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Upon Uncertain Ice: Contingency,  
Being and Witness in Later Cormac  
McCarthy

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## Abstract

Interest in Cormac McCarthy's writing has grown rapidly over the past decade, with an attendant increase in the scholarly attention paid to his works. The author's long affiliation with the Santa Fe Institute (SFI) has often been remarked upon, but little scholarship has attempted to explore the potential interplay between some of SFI-period McCarthy's thematic and stylistic traits and a way of viewing the world encouraged by SFI's complexity science milieu. This thesis addresses that scholarly gap by way of a series of close readings of the five McCarthy novels from *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) to *The Road* (2006). The analysis identifies and teases out the overarching emphasis on contingency that distinguishes the SFI-period novels and gradually develops an original way of reading McCarthy's later metaphysics with respect to complexity and emergence.

McCarthy's use of paratactic syntax is examined in detail and its various functions are enumerated; an allegorical relationship between his style and his novels' fictive metaphysics is argued for. The Border Trilogy's exploration of contingency is detailed alongside its celebration of the imaginative capacity to generate narrative. The prevalence of references to contingent fortune in *No Country for Old Men* (2005) is examined, as is the way that the novel continues McCarthy's drift away from supernaturalism to a more metaphysically naturalist worldview. The affective power of *The Road* is analysed and related to its depiction of a world in which the contingency of the global biosphere is made frighteningly apparent. Finally, the focus on contingency and the tension between the being of the world and its witnessing are brought together and read through the lens of emergence. In doing so, this thesis uses its thorough close readings as the solid foundation of an attempt to present a new way of reading later McCarthy's fictive metaphysics.

## Abbreviations

TOK	<i>The Orchard Keeper</i> (1965)
OD	<i>Outer Dark</i> (1968)
CoG	<i>Child of God</i> (1973)
S	<i>Suttree</i> (1979)
BM	<i>Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West</i> (1985)
AtPH	<i>All the Pretty Horses</i> (1992)
TCr	<i>The Crossing</i> (1994)
TS	<i>The Stonemason: A Play in Five Acts</i> (1994)
TGS	<i>The Gardener's Son: A Screenplay</i> (1996)
CotP	<i>Cities of the Plain</i> (1998)
NCfOM	<i>No Country for Old Men</i> (2005)
TR	<i>The Road</i> (2006)
TSL	<i>The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form</i> (2006)
TCo	<i>The Counselor: A Screenplay</i> (2013)

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## Introduction

The Tarahumara had watered here a thousand years and a good deal of what could be seen in the world had passed this way. Armored Spaniards and hunters and trappers and grandees and their women and slaves and fugitives and armies and revolutions and the dead and the dying. And all that was seen was told and all that was told remembered. Two pale and wasted orphans from the north in outsized hats were easily accommodated. [...] The indians were dark almost to blackness and their reticence and their silence bespoke a view of a world provisional, contingent, deeply suspect. They had about them a wary absorption, as if they observed some hazardous truce. They seemed in a state of improvident and hopeless vigilance. Like men committed upon uncertain ice.

*The Crossing*

All things, in Cormac McCarthy's fictional worlds as in reality, pass into oblivion, just as all things exist in a perilous state of contingency. This truism is at the core of McCarthy's literary-metaphysical vision, and it is manifested in the people who 'are gone now' but whose 'names are myth, legend, dust' at the end of *The Orchard Keeper*, in the once-rich world of organisms now reduced to ash in *The Road*, in the archaeological relics and traces of past being (whether human remains or artefacts, non-human life or geological features) scattered throughout every one of his prose works. In a McCarthy novel, all men (and those few women who grace his pages) are ever 'committed upon uncertain ice'. To be a McCarthy character is to be in perilous and transitory suspension over the ever-present abyss of death and violence, awaiting the moment when the ice will crack and swallow you or those nearest to you. The Tarahumara natives whom Billy and Boyd Parham meet in *The Crossing* are presented as something ancient and relatively stable in the face of the passage of time; the list of those who have passed by them over a thousand years of visiting the

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ciénega is a fragmentary assortment from the history of the land since the arrival of Europeans, and the Tarahumara's memory of that parade of visitors is collective and continuous. Their vision of the world, in keeping with a dominant strand in McCarthy's oeuvre, is centred around provisionality, uncertainty, and contingency.

Despite the narrative suggestion of their relative permanence, however, the reader of McCarthy must sense that the Tarahumara will also, like all things, pass into the same oblivion as the Anasazi upon whose urban ruins Judge Holden elaborates in *Blood Meridian*, or that of the other prehistoric peoples whose traces can be found in petroglyphs scattered throughout the Southwest of all McCarthy's border novels, or indeed that of the contemporary Western civilization which is reduced to rusting artefacts and fading memories in *The Road*.

This thesis examines this overarching theme in a period of McCarthy's oeuvre that takes contingency as its grand problematic. The later five novels (from *All the Pretty Horses* to *The Road*) become preoccupied with questions surrounding the concept of contingency, whether that contingency be the path of an individual's life through the world, the possibility of making plans amid the world's chaos, or the continuance of a global environment conducive to the proliferation of life. The five novels that will be examined here all take notions of chance, provisionality, and uncertainty and turn such notions over in various ways to reveal their many facets when held under different lights. This period of McCarthy's career coincides with his association with the Santa Fe Institute (SFI), the interdisciplinary research institute which focuses on complex systems. These five novels' preoccupation with contingency (among other things) also reflects concepts current in the sciences of complexity and offers, in the context of the extant criticism, new ways of reading McCarthy's fictive metaphysics.

An analysis of contingency in these five novels requires at the outset a definition of the term as used here. According to philosophical tradition, the term denotes the absence of necessity: it refers to that which is the case without logically (or necessarily) having to be the case. By this definition,

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almost every true proposition about matters of fact in the world can be said to be contingent, whereas true propositions that concern logical identity or tautology, for example, would be considered necessary truths. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the term ‘contingency’ is not restricted to its very specific philosophical definition. I wish to use the term more as it is employed by Stephen Jay Gould when he asserts that it is the ‘central principle of all history’, as opposed to the reductionist accounts of linear science (Gould, *Wonderful Life* 283). Gould takes care to distinguish contingency from randomness, outlining the historical nature of contingency as he sees it:

A historical explanation does not rest on direct deductions from laws of nature, but on an unpredictable set of antecedent states, where any major change in any step of the sequence would have altered the final result. This final result is therefore dependent on, contingent on, everything that came before – the uneraseable and determining signature of history. (283)

Gould thus presents an idea of contingency that encapsulates unpredictability, historicity and naturalism. His own vision of evolutionary history is one marked by relative stability punctuated by ‘brief, sometimes geologically instantaneous, episodes of mass extinction and subsequent diversification’ (54). The course of this history, and of all history, is for Gould, heavily dependent upon the operation of contingent, chance events. This is captured most memorably in his image, borrowed from Frank Capra’s classic 1946 movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*, of rewinding the tape of life to play again with some initial features changed. Gould’s point is that everything would be different should the tape of life be replayed from an earlier geological period with some crucial changes (much as George Bailey in *It’s a Wonderful Life* is shown how different things would be in Bedford Falls were he never born), emphasising his insistence on chance’s importance in the development of evolution. The intersection of chance, unpredictability, historicity and ontological naturalism is

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where Gould's sense of contingency resides, and that is the sense in which the term is used in this thesis.

McCarthy's novels all offer worlds in which this contingency is one of the operative forces in the world's unfolding, and his career has seen some recognisable variations and shifts applied to aspects of that contingency. While there is a greater suggestion of potential supernaturalism underpinning the physical world in the earlier five novels, the novels from *All the Pretty Horses* to *The Road* evince a more naturalistic conception of the universe and of the relationship of humanity to the world's contingent natural forces. Those forces, the novels demonstrate, guide and channel the paths of people's lives, the broader course of history and the development and continuance of the global ecosystem on which life depends. The five novels discussed in this thesis are those in which McCarthy's vision of the universe tends away from the supernaturalistic towards a *Weltanschauung* more grounded in the principles and concepts current in the scientific milieu frequented in SFI by McCarthy.

McCarthy's interest in science goes back to his childhood, as he explained to David Kushner for a 2007 *Rolling Stone* interview: 'When I was a kid, I was very interested in the natural world [...] To this day, during casual conversations, little-known facts about the natural world will just crop up.' In the University of Tennessee he studied physics and engineering for a time, saying of his interest in physics: 'It's interesting to know how the world works' (Kushner). His childhood curiosity extended from an interest in the natural world to an insatiable exploration of numerous hobbies: 'I remember in grammar school the teacher asked if anyone had any hobbies. I was the only one with any hobbies, and I had every hobby there was. There was no hobby I didn't have, name anything, no matter how esoteric, I had found it and dabbled in it' (Woodward, 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction').

It is no surprise, then, that he naturally gravitated towards the scientists rather than fellow writers at a dinner reception held for recipients of the MacArthur Fellowship (which he was awarded in 1981), or that his friendship with some of those scientists led to regular excursions from his home in El Paso to the SFI after it was founded in 1984. These trips to SFI to participate

in discussions about some of the most cutting-edge research on complex systems coincided, Kushner tells us, with much of the writing of *All the Pretty Horses*. Over a decade and three published novels later, around the turn of the millennium he moved to the outskirts of Santa Fe with his third wife, Jennifer Winkley, who bore him his second son (Spurgeon 14). He became a ‘mainstay among the rotating researchers’ in SFI, where ‘you were likely to hear him tapping away in his office on a blue Olivetti Lettera 32 portable typewriter,’ and around the time that Richard Woodward wrote his second interview feature on the author in 2005, McCarthy would come to SFI ‘most days, even on weekends’. He ‘engage[s] in discussions with researchers about their specialties [...] looks over their texts before publication,’ and ‘regularly attends the workshops [...] where the topic may be the evolution of prion proteins or mammalian muscle adaptations or lying and deception or bounded inferences for decision-making in games’ (‘Cormac Country’).

