of love; that the goodness of cradling your child in a swimming hole will not be undermined though it be surrounded by unimaginable horrors; that a quiet prayer of thanks over a plate of warm food is sacred, however hungry you have been or will be. This is Vereen Bell yet again – "the world itself is mysterious enough without involving ideas or transcendence of it" – but here portrayed in sacramental imagery.[72] The worth and meaning of life is not located beyond or behind these common, corporal acts of love, just as the fullness of Christ is not located beyond or behind the acts of Jesus. That birth and that bath and that meal are not signs of life, or not *just* signs of life: these acts themselves bear the fullness of life itself. They do not point beyond themselves to some greater value: they themselves realize that value. They aren't signs of something else waiting down the road worth surviving for. The acts themselves – lifting your child above the ruins, hugging your child under a waterfall, feeding your child a buttered biscuit – they themselves justify all the risks they entail. In this sense, the logic of the man's stubborn, sacrificial promise to carry the fire for his son follows the logic of sacrament that I've described, a logic which likewise locates the sacred not behind or beyond the fallen world, but squarely in the world and in the midst of all its brokenness.

What then are we to make of the mother's challenge to the man, that if he would survive he must construct a passable host, breathe it into being, coax it along with words of love? I would not diminish the force of her argument here. The woman knows birth is sacrifice. She accuses the man precisely of sacrificing too much, of forcing the boy to stand for his selfish need to believe in something. But for the man, caring for his child is not just a passing stand-in for some ultimate value

[72] Bell, *Achievement*, 2.

which his wife has exposed as empty. These passable hosts may be fleeting, but they are not mere symbols. Hugging your child, feeding your child, telling him stories, keeping him safe: these entirely bear the love that they passably, passingly signify. The man intuits, in a manner that recalls the theology of sacrament, that the lack behind the enacted sign of love does not impoverish the fullness of the love so signed. Thus, as much as this novel recalls the theology of the cross, it can be seen to *resist* the theology of the cross as well. In Luther's least subtle moments the theology of the cross can flatten or condense the whole of the incarnation into three horrific hours at Golgotha. Recall Luther's words – "God can be found *only* in suffering and the cross."[73] But Jesus did more than die. For one thing, he broke bread with his friends on the night before he died. Against the most reductive readings of Luther, sacramental theology brings the whole of incarnation to bear against the suffering of the cross. Cormac McCarthy reminds us that the sacraments reckon holy a whole host of quotidian, corporeal actions and so broadens a commitment to the cross into a fully fledged incarnational theology, a theology for the whole of life, a theology that cherishes ordinary moments of love over and against the cruel reality of death. Jesus did more than die, and so does the father in this novel. Though the man cannot deny his own impending death anymore than we can deny Jesus Christ's, the acts of love with which he fills his numbered days still defy death's power to efface them. Though these acts may be only passing hosts for goodness, they do not merely refer to some greater good that the man and boy are on the road to find: they embody that goodness entirely. There is no fullness behind them; these passing hosts bear all the fullness of the holy. There is no meaning or value or holiness beyond the love of this man for his child and the child for this man; that love itself is meaning and value and holiness. When the man holds his child or feeds his child or warms his child by the fire, "this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground."[74]

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[73] Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *Luther's Works Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, eds. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1957), 52.
[74] McCarthy, *The Road*, 31.

Which leads to the second part of the woman's statement, that one would do well to live for another. If one insists, as does the man, that the enacted signs of life bear the fullness of life, if one demands that these acts make their stand against the horrors all around, if one holds with stubbornness to a promise that the lack-in-being lying behind our passing subjectivities and passable hosts and ceremonies of air is in fact exactly what facilitates the preciousness of fragile gifts like love and tenderness and goodness and beauty, then ethical implications immediately inhere. Because if life is not just about survival, not just about accomplishing or achieving some final end, some final meaning beyond life, if the primary value of life is entirely present in these passing, fragile acts of love, then the way we treat each other here and now matters. And if there is a consistent conflict between father and son in *The Road*, it revolves around the matter of treating others rightly.

The rule of the road

At the end of *Cities of the Plain*, Billy Parham tells the stranger he mistakes for death that "el compartir es la ley del camino."[75] Sharing is the rule of the road. This sounds like a platitude or a truism, but in fact it is intimately derived from the sacramental dispossession and sacrificial acts I've just described. Four moments exemplify the dilemma of ethics on the road.