According to neuroscientist Chris Wood, ‘McCarthy’s knowledge of math and physics, and in particular the histories of those fields, exceeds that of many professional physicists and mathematicians’ (Romeo). McCarthy has proofread and been thanked in the acknowledgements of his scientist friends’ books, such as his close friend Murray Gell-Mann’s *The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and the Complex* (1994), Lisa Randall’s theoretical physics primer *Warped Passages* (2005), and theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman’s anti-reductionist *Reinventing the Sacred* (2008). The acknowledgements of McCarthy’s own *No Country for Old Men* contain his thanks to SFI ‘for his long association and his four-year residence’, and he is listed as a trustee on SFI’s website (‘Trustees’). McCarthy sums up his own personal reasons for spending so much time at SFI: ‘I’m here because I like science, and this is a fun place to spend time. There’s good craic’ (Romeo).

McCarthy’s commitment to SFI and his fascination with scientific endeavour in general are often mentioned in studies of his work but few have attempted to draw any substantial connections between the worldviews manifested in his work and his immersion in a scientific milieu. Furthermore, no scholarly study has tried to redefine the periods of McCarthy’s oeuvre with

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respect to his time at SFI. This thesis argues that the five later novels, which for the sake of convenience will be referred to hereafter as the SFI-period novels, constitute a distinct period in his career marked by the prominence of the theme of contingency and, in biographical terms, by his regular attendance (and eventual residence and trusteeship) of SFI. Through an analysis of the manifestations of the theme of contingency in the SFI-period novels, and a reading of some of his particular stylistic traits of this period, this thesis moves through a close reading of the relevant primary texts towards an attempt to draw conclusions about McCarthy's later metaphysics with respect to complexity science and emergence.

McCarthy's fictive metaphysics shift over the years, but at heart they are comprised of a tension between two modes of viewing the universe. The first is one that sees the universe as a meaningless Laplacean mechanism in which not only humanity but all of life is constantly imperilled; his novels emphasise 'the indifference of the cosmic jaw to the bloody morsel of humanity', as Michael Chabon memorably put it in his review of *The Road*. Jacques Monod, the molecular biologist whose *Chance and Necessity* outlined a view of natural order in which blind chance is the fundamental operative force in the emergence of life, is a useful touchstone here as his vision of the universe corresponds with that mechanistic quasi-nihilism detectable in McCarthy. Monod outlines his understanding of the function of most human metaphysical schemes in the face of the world's underlying true nature: 'All religions, nearly all philosophies, and even a part of science testify to the unwearying, heroic effort of mankind desperately denying its contingency' (qtd. in Gray 1).

In Monod's vision of the world the absolute contingency of random chance is the fundamental truth of the universe. He presents a worldview in which no purpose and no intention guided the improbable assemblage of molecular material into the first building blocks of life, on which natural selection then operated and generated the proliferation of complex lifeforms. Such a worldview is akin to those moments in McCarthy when the narrator depicts the world as godless, meaningless and utterly bereft of teleological

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purpose. As this thesis argues, McCarthy's literary style functions allegorically to inscribe such a vision in the fabric of the texts themselves, whereas the narrative content repeatedly returns to assertions and ruminations corresponding to such a worldview.

Opposed to this vision of the world is another that is at times speculative and at times downright mystical. McCarthy's texts occasionally ascend into flights of figurative elaboration that seem to represent, on the part of the narrative voice, a mystical yearning for some ineffable pre- or supra-human knowledge of the world as it is in itself. Throughout McCarthy's earlier work, this manifests itself frequently in the form of intimations of a metaphysical order that is Gnostic in aspect or that otherwise suggests supernatural forces and entities whose inscrutable and oftentimes malevolent purposes can only be glimpsed impartially through the work of their avatars in the form of, for example, the 'grim triune' in *Outer Dark* or Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*. From *All the Pretty Horses* onward, the suggestion of Manichean metaphysics falls away significantly, with the emphasis instead being on the difficulties faced by the characters as they flounder in worlds altogether more naturalistic in complexion, notwithstanding the continuing presence of numerous phenomena that could be read as supernaturalistic.

The attempts of the SFI-period novels' characters to account for some of the world's more baffling features, but particularly for the nature of the world's contingency, give rise to interpretations of the given world's phenomena which range from the outright superstitious to the causally explanatory. These later novels, this thesis argues, form a broad period in McCarthy's work in which the career-long tension between naturalism and supernaturalism tends more towards the naturalistic, albeit without ever resolving entirely.

The interplay between, on the one hand, a sense of the world's contingency as being something like the vision of the universe proposed by Monod, and on the other hand the regular intimations of alternative metaphysical schemes that venture into territory more supernatural, or quasi-supernatural, is at the very heart of McCarthy's metaphysical tension. This

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tension is so fundamental to McCarthy's literary vision that it manifests itself in manifold ways throughout his oeuvre, with its most bald and minimal presentation being the stage play and 'Novel in Dramatic Form,' *The Sunset Limited* (2006).

*The Sunset Limited* was premiered in May 2006 by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company<sup>1</sup>. Five months later, Vintage published the play in paperback. The paperback's textual content remains essentially the same as the staged production: in a run-down tenement, two men debate the nature of existence and the meaning of life, one trying to convince the other not to commit suicide.<sup>2</sup> But while the content remains essentially the same on stage and in print, the published version of the play has one puzzling additional feature: it contains the subtitle 'A Novel in Dramatic Form'. This subtitle, and the play/novel as a whole, points beyond the text itself to the metaphysical tension present in McCarthy's other novels.

The characters of this one-act play are labelled Black and White, reflecting simultaneously their respective skin colours and the polarity of their metaphysical worldviews. White is an atheist professor who 'yearn[s] for the darkness' (135) and has attempted to kill himself by jumping in front of a subway train. Black is a born-again Christian and ex-convict who happened to be present on the subway platform at the time of White's 'amazin leap' (22) and who now believes this whole episode has been fated so that he can save White from his nihilistic path towards self-destruction. As he puts it himself: 'You know who appointed me. I didn't ask for you to leap into my arms down in the subway this mornin' (10). Throughout the conversation that follows, White wants to leave the apartment and be free to kill himself, repeatedly stating 'I've got to go', 'I'm going home', 'I have to go' (6, 8, 43). Each tentative attempt to leave is halted by another stalling tactic on the part of Black, until White resolutely says 'No. No more time. Goodbye' as he heads towards the door for the final time (140).

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this discussion of *The Sunset Limited* was previously published as "A Novel in Dramatic Form": Metaphysical Tension in *The Sunset Limited*?

<sup>2</sup> In the endnotes to her paper 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*: A Dialogue of Life and Death (A Review of the Chicago Production)', Dianne C. Luce points out a few of the minor dialogical differences between the staged production and the published work.



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White claims to have reached his suicidal conclusions through intellectual means, having come to see the world as utterly devoid of meaning. He longs for the nothingness of death to release him from the futility of existence in this ‘moral leper colony’:

I dont regard my state of mind as some pessimistic view of the world. I regard it as the world itself. Evolution cannot avoid bringing intelligent life ultimately to an awareness of one thing above all else and that one thing is futility. (75, 136)

Or, as Black then paraphrases a little more colourfully: ‘If I’m understandin you right you sayin that everbody that aint just eat up with the dumb-ass ought to be suicidal’, to which White agrees (136). White believes that his superior intelligence leaves him ‘without dreams or illusions’ and grants him a realistic view of the world as ‘basically a forced labor camp from which the workers—perfectly innocent—are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed’ (136, 122). A man, to White, is a ‘thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void. No meaning to its life. Its words’ (139), echoing here one of the feelings of men’s absurdity described by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime make silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him but you see his incomprehensible dumb-show: you wonder why he is alive. (Camus, 20–1)

White is thus presented as a nihilist, albeit one lacking either a Nietzschean will to self-creation or a Camusian revolt engendered by Sisyphean acceptance of his lot’s absurdity. Moreover, his nihilism has been arrived at through deliberation and a gradual stripping away of meaning and value. This nihilism need not be solely understood as such, however, as it could

be read as something similar to the utterly contingent vision of the universe presented by Jacques Monod: as an extreme form of ontological naturalism.

*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* offers a tentative definition of naturalism as the belief ‘that reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing “supernatural”, and that the scientific method should be used to investigate all areas of reality, including the “human spirit”’ (Papineau, ‘Naturalism’). Philosophers’ self-identification as ‘naturalists’, without precisely defining what this entails or reaching consensus with their definitions, is so commonplace since at least the mid-twentieth century as to make a comprehensive definition virtually impossible. The foregoing tentative definition, however, reveals two separate components: ontological naturalism, concerned with the contents of reality, and methodological naturalism, concerned with the ways of investigating reality. While there are many potential definitions of naturalism, of either the ontological or methodological variety, one prominent theme is the relationship of scientific knowledge to, respectively, the ontological contents of reality and the practice of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Among philosophers, particularly in the analytic tradition, an overwhelming majority would identify themselves as naturalists (de Caro and Macarthur 2). While it is true that few contemporary philosophers would claim to be non-naturalists, a large subset of humanity in general could be uncontroversially designated as such: people who believe in a deity, multiple deities, superstitions, ghosts and/or mind-body dualism, among many other possible examples.

McCarthy’s characters have always dwelt in worlds that display inherent and often radical contingency; but for the most part the uncertain and unpredictable vicissitudes of earlier McCarthy could very readily be attributed to more or less inscrutable supernatural forces. The novels up to and including *Blood Meridian* owe much of their cosmology to the Gnostic understanding of the world. In the Gnostic worldview the world as we know it is essentially a cosmic prison within which a fragment, a spark, of the alien divine is locked in

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<sup>3</sup> Ontological naturalism, thus defined, would be construed as the belief that reality consists solely of those things available to observation and to the methods of empirical science, whereas methodological naturalism can be thought of as the belief that philosophy and science are both ‘engaged in essentially the same enterprise’ (Papineau).

each human vessel and can only be returned to its source through the achievement of *gnosis*. Humans, however, are deceived and kept in the dark – so to speak – by the *demiurge*, the malevolent creator of the material world, and by his agents in the world, the *archons*.