First, while his father is foraging, the boy sees another boy across the street and chases after him. The father, believing the other boy to be bait for a trap, grabs his son and scolds him, "Do you want to die?" The boy protests, "I want to see him, Papa . . . I'm afraid for that little boy . . . We should go get him Papa. We could get him and take him with us."[76]

The day after a lightning storm the man and the boy come upon a burn victim "shuffling along the road before them, dragging one leg slightly and stopping from time to time to stand

[75] McCarthy, *Cities*, 267.
[76] Ibid., 85.

stooped and uncertain before setting out again."[77] The man is badly injured, "as burntlooking as the country, his clothing scorched and black. One of his eyes [is] burnt shut and his hair [is] but a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull. As they [pass] he [looks] down. As if [he's] done something wrong."[78] The boy begs his father to let them stop and help, but the father refuses. "No," the man says, "there's nothing to be done for him."[79]

When the man and the boy happen upon an old, blind seer named Ely, the boy insists that they give him some food and invite him to join their campfire. The next morning the man

> and the boy [argue] about what to give the old man. In the end he [doesn't] get much. Some cans of vegetables and of fruit. Finally the boy just [goes] over to the edge of the road and [sits] in ashes . . . You should thank him, you know, the man [says to Ely]. I wouldnt have given you anything.

Finally, late in the novel "an outcast from one of the communes" with the fingers missing from his right hand steals all the man and boy's belongings.[80] When they catch him, the father forces the thief to strip naked at gunpoint and takes his rags of clothing away, a death sentence in the cold. "I'm going to leave you the way you left us," the man says.[81] Afterwards the boy cries and begs his father,

> Just help him, Papa. Just help him . . . [He's] just hungry, Papa. He's going to die.
>
> He's going to die anyway.
>
> He's so scared, Papa.
>
> The man [squats] and [looks] at him. I'm scared, he [says]. Do you understand? I'm scared.
>
> The boy [doesn't] answer. He just [sits] there with his head bowed, sobbing.[82]

We can sympathize with the man's fierce protectiveness in every case. But the ferocity with which he guards his son perhaps leads him to wander into a different version of his wife's onto-

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[77] Ibid., 49.
[78] Ibid., 49-50.
[79] Ibid., 50.
[80] Ibid., 255.
[81] Ibid., 257.
[82] Ibid., 259.

theological error. If for the woman death is absolute, for the man survival is just as absolute. To keep his child safe he must betray the very love for which the boy has come to stand as symbol. The child's survival precludes any hint of vulnerability or mercy to anyone else, even towards those biblically enjoined others: the young, the old, the blind, the stranger, the outcast. The man will give himself up for his child, it's true, but for no other. In his own, protective, sympathetic way, the man inches an ethical step closer to Anton Chigurh: he will not make himself vulnerable.

The boy, however, believes something else, something Johann Metz has characterized using the vocabulary of sacrament. When "life aims only at survival," writes Metz, "even that success will soon be denied it."[83] The ultimately vain contest to survive and evade death turns our fellows into rivals, into enemies and competitors for finite goods, and ultimately into objects for our domination. This is the world of *The Road*. Recall that first basement, where humans are literally consumed as objects for survival, sacrificed to the gods of self-preservation, a horrific black mass.[84] When life attends to the sufferings of others, when it makes itself available to self-dispossession, when it faces death directly and becomes vulnerable to others' needs, it stands free to accept what Metz calls the true "nourishment and sacrament of life."[85] The bread of eucharist is the sign of a death, says Metz, but under that deadly sign hides the real meaning of life, which is in fact not survival but love. According to Metz, once we accept the inevitability of our own and others' deaths, we can leave

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[83] Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 55.