McCarthy scholarship has long recognised the elements of Gnosticism within his work, most notably with Leo Daugherty's 'Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy'. Daugherty reminds us that Gnosticism, at least in its Manichean variation, is 'easily confused with nihilism,' the reason being that the distant, alien Gnostic god 'generates no *nomos*, no law, for either nature or human activity. The law, instead, is the law of the archons, and justice is theirs as well' (161). Daugherty repeats Hans Jonas's identification in *The Gnostic Religion* (1958) of the soteriological dimension in Gnosticism as that which distinguishes it from nihilism: the alien divine is attempting to save those sparks of the divine within humans through *pneumatic* messengers in possession of *gnosis*.

Since Daugherty's study, much McCarthy scholarship has followed his lead and unearthed the evident traces of Gnostic thought in most of his other works, particularly in his southern novels (or at least after the relative absence of overt Gnostic markers in *The Orchard Keeper*). Dianne C. Luce presents most of those traces in her *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (2009). As she says of the first of those novels, *Outer Dark*: 'the gnostic revaluation or deconstruction of what has come to be mainstream Christian teaching and especially the Judaic tradition that lies underneath it, may comprise the most prevalent (but not the only) pattern of metaphysical intimations informing the novel' (65–6). Australian scholar Petra Mundik has devoted her doctoral research to the theme of Gnosticism in McCarthy, and her published essays treat the topic with exactitude and a thorough appreciation of the Gnostic religion. Her work, however, is somewhat prescriptive and reductive in its insistence on Gnostic readings of all McCarthy work.

The Gnostic influence on *Blood Meridian* has now become so generally accepted as to prompt regular critical reminders to guard against reductively interpreting the novel in those terms, such as Harold Bloom's assertion that to

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reduce the text to a Gnostic fable ‘lessen[s] the imaginative force of the book.’ Bloom reminds the reader that the novel itself, during the kid’s dream of the judge while in prison, ‘warns you not to use any system, including the Orphic system, for interpreting the Judge. Don’t try to reduce the Judge to his origins’ (Josyph, ‘Tragic Ecstasy’ 210).

What distinguishes the supernaturalist elements of SFI-period McCarthy from those of his earlier work is the fact that they are much more assimilable into a broader naturalist metaphysical scheme. His SFI-period work gestures occasionally toward the supernatural, but this later work also allows for, and often suggests, the distinct possibility that the supernatural phenomena in question are either one of two things: the human imposition of supernatural explanation onto natural phenomena because of an anthropogenic epistemological framework that struggles to account for the meaninglessness of the world’s metaphysical injustice, the blindness of fortune, and the utter contingency of humanity’s continued existence on the planet; or entirely natural emergent properties which, while potentially irreducible to their underlying physical causes, are nevertheless utterly determined and in perfect agreement with a naturalist conception of the universe.

I am arguing in this thesis that the SFI-period novels share a distinctive pronounced emphasis on contingency; but the theme of contingency is also evident in his earlier five novels, albeit in less overt ways and framed, for the most part, within worlds that suggest inscrutable supernatural causes underlying the physical. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the alignment of its three central characters hinges around the murder of Kenneth Rattner. Marion Sylder, bootlegger and Rattner’s killer, becomes a father figure to Rattner’s son John Wesley without either of them knowing about their connection through the fatality. The other major influence on John Wesley’s formative development in the Tennessee mountain community is Arthur Ownby, known affectionately as Uncle Ather, who keeps vigil over the murdered Rattner’s corpse which rests in a spray pit in the woods. The somewhat arbitrary and yet never discovered connection between the three characters signals the unifying presence of death in all lives, the contingency of which is attenuated somewhat in the novel by its

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intimations of a mysterious pre-human and supernatural knowing to which Ather is privy, being as he is immersed in the wild ways of the mountain woodland.

With *Outer Dark*, a Gnostic theme enters that is continually returned to throughout the rest of the oeuvre. The novel chronicles a sequence of dreamlike episodes of the paired journeys of a brother and sister, Culla and Rinthy Holme, as they traverse a landscape that is Appalachian in aspect but is never named as such and is rendered fabulous through the surreal nature of many of the episodes, especially through the monstrous and murderous 'grim triune' whose path will eventually cross with Culla's. The novel opens with the birth of their incestuously conceived child, which Culla leaves exposed to die in the woods. After a travelling tinker takes the child and Rinthy discovers her brother's infanticidal deception, she embarks on an odyssey through the mystical world of the novel seeking her child, lactating all the while and remaining innocently naive in her kindly outlook. Culla pursues Rinthy and becomes engaged in a sequence of incidents which often grow sinister and threatening, the outer world manifesting his inner guilt and turmoil and reflecting the principles of a Gnosticism that views the material world as an endarkened prison from which there is no escape, save by the knowledge and release that comes with true gnosis.

Along with *Blood Meridian*, *Outer Dark* is perhaps the most overtly supernaturalistic of all McCarthy's novels, and the contingent tribulations faced by its central characters are always framed in such a way as to suggest the workings of maleficent forces, embodied in the anti-Trinity of the grim triune who eventually slit the baby's throat after Culla encounters them.

McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, reads as something of a departure from the first two, both stylistically and thematically. It is still marked by those preceding novels' trademark stylistic McCarthyisms (the absence of quotation marks to identify direct speech; the tendency towards paratactic simplicity in his sentences' rhetorical form; the occasional flights of figurative language redolent of Faulkner in his more heightened mode), but the parataxis is much more pronounced and the heightened passages greatly reduced in both

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frequency and elevation. The simplicity of the paratactic prose reflects its novel's protagonist, the simple social pariah Lester Ballard whose ignorance and animalistic urges combine with his utter solitude to lead him down a path to necrophilia and murder. His heinous acts jar disturbingly with the novel's non-judgemental tone and its efforts to garner some measure of sympathy from the reader towards Ballard. His path through the novel ends with his literal descent into the earth, as he retreats to a system of caves in a reverse of Plato's allegory.

The contingency of the world in *Child of God* manifests itself primarily in the utter indifference of the natural world to the sufferings of Lester and his victims. He comes to exist in a wilderness oblivious to his presence and to what most would deem the monstrosity of his actions, and his existence in that wilderness is an animalistic one, devoid of most of the social and behavioural niceties of civilization. His attempts to mimic the social and romantic customs he yearns to be a part of become increasingly depraved and murderous, but all the while the natural world surrounds and envelops him as his tracks mingle with those of fox, mouse and bird. The woods are 'Old woods and deep. At one time in the world there were woods that no one owned and these were like them' (119). One of the few things the novel tells us Ballard knows about the world is 'that all things fought' – he understands the Darwinian struggle innately despite his inarticulate ignorance, because he is immersed within that struggle in the constant striving of the natural world (160). The only moment in the novel when we are afforded an outward glimpse of his profound sadness is when he 'watched the diminutive progress of all things in the valley, the gray fields coming up black and corded under the plow, the slow green occlusion that the trees were spreading. Squatting there he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry' (161). Ballard's sadness here seems to be for the very presence and continuance of life itself: the 'diminutive progress' of life in the valley represents that which he is in a sense exiled from in his necrophiliac fetishization of the inanimate.

*Suttree* (1979) finds McCarthy at his most autobiographical in its depiction of an intellectual who has turned his back on the life of material

success and privilege laid out for him by his background and education. Cornelius Suttree instead chooses to live as a fisherman in a rickety houseboat among the reprobates and drunks of Knoxville's McAnally Flats, and the novel chronicles his life on the river and his encounters with 1950s Knoxville's many colourful characters. We are occasionally afforded glimpses into Suttree's psychological struggle with mortality and with the dualism inherited from his Catholic upbringing, a struggle that reflects the broader tension evident in McCarthy's fictive metaphysics throughout his oeuvre. In *Suttree*, the protagonists' metaphysical struggle is figured in the many instances of doubling and reflection and most crucially in the image of Suttree's stillborn twin, his 'Mirror image. Gauche carbon' (14). The novel toys with the idea of contingency, most memorably and significantly when Suttree's life with mussel catchers upriver and his burgeoning love affair with their young daughter Wanda end abruptly: a wall of slate above their camp collapses after a period of heavy rain and crushes Wanda into 'sheared limbs and rags of meat among the slabs of rock' (362). The provisionality and ephemerality of life is evoked throughout the novel through old photographs, such as the portraits hanging in Mother She's house looking 'gravely from out of their paper past' (228). Likewise, the photographs of dead relatives Suttree looks through in his Aunt Martha's house are 'masks of incertitude before the cold glass eye of the camera [...] Blind moil in the earth's nap cast up in an eyeblink between becoming and done,' and his disgust at the mortality of the flesh and the seeming ludicrousness of body/soul dualism is captured by the narrator: 'What deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god [...] could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky wormbent tabernacle' (129–30).

Suttree ultimately comes to an understanding about the universe through a series of visionary episodes brought about by drugs and fever. After he finally recovers, a priest visits him and tells him he had a close call, to which Suttree responds in the affirmative, admitting to the perennial contingency of his existence: 'All my life. I did'. The priest suggests that God must have been watching out for him but Suttree responds:

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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. (461)

Suttree's intellectual struggle with dualism and the guilt and fear inculcated in him by his Catholic upbringing appear to be resolved through a mystical epiphany that evokes the perpetual flux and monism of Heraclitean cosmology. The personal resolution of his psychological and spiritual struggles makes him something of an optimistic exception in early McCarthy, and Suttree's figurative and literal departure from his quasi-purgatorial life on the river at the close of the novel echoes McCarthy's own abandonment of the South as a setting of his work in favour of the scorched landscapes of the Southwest (*The Road* returns to the South but it has more in common with the western genre than with Southern fiction).