[84] Images of sacrament are less common in McCarthy's Appalachian novels – *Suttree* excepted – but one example is specifically worth noting. McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, is a book which in some ways seems inversely to figure *The Road*. The main character, Culla Holme, impregnates his sister Rinthy but then steals the child upon delivery and leaves the infant to die in the woods. The child survives and Rinthy sets off to search of him. Culla follows in pursuit of his sister. These characters wander through the same southeastern United States which sets *The Road*, though they are unsure exactly what they're searching for. There is a similar degree of danger on this road, as a trio of murderers moves through the land randomly killing people. Ultimately the murderers take possession of the lost child and Culla comes upon them all in the woods. They ask Culla to take responsibility for the boy several times, and when he will not, they slit the child's throat and drink the toddler's blood. Culla's failure to respond, to take responsibility, to risk himself, leads to the literal consumption of the child. For an excellent reading of this scene and the novel, see Edwin Arnold, "Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables," *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 45-70.

[85] Metz, *Passion for God*, 56.

aside a domination that strives futilely after a transcendent sort of survival and turn instead towards the real meaning of life: a love which embraces risk, embraces finitude, and embraces suffering. We might accept that "self-preservation is not the highest goal . . . That we are impinged upon primarily against our will is the sign of a vulnerability and a beholdenness that we cannot will away."[86] Or, as Rowan Williams puts it, for Christians the primary question is: "does [one's action] speak of the God whose nature is self-dispossession for the sake of the life of the other?"[87] What grounds ethics is "the candid acknowledgement of [our] powerlessness, in grief, not in complacency, because in this way it models" (as do the sacraments, I would add) "the divine dispossession."[88] To emphasize Williams here: ethics are grounded in grief. "All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, the father whispered to the sleeping boy, I have you."[89]

This is important because it clarifies how one should read the relevance of Christianity to this novel as well how one might regard the role narrative plays in its ethic. Critics who want to preserve some relevance for the Christian religion in *The Road* tend too simply to see the boy as the singular incarnation of God, much as the man does: "If he is not the word of God God never spoke."[90] If love will save what's left of the world, these critics claim, then that love is mysteriously modeled by the man and singularly embodied by the boy.[91] Allen Josephs, for example, sees the man's dying words – "Goodness will always find the little boy. It always has. It always will." – as

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[86] Butler, *Giving Account*, 100.
[87] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 263.
[88] Ibid.
[89] McCarthy, *The Road*, 54.
[90] McCarthy, *The Road*, 5.
[91] For examples, see especially Allen Josephs, "The Quest for God in *The Road*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Stephen Frye (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 133-148. and Thomas Carlson's "With the World at Heart: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* with Augustine and Heidegger" in *Religion and Literature* 39 no. 3 (Autumn 2007): 47-71.

expressing a climactic sort of faith in the boy as the pinnacle of human goodness.[92] But as Josephs acknowledges yet fails to understand, the man is referring here to the boy they fled in fear while foraging, not to his own son. Goodness is about the risk of relation with strangers rather than the singularity of one's own relation. Even those readings which most carefully read the love of the man for the boy disregard how the man's exclusive care for his child forestalls relation and frustrates goodness. Because the man (and these critics) too closely identify the boy with the word of God they disregard the dispossession inherent in every spoken word, in every human identity. To say this child is the word of God is another way of saying that he is fundamentally given over to others, like God is in Christ and like all of us are too, without exception and without end. To call this child a sign of God is to incur an immediate demand for dispossession. The difficult lesson of this novel, embodied in the vulnerability of this boy, is that love demands a dispossession that will undermine the care that we offer even to those we love most.

As to the narrative foundation for ethics in *The Road*, if stories lay some foundation for moral reasoning in this novel it is not because they describe characters or characteristic virtues. Rather, it is because they condition humans as fundamentally dispossessed of themselves. This is another reason Frei's intention-action model of Christ's identity – what is a person like? – invites revision by the theology of sacraments. Recall MacIntyre's ethical project in which we always knows the end of the story and infer the intention and identity behind action from that end. On his model, ethics should describe and generate practices that lead to a desired, natural conclusion. But this idea of storytelling entirely fails to ground the ethical in *The Road*, where the end remains so obscure and the good so indiscernible. Lydia Cooper, whose readings of McCarthy I find nearly everywhere else persuasive, notes "the crucial role of storytelling in the transmission of a moral sensibility" in the

[92] McCarthy, *The Road*, 281.

novel.[93] But the failure of a narrative ethics of this sort – as carriers of moral sensibilities, as vessels of virtue – is quite clearly demonstrated by the text.

In hopes of cultivating some goodness in his son, the man tells "the boy stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them."[94] But after the father shoots a man with a flare gun in self-defense , the boy doesn't want to hear them anymore.

> You have to talk to me, [the man] said.
> I'm talking.
> Are you sure?
> I'm talking now.
> Do you want me to tell you a story?
> No.
> Why not?
> The boy looked at him and looked away.
> Why not?
> Those stories are not true.
> They don't have to be true. They're stories.
> Yes. But in those stories we're always helping people and we dont help people.
> Why dont you tell me a story?
> I dont want to.
> Okay.
> I dont have any stories to tell.
> You could tell me a story about yourself.
> You already know all the stories about me. You were there.
> You have stories inside that I dont know about.
> You mean like dreams?
> Like dreams. Or just things that you think about.
> Yeah, but stories are supposed to be happy.
> You dont have any happy ones?
> They're more like real life.
> But my stories are not.
> Your stories are not. No.
> The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad?
> What do you think?
> Well, I think we're still here. A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here.
> Yeah.
> You dont think that's so great.
> It's okay.[95]

[93] Cooper, *No More Heroes*, 151.
[94] McCarthy, *The Road*, 41.
[95] Ibid., 267-9.

Stories cannot suitably cultivate virtues in a world where the good is so difficult to discern, where the tradition has become so entirely irrelevant to the present, where the *telos* of the human is so contested. But the fact that stories cannot reasonably cultivate virtues does not mean they cannot provide some stable ground for ethics. Immediately after this scene, the boy does tell the man a story, one not shared with the reader. What the giving and receiving of this story leads them to do is to confess that they both cry in secret sometimes and to admit how sick the man really is and to wonder whether the man the father shot ended up dying. In other words, the story does not instill them with virtue, instead it displaces them and exposes their vulnerabilities to one another, and this is the surer foundation for ethics in any case. The narratability of our identities provides us

> a way to understand that none of us is fully bounded, utterly separate, but, rather, we are in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation we do not choose. It forms the horizon of choice, and it grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it creates the conditions under which we assume responsibility. We did not create it, and therefore it is what we must heed.[96]

In the idiom of Christian theology, then, the virtues don't resemble MacIntyre's teleological best practices; rather, "virtue . . . comes to be bound up with the steady critique of all practices that reinstate or try to reinstate claims on the love of God grounded in achievement . . . Virtue thus rests upon the fundamental process of curing the delusion that I have an interest or good that I alone can understand, specify, or realize."[97] That is, the sole virtue is in dispossessing oneself of oneself, of giving over one's interests and goods to others.

Because they neglect the prominence and recurrence of the sacramental in this novel, most critics and reviewers of *The Road* have therefore not understood the ethical dilemma at play in the text. Many recognize an ambivalence the father feels between protectiveness and risk, but because these critics lack the vocabulary of dispossession that the theology of sacrament (as I've described it)

[96] Butler, *Giving Account*, 101.
[97] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 262.

introduces, they oversimplify or ignore the implications ambivalence. James Wood regards the novel, for example, as trivializing the theological, arguing that "there is something perhaps a little showy, a little glib, about the way that questions of belief are raised and dropped."[98] According to Wood, McCarthy merely toys with theology, pretending that questions of God and theodicy dominate but in the end replacing the theological with the personal. Wood insists that "the end of the world is more than a personal matter; and what this magnificent novel gains in human interest it loses by being personal at the moment when it should be theological."[99] In missing McCarthy's sophisticated use of sacramental imagery, Wood also misunderstands the dispossession of the self that constitutes the love between these two characters and fails to recognize that it is profoundly theological. The personal, in fact, does replace the theological in the end. Shelly Rambo agrees with Wood, but perhaps needlessly pursues her own theological solution in trauma theory and the harrowing of hell, determining that her new theological framework might serve as a "testament to the ways in which life and death can no longer be distinguished."[100] But a framework for understanding the mingling of life and death, of presence and absence, is already robustly figured in the novel itself with its images of baptism and eucharist.