McCarthy's undoubted masterpiece, *Blood Meridian*, is saturated with symbols of esoteric knowledge such as Tarot, the alchemical tradition, Kabbalah, or Gnostic cosmology, which all contribute to the overall sense of a world governed by incomprehensible supernatural forces of which the demonic Judge Holden is avatar and archon. The world's contingency is not all too apparent, as it is almost impossible to cast aside the intimations of cosmic supernatural intent. Judge Holden emerges from the text as an apparent immortal, appearing to the kid in the closing scenes almost thirty years after they had last met, not having aged at all in the intervening time (343). After killing the kid in the jakes, the judge dances naked in the saloon, repeatedly saying 'that he will never die,' lending further weight to readings of the novel whereby the judge is a personification of violence or evil, or indeed the devil himself (353).

Nevertheless, the novel is bestrewn with narrative evocations of the natural world whose startling representation of the sublime allows a naturalistic



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conception of the world to be read, however quietened, in fraught opposition to the overarching supernatural scheme. Occasionally, such passages render natural phenomena in terms intended to make them strange and capture something of the human mind's grasping for explanation when confronted with such mysterious phenomena. Here, for example, is a description of the riders passing across the bed of a dry lake:

Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron filings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon that harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality. (260)

The flaring of the sand is described such that it suggests some natural phenomenon akin to magnetism, but it does so in such a way as to create a sense of the riders and their world as defying natural law in their very terribleness. As is often the case in McCarthy, the clauses here that suggest something beyond the natural are couched in what James Wood describes as 'analogical similes': 'As if' here, but 'as though' or 'like some' also feature strongly. As Wood says, these linking phrases introduce 'not a visual likeness but a hypothetical and often abstract parallel' (Wood, 'Red Planet'). Such simile constructions allow a kind of askew resemblance to be set up, with the narrative voice appearing unable to quite describe the phenomena in question without recourse to imperfect, partial associations. But, additionally, the defamiliarising effect of such simile constructions allows supernatural intimations to jostle uncomfortably with natural descriptions, refusing to allow interpretation to settle either way and contributing to the metaphysical tension at the core of McCarthy's work.

Partway through the narrative of *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden presents to the gang one of his many discourses on the nature of the world and the men

within it. During a discussion about the judge's ledger with its meticulously drafted sketches and notes, an episode in the chapter corresponding with the subtitle 'Representations and things', he claims:

Whether 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. (148)

In this brief statement, the judge grants us a succinct summary of one of the central metaphysical problems McCarthy's work has always grappled with – the relationship between the thing and its representation, between reality and appearance, between the world as it is in itself and the interpretive matrix through which we encounter that world. For every man, the judge suggests, there exists a host of 'tabernacled' representations and interpretations instantiated by acts of witnessing. Applied universally, this principle extends throughout humanity in a vast web, an 'endless complexity' constituted by nodes ('every man') and the epistemological connections between them, in a complex system not dissimilar to the neurons and synapses in a brain or similar network. This being-and-witness dichotomy is one of the ways in which the internal tension in McCarthy's worldview is expressed, and it tidily prefigures the thematic focus in his SFI-period work on the contingent world of being and the interpretive matrix of witnessing through which the world is given a second life in the form of the multitude of stories we tell ourselves and each other about it.

In exploring the related aspects in this thesis, I will first analyse some of the stylistic particularities of McCarthy's prose and then move on to focus on the five novels in more detail and with more of a thematic focus. The first chapter addresses some of the central features of McCarthy's style and asks what conclusions one might be able to reach about the metaphysical architecture of his novels' fictional worlds if one reads his style allegorically. McCarthy's prose style is composed of two registers, and while those registers occasionally blend and overlap with one another rather than being discrete

rhetorical schemes, it is nevertheless possible to discern those registers in every one of his novels with varying degrees of emphasis. The first is the flat, declarative register that invokes Hemingway and is marked by a pronounced parataxis which strips the prose of both explicitly prescribed causal logic and the hierarchical ordering of elements (sentences, clauses, subjects) with respect to importance. The second register is a heightened one in which flights of figurative, philosophical or speculative fancy ascend precariously from the firm ground of the surrounding flat register. The paratactic regime dominates both registers, but in the flat register it is stripped of much of its figurative ornamentation and revealed as the bare structural frame around which McCarthy's prose style is built. Likewise, McCarthy's occasionally startling figuration is widespread in the flatter prose, but in the heightened register we can see McCarthy's figurative impulse given the space to elaborate, in prolonged and occasionally exaggerated fashion, on the more sober underlying material.

The first chapter here thus explores McCarthy's paratactic style and asks what conclusions we might reach about the metaphysical architecture of his novels given the prevalence of that style. Through a number of close readings of passages from the novels, the chapter teases out a particular metaphysical *Weltanschauung* (albeit one with internal tensions) that shares many features with the paratactic regime that dominates McCarthy's narratives. It ventures an initial sketch of how McCarthy's figurative idiosyncrasies may be interpreted in light of that *Weltanschauung*.

The subsequent chapters all focus more closely on the five SFI-period McCarthy novels, reading them through the lens of contingency and teasing out further evidence of his emphasis on that theme. Chapter Two applies this focus to the three novels of the Border Trilogy, exploring those novels' collective emphasis on the interplay of a contingent world and the interpretive matrix with which that world is overlaid. Issues surrounding causality, determinism, freedom and moral responsibility are central to John Grady Cole's doomed path through the trilogy, whereas Billy Parham's parallel trajectory emphasises the central role played by story in the generation of a

meaningful world amidst the indifference and contingency of the physical universe.

Chapter Three turns to *No Country for Old Men*, explicating that novel's insistence on the role of chance in the world. The novel's three protagonists are each treated in turn as representatives of three particular attitudes towards the contingency of a world in which every action is, in many ways, the roll of a die. The novel's reliance on metaphorical language related to gambling or games of chance is explored, as are the more overt literal references to games and ventures in which luck plays a prominent role. The centrality of luck in the novel becomes a prism through which the being-and-witness dichotomy can once again be partially disentangled; the chapter examines the relevant naturalistic understanding of luck, whereby the trappings of superstition are read as being little more than interpretive heuristics through which the world's indifferent contingency can be diminished.

Chapter Four moves on to *The Road*. In this novel the theme of contingency reaches its apotheosis through its depiction of a world where the continuance of the entire global biosphere is shown to have been no more than a complacent and unwarranted assumption. The novel's insistence on the contingent, provisional nature of the world manifests itself primarily through its affective power, and some of the ways in which the novel is endowed with that power are explored. The first of these is the novel's judicious use of analepsis to generate stark contrast between the natural world prior to and after the almost complete annihilation of all life. Additionally, the novel's frequent use of physiological metaphor in its descriptions of the environment or the planet suggests the field of geophysiology – the conception, encapsulated in James Lovelock's Gaia theory, of the global ecosphere as one complex superorganism with manifold self-regulatory mechanisms which emerge naturalistically from the relatively simple behaviours of its parts. Finally, such allusions to emergence and complexity, coupled with the novel's frequent gestures toward theological speculation, prompt a speculative naturalistic interpretation of this novel's God as an emergent property of the world.

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The concluding chapter ties together the issues discussed in the preceding chapters and offers a vision of McCarthy's later metaphysical worldview, a worldview that remains as fraught with tension as ever but which appears to be resolving more in accordance with certain principles of a piece with much of the discussion surrounding complexity science. A naturalistic understanding of creativity, narrative and God is proffered as one potentially fruitful interpretation of McCarthy's work in the years since he began to regularly spend time with complexity researchers at the SFI.

This thesis thus progresses towards an argument that addresses a number of different gaps in the related criticism. There is a paucity of scholarship that combines consideration of McCarthy's acknowledged scientific literacy with his regular immersion in a milieu versed in the study of complexity and the conceptual vocabulary involved. Many of those scholars who do address it either misrepresent complexity (or, just as frequently, the related area of nonlinear dynamics popularly known as 'chaos theory'), or they do little more than gesture briefly towards McCarthy's scientific interests without engaging with some of the potential ramifications of those interests with respect to the SFI-period novels.

Certain difficulties must be addressed in my attempts to deal with scientific theories and concepts in this thesis. Firstly, complexity science is relatively nebulous and hard to objectively define. One cannot point to a definitive theory or a foundational scholarly paper or book (there is no such thing as complexity *theory*, for example, despite that term being widespread). There are many textbooks on the subject, and a plethora of popular science treatments, but one cannot refer to a defining text in the same way that one could with, say, the general theory of relativity or Gödel's incompleteness theorems.

Secondly, I am not a scientist, nor do I purport to be. A full and proper understanding of related scientific fields would require lengthy training in at least mathematics, physics and non-linear dynamics. I am not engaging with hard science *per se*. Rather, I wish to deal with some of the concepts current among complexity scientists, such as *emergence*; and I am utilising in this thesis

some of the more speculative work of complexity scientists and philosophers which sees in the concept of emergence a new way of relieving the feeling of cosmic insignificance encouraged by a purely reductive physicalist conception of the universe.

I am also keen to avoid here another problem: the misuse of scientific concepts within literary and cultural criticism, as exemplified by the excerpts from cultural theorists provided in Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's *Intellectual Impostures* (2003). By admitting at the outset that I am no scientist, and that I am more interested in some of the conceptual apparatus of complexity science and how it might be reflected in the fictive metaphysics of an author immersed in that scientific milieu, I hope to avoid the types of accusation justifiably levelled at many cultural theorists: namely, that their attempts to incorporate scientific concepts within their critical work often appears motivated by a desire to give their work a veneer of scientificity, thus impressing non-scientific readers by an attempt to dress up relatively banal observations with obfuscatory discourse, thus disguising their potential banality.