Wood and Rambo are exceptions; most readers of the novel regard the religious as a ruined remnant of a lost world, no different than the burned out cities that line the road. For these, "carrying the fire" serves as a vague sort of "metaphor for some kind of moral order and as such the guarantee of a future humanity that is clearly intended," a vague sign that nonetheless strains to be meaningful "outside the terms of the sacred idiom."[101] But in doing so these critics neglect the biblical and sacrificial background to the phrase, and thus they overlook the value McCarthy places

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[98] James Wood, "Getting to the End," in *The New Republic* 236 no. 16 (May 21, 2007): 47.
[99] Ibid., 48.
[100] Shelly L. Rambo, "Beyond Redemption? Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* after the End of the World," in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41 no. 2(Fall 2008): 115.
[101] Paul Patton, "McCarthy's Fire," in *Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy's* The Road, eds. Julian Murphet and Mark Steven (New York: Continuum, 2012), 142.

upon finite, fleeting acts of goodness. Even sophisticated studies, such as Grace Hellyer's "Spring has lost its scent," which reads *The Road* alongside Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, falter and miss the relevance of sacrament.[102] Referencing Benjamin's study of trauerspiel, Hellyer sees the father as stubbornly gripping a romantic religious symbol of truth that no longer bears any actual referent. Of course, given the total giving over to signs that the theology of sacrament can be understood to occasion, Benjamin's sympathetic description of baroque allegory is likely the more appropriate a tool of comparison for sacrament.[103]

This is not to claim *The Road* for theology, by any means. But the novel clearly refers to theology, and the moral ambivalence that drives the dramatic tension of the narrative can only be illuminated by the ambivalence that sits at the heart of the Christian sacramental tradition. Allow me then to return to the provocative words of *The Crossing*'s ex-priest:

> [T]he lesson of a life can never be its own. Only the witness has power to take its measure. It is lived for the other only. The priest therefore saw what the anchorite could not. That God needs no witness. The truth is rather that if there were no God then there could be no witness for there could be no identity to the world but only each man's opinion of it. The priest saw that there is no man who is elect because there is no man who is not. To God every man is a heretic. The heretic's first act is to name his brother. So that he may step free of him. Every word we speak is a vanity. Every breath taken that does not bless is an affront. Bear closely with me now. There is another who will hear what you never spoke. Stones themselves are made of air. What they have power to crush never lived. In the end we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his grace.[104]

I don't contend that this ex-priest speaks for McCarthy, or that his theology holds up even to the end of the border trilogy, let alone beyond it into *The Road*. But at the very least, it bears some

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[102] Grace Hellyer, "Spring has lost its scent: Allegory, ruination, and suicidal melancholia in *The Road,*" in *Styles of Extinction*, 45-62.

[103] "For it is precisely visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality. The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of the engravings and descriptions of the period, is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection. Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem." Walter Benjamin, *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 2009), 232.

[104] McCarthy, *Crossing*, 158.

interesting resonances with the reading of *The Road* I've just given. A life does not belong to itself, and though God needs no witness, the theologies of incarnation and of sacrament regard God as suffered through signs, and witnessed by others. The human life of God does not belong to itself either. Signs divest us of each other in the naming, but they also bind us to each other in narrative. Indeed, in consenting to be bound by endless, finite witnesses, God consents to our own share of dispossession. According to the theology of the cross, the basic giving over of God grounds all reality. Either version of natural theology represented in the labored argument between priest and pensioner – the pantheistic versus the gnostic – falls short on these cruciform terms. Instead we are offered a sacramental theology of embodied actions, a theology of signs which shows how "meanings emerge [more] from a process of estrangement, surrender, and re-creation than we might expect if we begin only from the rather bland appeal to the natural sacredness of things that occasionally underpins sacramental theology."[105] God is signed and realized in estranged surrender, not in blandly general sacredness. Dispossession is how God appears and who God is.

This is what it means to be; it means to be given over as a story, and to be realized in that telling as a human. Thus we might even come to agree even with Judge Holden who states in *Blood Meridian*, "[w]hether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world."[106] Or we might listen to the blind man from *The Crossing*, who tells Billy that we will find the goodness of God only in receiving the stories of others, in listening: "En este viaje el mundo visible es no más que un distraimiento. Para los ciegos y para todos los hombres. Ultimamente sabemos que no podemos ver el buen Dios. Vamos escuchando. Me entiendes, joven? Debemos escuchar."[107] Or we

[105] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 210.
[106] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 141.
[107] McCarthy, *Crossing*, 292. I translate this as: "In this way the visible world is no more than a distraction. For the blind and for all men. Ultimately we know that we cannot see the good God. We listen. Do you understand, young man? We should listen."

might accept the teachings of this ex-priest, who has come to realize that language in fact indebts us to one another, that if the life of God has been given over to us, then "in the end we shall be only what we have made of God." Or indeed we may come to understand what is at stake when the dying father says to his son at the end of this sad book: "You have my whole heart. You always did."[108]

Mystery

As ever, McCarthy concludes with mystery, this time literally:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in you hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.[109]

Some critics, like James Wood, read this ending as vaguely (if insufficiently) religious and redemptive; others find it the most damning passage in the book, rendered all the more cruel because it is "likely to strike . . . readers as more hopeful than it actually is . . . Once there were brook trout, and now there are not. You could see them, and now you cannot. They smelled of moss, and now not even moss smells of moss anymore . . . It is hard to see an upside here."[110]

I don't mean to impose an "upside" to this passage. But if the crux of this novel is the emotional exploration of the death that each life guarantees, of the necessary absence in every presence, of the dispossession basic to subjectivity, then perhaps we can offer a more subtle reading, one which recalls Christianity but without any falsely optimistic sense of redemption. The fish of course is a classic Christological symbol. It may seem too much to claim that this post-apocalyptic

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[108] McCarthy, *The Road*, 279.

[109] McCarthy, *The Road*, 286-7.

[110] Dana Phillips, "'He ought not have done it': McCarthy and Apocalypse" *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*, ed. Sara Spurgeon (New York: Continuum, 2011), 186.

and religiously ambivalent novel ends with a figure for Christ until we read the description of these fish. On the backs of these polished, muscular, torsional, living bodies, are "vermiculate patterns" of the world in its becoming. Vermiculate means wormy, and brook trout indeed bear worm-shaped patterns on their backs. But vermiculate also means worm-eaten. Corpses, too, are vermiculate. These living creatures have death written upon their very bodies even as they live, even as they stand in the current, their fins softly wimpling, their torsos smooth and muscular. Death comes with life, even with the life of God, and this dying is the pattern of the world in all its becoming. It cannot be put back, cannot be made right. But even if life necessarily summons death, this life is no less real nor good nor lovely for its cost. The mystery of which these things hum is the mystery of a life made infinitely precious by its finitude; a life made unbearably beautiful precisely because "all things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain" precisely because they have "their birth in grief and ashes"; it is the mystery of a life made finally good precisely because, as the father whispers to the sleeping boy, "I have you."[111] The final lines of this novel hum with the mystery of sacrament, with that very word "mystery," which itself, of course, gives over its original meaning to the sign of a crucified Christ.

[111] McCarthy, *The Road*, 54.

Conclusion

In imitation of Cormac McCarthy, allow me to conclude with my own suggestive epilogue.

As I noted in my introduction, the use of Christian sacrament is not found everywhere in McCarthy's fiction. It is mostly absent in his novels prior to *Suttree*, though it becomes increasingly common in later works. But the ideas and emotions which surround sacrament, at least as I've described it in these pages, are indeed present throughout McCarthy's fiction. A scene from one of those early Appalachian novels renders these sacramental surroundings almost entirely.

Outer Dark concludes with a particularly horrifying murder, even by McCarthy's standards. Rinthy, the mother of the murdered baby, has wandered rural Tennessee throughout the novel in search of her "chappy," the son who has been stolen from her and subsequently killed. Some time after the killing, still wandering, Rinthy ignorantly happens upon the scene of the murder.