For present example, N. Katherine Hayles is one such cultural theorist who has written much on the parallels between contemporary science (most notably chaos theory) and numerous aspects of poststructural and postmodern literary discourse, arguing that similarities between these two fields can be traced to their roots in a common cultural matrix. Hayles makes the postmodern assertion that advances in the sciences are determined by their cultural ground, an assertion most scientists would undoubtedly resist. Her 1990 book *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* posited the view that we are now living in a chaotic paradigm, a period in which profound shifts in our cultural matrix have manifested themselves both in the development of the study of chaos and in the radical reconfigurations of literary discourse since the advent of poststructuralism. Chaos is like postmodern theories, for Hayles, in that it is 'marked by the ambivalence characteristic of this cultural moment' (*Chaos Bound* 293). Such postmodern appropriations of scientific developments into broader social currents place rather too much emphasis on the sociocultural factors influencing the areas

attended by science and perpetuate the dangerous postmodern illusion that scientific discourse is as much of a social construct as other forms of discourse.

Such critiques of science are dangerous inasmuch as they have granted ammunition to those who seek to dismiss unwelcome scientific evidence: creationists, for example, or climate change deniers. This last point was famously and commendably acknowledged by a regretful Bruno Latour, whose own work contributed so much to undermining the assumptions of scientific objectivity, allowing ‘dangerous extremists’ to, in his own later words, ‘destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives’ (227). Although I venture into some rather speculative territory in this thesis, I attempt to qualify my speculations with adequate provisos and ensure that I am not misrepresenting the scientific concepts in question.

Returning more directly to McCarthy: Derek J. Thiess attempts to address the relationship between *The Road* and the complexity science conducted at SFI, but his essay is filled with inaccuracies and confusion surrounding the actual work conducted at SFI. Thiess’s ultimate aim, to tackle what he sees as the pseudoscience which damages legitimate warnings in the global warming debate, is commendable, but there are far too many unfounded accusations and generalisations: ‘McCarthy is a relativist’ and he ‘displays a complete disregard for science’ (533, 535). Thiess repeatedly and incorrectly refers to complexity as a ‘theory’; he equates complexity science with the work of Latour and uses an unfavourable account of Latour’s particular work as part of his attack on complexity (536). Throughout his essay, Thiess imposes quotation marks around the words ‘science’ and ‘researcher’ whenever he is talking of the scientists who work at SFI, while repeatedly misunderstanding the actual science involved and, ironically, fulminating against the ‘pseudoscience’ that undermines genuine and important climate-change research.

In relation to *The Road* specifically, the concept of entropy, central to thermodynamics and information theory, has been explored by Markus Wierschem. His identification of entropic signifiers in the novel is informed by a solid grounding in the history of the concept and its theoretical

underpinnings. Wierschem suggests at the start of his essay that ‘little if any of [McCarthy’s interest in science] has made the slightest impact on our assessment of the author’s oeuvre;’ the study of the ‘scientific McCarthy’, he says, constitutes ‘one of the most glaring blank spots on the map of McCarthy scholarship today’ (1).

With regard to the thesis at hand, ecocritical approaches to McCarthy’s work, such as Georg Guillemin’s in *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004), address McCarthy’s appreciation of the natural world in ways that anticipate some of my arguments. Jay Ellis’s *No Place for Home* (2006) comes especially close to points I want to raise. It does so in a cursory way, however: Ellis acknowledges that a full exploration of the themes in question is beyond the scope of his monograph, which is in any case concerned primarily with the theme of character flight from constraint (288). I also differ from Ellis on the point of periodization. While I identify a particular thematic unity in all of what I am terming the SFI-period novels, Ellis divides the novels of the SFI years in two: he splits McCarthy’s work into three distinct periods, with the second being a ‘system of scientific hypotheses on chaos, complexity theory, and constraints of fate and chance on free will’ (the Border Trilogy) while ‘the third finally recedes from these possibilities [...] to find an ultimate expression of final aesthetic possibilities available only through an imagination driven less by these systems than by the power of story’ (*No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*) (288).

My treatment in this thesis of ontological naturalism doesn’t extend to an examination of McCarthy’s work in relation to the tradition of American *literary* naturalism. Such a foray would have required an expansion of focus that would have diluted the central themes. McCarthy’s debt to the tradition of literary naturalism in the United States has been covered persuasively by Steven Frye, who has said that *The Crossing* ‘evokes a tension between the real and the surreal, the materially tangible and yet mysterious and terrifying, and thus is largely an instance of what has come to be called *romantic naturalism*’ (‘Cormac McCarthy’s “world in its making”’ 48).



I am also very conscious here of the work of Vereen M. Bell who published the first book-length study of McCarthy, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988), prior to which he was one of the first literary critics to engage with the author in his 1983 essay ‘The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy’. That essay starts with a statement that encapsulates Bell’s assessment of McCarthy’s fictive worldview: ‘Cormac McCarthy’s novels are as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot’ (‘Ambiguous Nihilism’ 31). Bell uses a quote from *Suttree* to illustrate ‘McCarthy’s metaphysic: none, in effect; no first principles, no foundational truth; Heraclitus without logos’ (32).<sup>4</sup> Bell’s attribution of a form of nihilism to McCarthy would be taken up by many later scholars, who similarly read in the author a vision of a world utterly devoid of meaning, in which characters move as though without any agency or interior life.

Shane Schimpf’s *A Reader’s Guide to Blood Meridian* (2008), for example, presents a range of evidence to support a nihilistic Nietzschean reading of that novel, although his insistence that Judge Holden’s words encapsulate the author’s vision ignores the novel’s other voices and the ambiguity of the Judge’s metaphysical position with respect to the novel’s overall outlook. Eric Miles Williamson and William Quirk likewise read Nietzschean influence in McCarthy, respectively addressing *Blood Meridian* and *The Sunset Limited*. Denis Donoghue, when describing McCarthy’s earlier novels, speaks of the characters as resembling ‘recently arrived primates, possessing each a spinal column but little or no capacity of mind or consciousness. [...] The appalling quality of each deed is its emptiness, as if it were done before anyone thought of a meaning it might have’ (‘Teaching *Blood Meridian*’ 260–61).

Another tradition of McCarthy scholarship arose in response to those who viewed him as a nihilist, with Edwin Arnold being perhaps the foremost among such critics. Arnold argues, contra Donoghue, that ‘McCarthy is no

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<sup>4</sup> In Edwin T. Arnold’s review of the Bell monograph, Arnold presciently predicts that if and when McCarthy’s work generates further critical discussion ‘much of it will be spent answering Bell, using Bell as a springboard, filling in the blanks Bell has left open’ (Arnold ‘*Achievement*’ 263).

nihilist, that his works have meaning and theme, and his characters are made of much more than erect spinal chords' ('Mosaic' 8). Arnold's project to invigorate a less reductive analysis of McCarthy's metaphysics and ethics extends through all of his scholarship on the author, as he tries to elucidate 'the theme to be found in all of the books of Cormac McCarthy. [...] it is not that he says there is no mystery. Quite the opposite. The mystery McCarthy propounds is that we are blind to the mystery that is the very stuff of our existence' ('Naming' 66).

Other critics follow Arnold's lead in exploring threads in McCarthy's metaphysics and ethics that counter the nihilistic reading of his work. Kim McMurtry, for example, reads the Border Trilogy as presenting 'the biblical truths of human depravity and the need for redemption (143). Bryan Giemza explores the Catholic dimensions of McCarthy's work, claiming that the author's novels are 'awash in the blood of his Catholicism' ('Toward a Catholic Understanding' 172). Elisabeth Andersen's *The Mythos of Cormac McCarthy* (2008) is a laudable attempt to tease out overarching metaphysical strands in the author's novels up to and including *Cities of the Plain*. Andersen is a little too schematic, however, in her insistence on a structural unity linking all of McCarthy's novels with respect to paired protagonists, particularly when dealing with novels more resistant to her imposition of the structure, such as *Blood Meridian*.

While there are many good reasons to read McCarthy's novels through lenses of Christianity or, more specifically, Catholicism, and there is much to be said about the nature (and the existence or otherwise) of God in his work, my thesis here only gradually comes to discuss the nature of a potential deity in SFI-period McCarthy. In Chapter Two, which analyses contingency in the Border Trilogy, I consciously avoid discussing divine predestination when addressing the topic of determinism and freedom. My primary concern is with the ways in which the novels explore the idea of contingency in the context of a world in which the existence of God is by no means guaranteed (and is in fact very often questioned or denied by the narrators). Later in the thesis I turn back towards the God question, but I do so in the context of the naturalistic

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conception of God proposed by former SFI resident and McCarthy acquaintance Stuart Kauffman.

John Cant's *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2008) makes an effort to bridge the gap between the two schools of reading his metaphysics: Cant says that McCarthy is 'a religious writer in a Godless world' (253). I share with Cant his assessment of the novels' insistence on humanity's need to create meaning in a universe so vast in both space and time that humanity is made utterly insignificant. But whereas he frames such assertions within a broader argument that McCarthy's work is at heart a mythoclastic critique of American exceptionalism, my thesis frames the anthropogenic creation of meaning within an examination of contingency's thematic prominence in the SFI-period novels, and I ultimately draw quite different conclusions with respect to the creative impulse in humanity.

One of the most important precursors of this present study is Dianne C. Luce's 'The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*', in which Luce characterises the symbol of the road in *The Crossing* as a metaphor for 'the narrative of a life' (195). Luce expertly argues that *The Crossing* is 'a matrix of intersecting stories, partial or complete, often competing, with varying relationships to truth, cutting across and interwoven with the apparently simple linearity of the road narrative of Billy's life' (196). She suggests that, in the Border Trilogy, the human capability for narrative is 'our primary means of accessing and perhaps communicating the thing itself: the world which is a tale' (208). My own explication of the trilogy in Chapter Two builds on Luce's account of the role of story in McCarthy, but it goes beyond Luce in that it points towards the broader argument of this thesis with respect to the creative impulse in the universe in general.

Another aspect of my argument, the exploration of the puppet trope of determinism that springs from *All the Pretty Horses*, is addressed by Rick Wallach ('Theater, Ritual, and Dream' 167–9). Wallach touches on the puppetry motif in the context of a broader argument that persuasively ties together the trilogy's many literal instances and figurative evocations of performance with its equally prominent episodes of dreaming. I include more

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examples of how puppetry pervades much of the trilogy as a symbol of determinism and I tie that symbol into the overarching consideration of the theme of contingency in the SFI-period novels.

I have consciously avoided here the thoroughgoing application of any particular theoretical framework to McCarthy's work, instead concerning myself with the formal and thematic features of the texts themselves and their intertextual relationships to both historical and contemporary scientific, philosophical and literary ideas. In this respect, my thesis borrows from Formalist and New Critical methods of formal analysis and close reading while eschewing some of the more dogmatic elements historically associated with those theoretical frameworks: namely, their insistence upon their own scientific objectivity or the self-contained nature of a text.

My methodological approach is primarily comprised of textual and critical analysis, with an emphasis on close reading. In my analysis of McCarthy's literary style, I comparatively analyse other authors who deploy similar stylistic or rhetorical techniques in my attempt to isolate the particular uses to which McCarthy puts those techniques and identify how they relate to the metaphysical architecture of the novels.

## 1 – Being & Witness: Paratactic Style, Paratactic Worlds

Vereen M. Bell's early assessment of McCarthy's novels interpreted them as being essentially nihilistic, depicting fictive worlds populated by characters who 'threaten to become almost eerily unselfconscious' and who 'exhibit a characteristic rural fatalism about issues of cause and effect: existence is no more explicable to them than climate, or nature itself, and not a fruitful subject of meditation' (*Achievement* 4–5).

This vision of McCarthy's worlds has been echoed by numerous critics and scholars in the years since Bell initiated serious critical engagement with McCarthy. To take just one example: in the *New York Times* review of *All the Pretty Horses*, Madison Smartt Bell compares McCarthy's vision favourably to Faulkner's but discusses how they differ, suggesting that while 'Faulkner's work is all about human history and all takes place in mental spaces, [...] in Mr. McCarthy's work human thought and activity seem almost completely inconsequential when projected upon the vast alien landscapes where they occur' ('The Man Who Understood Horses'). Bell goes on to state that the 'sense of evil that seems to suffuse his novels is illusory; it comes from our discomfort in the presence of a system that is not scaled to ourselves, within which our civilizations may be as ephemeral as flowers.' The suggestion is that the worlds of McCarthy's novels are constructed such that human agency, if it even exists at all in any meaningful sense, is dwarfed by the impersonal, indifferent forces of nature.

Throughout his novels the former existence of now-vanished human civilizations, both historical and prehistorical, is held up against geological timescales to reinforce the ephemeral nature of those cultures and by extension suggest the utter contingency of contemporary civilization(s). Petroglyphs etched by vanished prehistoric artists regularly make an appearance throughout the western novels, as do the ruins of the vanished Anasazi in *Blood Meridian*, and the effect of such repeated gesturing toward archaeological remnants is not

dissimilar to that of Shelley's 'Ozymandias': 'Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair!'<sup>5</sup>

In McCarthy, the privileged status accorded to humanity by anthropocentric ontology and epistemology is radically challenged by his vision of cosmic forces whose immensity renders human struggles almost entirely insignificant. The nature of these cosmic forces has subtly altered through his oeuvre however: after *The Orchard Keeper*, his interest in Gnosticism pervades *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, *Suttree*, and *Blood Meridian*, in each of which, to a greater or lesser degree, there is the suggestion that the world may be one that has been created by a malevolent demiurge. In the later, SFI-period novels, on the other hand, Gnostic imagery recedes somewhat and the potential for supernaturalist readings is diminished due to an increased emphasis on metaphysical naturalism as the potential framework underpinning the fictional worlds.

While hereafter I will focus on how each novel treats the theme of contingency that emerges as one of the central concerns of his SFI-period work, this first chapter focuses on some of the general stylistic features of the novels that have a bearing on our reading of their metaphysics, proposing a reading of McCarthy's style which closely associates many of his techniques with the metaphysical architecture of his worlds and which thus lays the groundwork for more detailed analyses of the five SFI-period novels .

My analysis of McCarthy's style addresses a set of core questions: What, if anything, is the relationship between a literary style and the *content* of a text? What are the defining characteristics of McCarthy's style that might have a significant, if subtly realised, bearing on the way the reader might imagine the created worlds of the novels? How does each of those stylistic features operate with respect to the narrative and thematic content depicted? What does an

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, *Blood Meridian* explicitly references the Shelley poem: in one of that novel's summary chapter subheadings is included the entry 'Pasajeros un de país antiguo,' which roughly translates as the plural of Shelley's 'traveller from an antique land' (*BM* 86). The position of this subheading in the sequence suggests that the travellers to which it refers are the family of gypsies whose later tarot reading will cryptically refer to future events of the novel.

address of all of these questions reveal about how one might read the *Weltanschauung* that reveals itself in each text?

It is helpful at this point to consider Lukács' discussion of the relationship between style and *Weltanschauung*:

What determines the style of a given work of art? How does the intention determine the form? (We are concerned here, of course, with the intention realized in the work; it need not coincide with the writer's conscious intention). The distinctions that concern us are not those between stylistic 'techniques' in the formalistic sense. It is the view of the world, the ideology or *Weltanschauung* underlying a writer's work, that counts. And it is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the world which constitutes his 'intention' and is the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing. Looked at in this way, style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather, it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content. (qtd. in Hale 396)<sup>6</sup>

As Lukács points out here, the relationship between style and content is neither arbitrary nor unidirectional. The style is in some sense determined by the content, but in Lukács' terms, it is not just a specific form *for* a specific content, it is 'the specific form *of* a specific content' (emphasis added), establishing the difference between style and form alone while suggesting the inextricable dependence of style on both form and content. Lukács' intention

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<sup>6</sup> Lukács makes this statement at the outset of a consideration of modernist literature and the ways in which it differs from realism. He goes on to discuss how modernism views man as a solitary, ahistorical being, with the modernist hero being 'strictly confined within the limits of his own experience' and lacking any personal history, being 'thrown-into-the-world' in a Heideggerian sense, and this he attributes to the ideological foundations of modernism. In the context of this discussion of McCarthy, it is perhaps interesting to note here that Lukács sees literary naturalism as part of the same ideological strand taken up by the later modernism, with the distinction between naturalism and realism depending 'on the presence or absence in a work of art of a "hierarchy of significance" in the situations and characters presented' (Hale 405). The naturalistic character of McCarthy's work should be apparent in his similar elision of hierarchies of significance, but if his novels share the 'static approach to reality' identified by Lukács as one of the markers of both naturalism and modernism then it is one in which emphasis is nonetheless continually placed on the situation of man within the broader sweep of temporal change. McCarthy's interest in temporal change focuses on the immensity of geological time, however, rather than historical dialectics.

is to elucidate the ideological underpinning of modernist literature, but his definition here of the relationship between style, form and content is generally applicable to a consideration of literary style whether or not one uses such a consideration in the context of ideological critique.

For Paul Crowther, style is one way of apprehending some of the ontological differences between the situated realities of finite embodied subjects. He explains:

No such subject can occupy the same part of space at the same time as another person or material body. This means that, in terms of perception, activity, and self-understanding, we will always occupy the world in a way that is different from other beings. We have a personal history which cannot be shared by others. (6)

An aesthetic style thus manifests a particular individual viewpoint, formed by manifold factors but in some very real sense representing an original viewpoint on the world. Such an understanding of style, as potentially revelatory of its author's worldview, is the understanding that this thesis adopts in its investigation into McCarthy's style and its relationship to the content of his SFI-period novels.

Notwithstanding the shifts and changes, certain elements of McCarthy's style have remained fairly constant throughout his oeuvre, such as the refusal to set off direct speech with quotation marks, the paucity of punctuation in general unless absolutely necessary, and the division of his prose into two largely distinct registers. His 'heightened' passages, which often display striking figurative flourishes, philosophically ruminative narrative intrusions, and the rhythmic flow of verse or the King James Bible, constitute one of those registers, while a flatter declarative prose is the other, the occasional monotony and functionality of which belies the subtlety of its effects. What both the heightened and the more workaday passages share, however, are paratactically structured sentences. The parataxis is often more obvious in the flatter register, but the heightened register operates within an



equally paratactic rhetorical scheme, and in both registers the paratactic syntax can be read allegorically in terms of the novels' metaphysical worldviews.

Take for example this paragraph from *Blood Meridian*, which begins with a fairly flat polysyndetic sentence and finishes in McCarthy's heightened mode:

They bivouacked by the tank and the farrier saw to the mules and ponies that had thrown shoes and they worked on the wagons by firelight far into the night. They set forth in a crimson dawn where sky and earth closed in a razorous plane. Out there dark little archipelagos of cloud and the vast world of sand and scrub shearing upward into the shoreless void where those blue islands trembled and the earth grew uncertain, gravely canted and veering out through tinctures of rose and the dark beyond the dawn to the uttermost rebate of space. (52)

As is often the case, the manual activities here are given a sense of routine repetition through the polysyndeton. The men's nightly labours seem familiar and automatic and are depicted in a relatively flat declarative register. The renewal of their journey at dawn then becomes the occasion for the landscape and the sunrise to become otherworldly through the figurative strangeness depicted. A sense of enclosure, perhaps entrapment, is established as both the sky and earth meet along the barely discernible plane of the horizon. The land, presumably surrounded by mountains here, appears to almost fall upwards into the 'shoreless void' of the sky, its canted slope exerting a gravitational pull to the blackness of space. The circumscription of these men's lives, this ragtag band of filibusters surrounding Captain White, is thus given figurative expression, and the only feeling of release from this encircled horizon is the void.

The prose of *Blood Meridian*, for Steven Shaviro, 'leaps from the concrete to the abstract and back again, often within the space of a single sentence. It observes a fractal symmetry of scale, describing without hierarchical distinction and with the same attentive complexity the most

minute phenomena and the most cosmic' (154). The novel displays 'an incessant fluid displacement, a flux of words and of visions and palpations, indifferent to our usual distinctions between subjective and objective, between literal and figurative or between empirical description and speculative reflection' (154). This leaping that Shaviro describes is precisely the shifting between McCarthy's two registers that is in fact evident in all of his work, but there are differences of degree between each novel.