> Late in the afternoon she entered the glade, coming down a footpath where narrow card tracks had crushed the weeds and through the wood, half wild and haggard in her shapeless sundrained cerements, yet delicate as any fallow doe, and so into the clearing to stand cradled in a grail of jade and windy light, slender and trembling and pale with wandlike hands to speak the boneless shapes attending her.
>
> And stepping softly with her air of blooded ruin about the glade in a frail agony of grace she trailed her rags through dust and ashes, circling the dead fire, the charred billets and chalk bones, the little calcined ribcage. She poked among the burnt remains of the tinker's traps, the blackened pans confused among the rubble, the lantern with its skewed glass, the axle and iron wheelhoops already rusting. She went among this charnel curiously. She did not know what to make of it. She waited, but no one returned.
>
> She waited all through the blue twilight and into the dark. Bats came and went. Wind stirred the ashes and the tinker in his tree turned slowly but no one returned. Shadows grew cold across the wood and night rang down upon these lonely figures and after a while little sister was sleeping.[1]

As the novel ends, Rinthy has tragically found what she has been searching for; she is joined with her child at last. The grace of that discovery is a "frail agony," surrounded by all the ghosts that haunt McCarthy's fiction. She is oblivious to the truth of her finding; her knowledge is a poor

[1] Cormac McCarthy, *Outer Dark* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 239-40.

instrument in this silent clearing, she cannot satisfy her curiosity. Her past is unspeakably violent: she has survived rape by her brother, endured the kidnapping and murder of her son. She waits and waits, not knowing what will come or even what it might be for which she waits. Most terribly, her slain child – in the words of *The Road* – cannot be made right again, cannot be brought back from this cold fire. The terror and tragedy of this scene cannot be denied. But her love – even in all its ignorance, trauma, and weakness – cannot be denied either, nor can the feeble, frail, frank holiness of it. She is terribly, sacredly granted rest at the side of her dead son. She has found him at last, and so her journey ends with a sign of communion, our "little sister" here "cradled in a grail."

The Road invokes the theology of sacrament more directly and consistently than any other of McCarthy's novels. But even where these images are rare, we can move from this theology towards a more thorough understanding of the tragic moral of McCarthy's stories. Having entered this peaceful, terrible clearing with Rinthy, having walked the road with father and son, we can understand in the penultimate scene of *Blood Meridian* that the kid has the opportunity to reject the violently enlightened black mass of Judge Holden, that with one act of forgiveness, he might unravel some of the string in Holden's maze. Recalling Rinthy and *The Road*, we can see Ed Tom Bell talking to his dead daughter, giving her "the heart [he] always wanted for [him]self," and we might recognize in this dispossession a love that defies the fatalistic power of Chigurh. We know that Buddy Suttree is still a broken coward when he leaves McAnally Flats, but we also might believe that what he has feebly carried through those bulldozed streets has sometimes been a real, if a broken, goodness. We can doubt whether Billy Parham will ever see his brother Boyd or John Grady again, but we have already seen "God's plenty of signs and wonders" on Billy's hands and in his heart.

As critics of many persuasions have skillfully documented, there is a tragic morality to these tales. There are clear rejections of religion and deep misgivings over both materiality and metaphysics. It's been my argument that the Christian theology of sacrament can hold these

tragedies, rejections, misgivings, and moralities together in a uniquely intelligible way, and that this theology is indubitably appealed to by McCarthy's imagery. This much, to my mind, is clear, and it's my hope that these pages will solicit similar conviction in others. But the most interesting upshot of this study, perhaps, will not be in how theology helps us to read McCarthy, but in how McCarthy might encourage those of us compelled to write theology. Because if "the sign that is Christ and the signs of Christ" are equally God in act; if Jesus is as entirely dispossessed in stories and signs as any other human; if the reality of Christ's presence is always effaced in order to be given over and realized in others: then the theology of sacraments demands everywhere a rethinking of theology.[2] How will the community which shares these signs and stories be thought as Christ's body? In other words, how shall we now conceive ecclesiology? How might the agony of Christ's death have failed to undo the goodness of his life? In other words, what should we make of resurrection? What will it mean to be saved if our greatest good arises in being handed over to others? How can we now think soteriology? And if this is how we understand the incarnation and the sacraments, if this is the human form of the divine, then how has Jesus achieved for us atonement, and what is the nature of his grace?

I don't believe McCarthy offers anything in the way of conclusive answers to these questions. But if, in spite of all the gruesome violence of these novels; if, in spite of all their dark fatalism and tragic loss; if, in spite of all this, we can close their covers and place them down and still hear the faint hum of their mystery, still feel the frail agony of their grace, then perhaps this persistence itself should become the awful object of our theology.

[2] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 206.

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