The shifting between both registers never reaches the dizzying level of intensity that is on display in *Blood Meridian*, but all of McCarthy's earlier five novels are dense with heightened passages (with the exception of *Child of God*, which is more economical with its use of stylistic ornamentation). *All the Pretty Horses* marks the beginning of a period where McCarthy's prose tends more toward the flat register, albeit with *The Crossing* being something of an exception much as *Child of God* is in the earlier period. All three Border Trilogy novels contain a great deal of elaborately figurative passages, but if one reads them in order of the narrative chronology (so, *The Crossing*, then *All the Pretty Horses*, and then *Cities of the Plain*), it is easy to discern the gradual diminishment of the heightened mode until *Cities of the Plain* has more in common stylistically with *No Country for Old Men* than it does with *The Crossing*. Likewise, *The Crossing* is stylistically closer in spirit to *Blood Meridian* than it is to the final trilogy novel. This diminishment could well be accidental, or a function of the fact that *Cities of the Plain* began life as an unproduced screenplay before the other novels were written. The shift towards the flatter, more literal register may very well signify something else, however. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will make a few attempts at interpreting this shift in light of each novel's narrative content.

For the most part, the SFI-period novels can be viewed collectively in terms of their style. They come to rely much less on the kinds of ostentatious figuration that is on display so much in the earlier novels. This tendency towards the flatter register, in which the underlying paratactic structure lacks substantial figurative adornment and is thus more visible, corresponds with the increasing emphasis on contingency and a move away from overt supernaturalism in his SFI-period novels. The subsequent chapters attempt to

address each of those novels in turn with respect to their explorations of contingency, and the conclusion of each chapter and the overall conclusion of the thesis attempts to draw a possible reading of his SFI-period work with respect to the stylistic features under discussion here.

Of the distinctive features of McCarthy's literary style under investigation here, perhaps the most fundamental, or at least the most pervasive, is parataxis. This syntactical and structural figure pervades all of his work as its primary organising principle, and its universality means that it is often easy to look past it when attempting to analyse or interpret his novels. Any thoroughgoing exegesis of McCarthy's novels should, however, attend to something so ubiquitous as this paratactic style and grapple with its relationship with the thematic content of the novels. Reading his novels, and particularly his SFI-period ones, in light of an analysis of their parataxis helps to illuminate the metaphysical and epistemological questions they raise.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the most literal definition of parataxis as 'the placing of propositions or clauses one after another, without indicating by connecting words the relation (of coordination or subordination) between them'. An example of such a paratactic statement is Caesar's 'Veni, vidi, vici'. The lack of conjunctions means that the reader must infer or supply relationships of subordination between the three clauses. As Richard A. Lanham puts it:

We were to infer that, for Caesar, diagnosing the situation ('I saw') and defeating the enemy ('I conquered') were no more difficult than simply appearing on the scene ('I came'). He boasts without seeming to by putting three different kinds of action on the same syntactic level. (Lanham 29)

So, in this instance, Caesar implies a kind of deterministic inevitability in the course of events without once using a conjunction which would make explicit

the causal relationships between the three clauses. Here, the absence of words signifying causality paradoxically emphasises causality, for rhetorical purposes.

This kind of understated boasting is one of the effects of the paratactic style in fiction that might be considered hard-boiled, or similarly ‘masculine’ in other ways. The replacement, in hard-boiled detective fiction, of the hypotactic framework of subordination favoured by realists with ‘an affectless parataxis connoting hardness and objectivity’ represents a ‘purging of subjective affect’ and suggests ‘a form of consciousness that seems fully adapted to the rationalized and instrumentalized aspects of everyday life in the twenties and thirties’ (Breu 61–62). The hypotactic mode, for hard-boiled and other kinds of fiction that took Hemingway as a model, is too prolix and subjectively oriented to capture the terse masculinity depicted in those works.<sup>7</sup> The suitability of such a style to McCarthy’s characters, from the anomic fringe-dwellers of his earlier works through the laconic western romantics of the Border Trilogy and *No Country for Old Men* to the hard-bitten denizens of a blasted America in *The Road*, is readily apparent.

Angus Fletcher, in his *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, defines parataxis as ‘a structuring of sentences such that they do not convey any distinctions of higher or lower order. “Order” here means intensity of interest, since what is more important usually gets the greater share of attention’ (Fletcher 162). He expands upon the literal *OED* definition, however, when he says that while ‘each predication stands alone’ in parataxis, a syntax is also paratactic if:

predications are joined by conjunctions of equality: “He ran, and they wept, and he ran again”; or “He walked, but the people ran.” This means that paratactic sentences do not attempt modification by relative

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<sup>7</sup> McCarthy famously dismissed both Proust and Henry James in the first of his few published interviews: ‘I don’t understand them. [...] To me, that’s not literature. A lot of writers who are considered good I consider strange’ (Woodward, ‘Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction’). The ostensible reason for their omission from his list of ‘good writers’ is because they don’t ‘deal with issues of life and death’, but it’s probably not coincidental that Proust and James are two of the most exemplary practitioners of elaborately complex hypotactic sentences which deal extensively with subjective interiority.

clauses, subordinating conjunctions, phrases in apposition, and the like.  
(162)

Such a use of multiple coordinating conjunctions in a paratactically structured sentence is *polysyndetic* parataxis, as opposed to the absence of conjunctions altogether which is *asyndetic*. McCarthy makes use of both figures throughout all of his work; both work in very different and specific ways within his texts but are nonetheless united in their display of the structural logic of parataxis.

Fletcher, whose overall aim is to analyse the general features of the allegorical mode in literature, refines his deployment of the concept of parataxis by paraphrasing Heinz Werner's *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*, which 'takes the term to mean the piecemeal behavior of young children or primitive peoples. We do not want to imply childlike or primitive behavior, but we do want our terms to have a roughly psychological meaning' (Fletcher 163). He continues in a footnote by quoting S.O. Andrew, who points out that parataxis, along with being 'simply a lack of grammatical subordination such as we find in the language of children and some primitive people', can also be 'a rhetorical device by which a subordinate relationship is idiomatically expressed by a coordinately juxtaposed sentence, as when we say "Knock and it shall be opened" instead of "If ye knock, it shall be opened"' (S. O. Andrew, qtd. in Fletcher 163n.). While parataxis can indeed 'idiomatically express' a subordinate relationship, the absence of subordinate conjunctions leaves open a space for ambiguity that contributes significantly to some of the effects achieved by McCarthy's work.

Fletcher refers to the *paratactic effect* as not necessarily being dependent upon the literal sense of parataxis when he states that the 'paratactic effect (psychological lack of higher and lower degrees of interest or value, "withdrawal of affect") seems to result even when the syntax conditions would seem to be subordinative. In short, sometimes hypotaxis produces the sense of no hierarchy' (164n.). The example he gives is William Faulkner, 'whose hypotaxis has no effect of variety, but rather creates a monotonous ground swell' (164n.). In McCarthy we see little to nothing of Faulknerian hypotaxis

(the Faulknerian influence on his work didn't extend to the use of more than the occasional subordinate clause), but it is helpful to hold onto the idea of the paratactic effect, for example when considering the broader structure of *The Road* with its fragmented sentences and isolated units of text separated by lacunae. This effect, whether elicited by straightforward asyndeton, by polysyndetic parataxis, by the use of sentence fragments or by the very structure of the novel in question, pervades McCarthy's work and it both contributes to and is intensified by the novels' thematic and narrative concerns.

I am adopting Fletcher's broader, psychological sense of parataxis when I suggest that McCarthy's style is paratactic. Whether strung together through the use of coordinating conjunctions or minimally telegraphic and devoid of conjunctions altogether, this parataxis is ultimately a style of juxtaposition as opposed to causal or hierarchical connection. Some examples chosen from the range of his corpus ably demonstrate this.

From *Child of God*:

He ate, he stared at the walls. He used the bedpan or chamberpot. Sometimes he could hear a radio in another room. One evening what appeared to be some hunters came to see him.

They talked for a while without the door. Then the door opened and the room filled up with men. They gathered about Ballard's bedside. He'd been asleep. He struggled up in the bed and looked at them. Some he knew, some not. His heart shrank. (*CoG* 177)

From *Suttree*:

The viaduct spanned a jungly gut filled with rubble and wreckage and a few packingcrate shacks inhabited by transient blacks and down through this puling waste the dark and leprous waters of First Creek threaded the sumac and poison ivy. Highwater marks of oil and sewage and condoms dangling in the branches like stranded leeches. Harrogate made his way through this derelict fairyland toward the final concrete

arches of the viaduct where they ran to earth. He entered delicately, his eyes skittering about. There was no one in. The earth was cool and naked and dry. Here some bones. Broken glass. A few stray dogturds. (S 116)

From *The Crossing*:

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

And from *No Country for Old Men*:

He climbed down and sat on the bed and wiped the dust from the case and unfastened the latch and the straps and opened it and looked at the packets of bills. He took one of them from the case and riffled it. Then he fitted it back and undid the length of cord he'd tied to the strap and turned off the flashlight and sat listening. (NCfOM 102)

The first is primarily asyndetic, being composed of sentences with little or no coordination; the second is a combination of asyndeton and polysyndeton; the last two are technically polysyndetic; and all are equally paratactic in their effects. There is a levelling of distinction between clauses, each being granted as much importance as any other, and all of them being arrayed in juxtaposition for the reader to apply their own judgement in drawing causal or hierarchical connections between the assembled elements.

It could be argued that the first example above, treating as it does the intellectually and morally stunted Lester Ballard, is in keeping with the 'piecemeal behavior of young children or primitive peoples' identified by

Fletcher as one working definition of the effect of parataxis. Such a use of parataxis is widespread in literature. For example, the first section of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), from the point of view of Benjy the 'idiot', is an exemplary display of the use of parataxis to represent the simplified consciousness of one without a grasp of the complexities of adult communication. Novels with child protagonists (particularly first-person ones) very regularly utilise the paratactic mode to make the prose feel authentically childlike. To take just one recent example, Willy Vlautin's *Lean on Pete* (2010) is written entirely in the simple, declarative parataxis of its child protagonist's first-person viewpoint.

The effects of parataxis are not limited to the representation of juvenile or mentally underdeveloped viewpoints however. Harold Bloom, while introducing a discussion of parataxis in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, claims that a 'great style is itself necessarily a trope, a metaphor for a particular attitude to reality' (Bloom, *Novelists and Novels* 331). He says of Hemingway:

This is parataxis with a difference, a way of utterance that plays at a withdrawal of all affect, while actually investing affect in the constancy of the withdrawal, a willing choice of the void as object, rather than be void of object, in Nietzschean terms. (331)

Lanham makes a similar point in his analysis of parataxis in *A Farewell to Arms*: 'When a syntactic pattern becomes so pronounced as this, we suspect that the syntax has become allegorical, has come to be *about* connection, *about* a refusal to subordinate' (Lanham 30). He elaborates on this when he suggests that this 'Hemingway hero does not reflect on the world he passes through; he notes and endures it' (31). Parataxis thus becomes a technique with which to syntactically mimic the unreflective stoic viewpoint of such war veterans as those Hemingway heroes, and such a reading of this syntactical figure could equally be applied to the way that some of McCarthy's novels stylistically replicate the unreflective stoicism of hardened Tennessee mountain folk, southwestern border cowboys and impoverished Mexican citizens, veterans of



military conflict in Europe and Vietnam, and the ragged human remnants of the collapse of civilization.

Perhaps the most extensive and wide-ranging treatment of parataxis in Western literature is contained in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953). Auerbach's sweeping study chronicles a range of mimetic techniques and styles from antiquity through to contemporary literature, and in many of the epochs covered he outlines the effects of the paratactic style of exemplary texts, often alongside treatments of contemporaneous hypotactically structured texts. Auerbach's work is particularly illustrative in terms of its insistence on the differing literary effects of parataxis, depending on each text's historical and cultural context.

Auerbach begins his study by contrasting two ancient epic styles: the Homeric and that of the Hebrew Bible. In Homer, events are narrated 'with such a complete externalization of all the elements of the story and of their interconnections as to leave nothing in obscurity' (Auerbach 4). The hypotactic Homeric style places all separate elements clearly in relation to one another, all of which take place 'in the foreground':

a large number of conjunctions, adverbs, particles, and other syntactical tools, all clearly circumscribed and delicately differentiated in meaning, delimit persons, things, and portions of incidents in respect to one another, and at the same time bring them together in a continuous and ever flexible connection; like the separate phenomena themselves, their relationships—their temporal, local, causal, final, consecutive, comparative, concessive, antithetical, and conditional limitations—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 depths. (6-7)

The contrasting style of the Bible is demonstrated using the account of the sacrifice of Isaac, which unrolls 'in a few independent sentences whose

syntactical connection is of the most rudimentary sort': in other words paratactic sentences (9). Thoughts are not externalized as speech, which only 'serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed' (11). Auerbach sums up this style when he states that 'the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal [...] remains mysterious and "fraught with background"' (11-12).

For the purposes of interpreting McCarthy's use of parataxis, Auerbach's importance lies in his identification of multiple paratactic effects throughout the history of European literature. He outlines the 'sublime' effect of Genesis 1:3 ('And God said, Let there be light: and there was light'):

[The sublime] is not contained in a magnificent display of rolling periods nor in the splendor of abundant figures of speech but in the impressive brevity which is in such contrast to the immense content and which for that very reason has a note of obscurity which fills the listener with a shuddering awe. It is precisely the absence of causal connectives, the naked statement of what happens—the statement which replaces deduction and comprehension by an amazed beholding that does not even seek to comprehend—which gives the sentence its grandeur. (110)

Such an intimation of the awesome incomprehension of 'amazed beholding' is certainly one aspect of McCarthy's paratactic effect also. When the Glanton gang lie in ambush for the approach of an Apache war band across a rippling mirage, the visual distortions of the atmosphere and the interpretive distortions of the witnesses are exaggerated and heightened through the polysyndetic parataxis of the description to achieve a hallucinatory 'amazed beholding' in which comprehension is so distorted as to suggest some other metaphysical realm breaking through into this one:

They crossed before the sun and vanished one by one and reappeared again and they were black in the sun and they rode out of that vanished

sea like burnt phantoms with the legs of the animals kicking up the spume that was not real and they were lost in the sun and lost in the lake and they shimmered and slurred together and separated again and they augmented by planes in lurid avatars and began to coalesce and there began to appear above them in the dawn-broached sky a hellish likeness of their ranks riding huge and inverted and the horses' legs incredibly elongate trampling down the high thin cirrus and the howling antiwarriors pendant from their mounts immense and chimeric and the high wild cries carrying that flat and barren pan like the cries of souls broke through some misweave in the weft of things into the world below. (*BM* 116)

Granted, such a passage lacks the unadorned brevity that Auerbach identifies in the Genesis verse. But this deranged vision of inverted, elongated 'antiwarriors' is rendered all the more terrifying and astonishing through the relentlessness of its paratactic, polysyndetic construction, the lack of causal connectives stripping the passage bare of 'deduction' or 'comprehension' and prompting instead an 'amazed beholding' of one frightening, barely believable image after another. In this instance, as is the case with many such heightened passages in *Blood Meridian*, the imagery invites supernaturalist interpretation and retains the spirit of the Gnosticism that informs much of McCarthy's early fictive metaphysics.

When Denis Donoghue addresses McCarthy's parataxis in his analysis of that 'howling antiwarriors' scene, he offers his own definition of its effect:

Greek rhetoric includes the figure called parataxis: it is a device for placing one thing beside another without subordination. No relation of cause and consequence is proposed: no article requires more attention than another. The effect of this writing is to nullify the force of successiveness and to make the details appear to compose themselves as a picture. Even the words that stand out as fancy writing—"pendant". . ."elongate". . ."chimeric"—allow themselves to be assimilated without

fuss to the parataxis. They are subdued to the reign of “and.”  
(Donoghue, ‘Teaching Blood Meridian’ 275)

Donoghue doesn’t extend his analysis any further than this suggestion that the effect of McCarthy’s parataxis here is a kind of counter-ekphrasis, composing a picture out of an assemblage of juxtaposed details. He rightly identifies the style’s nullification of ‘the force of successiveness’, hinting at the way parataxis refuses to impose a causal framework on the details recited, but this is as far as he goes. To take his analysis a little further, it should be pointed out that while the sequence of details ‘appear to compose themselves as a picture’, the ‘reign of “and”’ lends dynamism and propulsion to the composed picture such that it is never in danger of becoming static, despite the nullification of causation and succession. Such a use of polysyndetic parataxis additionally contributes a breathlessness to scenes in which it is used by simple virtue of the sheer length of the sentences thus constructed and the repeatedly thwarted readerly expectation that a clause following the word ‘and’ generally concludes a sentence.

John Vanderheide refers to Angus Fletcher’s analysis of allegory in his reading of both *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*, rightly identifying the ‘paratactic rhythm’ of the former’s dialogue and the ‘ostentatiously paratactic syntax’ of the latter’s narrative (Vanderheide, ‘Sighting Leviathan’ 111, 109). His identification of those works’ use of parataxis, coupled with Fletcher’s thesis that parataxis is a common feature of allegory, becomes a component of his argument that both of the McCarthy texts in question should thus be read allegorically and that the Book of Job is central to an allegorical reading of both works. Thus, the suicidal White in *The Sunset Limited* and the man’s suicidal wife in *The Road* are both avatars of Leviathan, ‘personification[s] of that destructive impulse that is part and particle of God’ the kernel of whose desire is ‘an absolute will to nothingness that would annihilate even itself’ (118). Conversely, Black in *The Sunset Limited* and the man in *The Road* both figure the character of Job: Black as the tormented Job of that biblical book’s central section, and the man as Job after God has revealed ‘the decentred place of the

human species in nature’, rendering God ‘altogether transcendent to any measurement (including that of justice)’ (116). The paratactic style of *The Road* allegorically demonstrates, for Vanderheide, ‘a repudiation of the aesthetic of the self-contained artwork, the thing that is complete in itself and is in need of no witness, no interpretation, no future, no fulfilment’ (119). It does so through its insistence that every ‘clause or fragment, incomplete in itself, gestures outside of itself, forwards and back, for the fulfilment of its sense. [...] What comes after depends on what comes before. What comes before depends on what comes after’ (119).

While Vanderheide’s allegorical reading of these two texts is both convincing and illustrative, his analysis of the paratactic style itself is relatively cursory. Apart from its function as a central component of allegorical tradition (and thus as an indicator that McCarthy’s texts should be read allegorically), Vanderheide points out that the syntax itself functions allegorically, signifying the interdependence of components of the ‘creaturely orders’ through the interdependence of each clause and fragment surrounding it.

To interpret the syntax of a literary text allegorically is particularly fruitful when the content of the text itself provides ample evidence to support the reading thus arrived at. Vanderheide recognises this and takes a few steps towards such an allegorical reading of McCarthy’s parataxis, but because Vanderheide engages more considerably with those texts’ allusions to Job, the question of how one might allegorically interpret the syntactical figure never extends beyond the briefest of treatments. That question is thus taken up by this thesis to include the use of this figure throughout McCarthy’s oeuvre and what it might mean for our interpretation of the worlds constructed therein and any recognisable shift in the metaphysical architecture of those worlds from his earlier work to his later.

Robert Alter includes a brief analysis of the paratactic style of *The Road* in his *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (2010). Alter sees McCarthy’s parataxis as, among other things, an example of the influence of the King James Version’s paratactic style on American literature. He suggests that the novel’s use of parataxis meets the challenge it sets itself to ‘represent

an order of reality fundamentally alien to the reality in which and for which our shared language has been framed' (172). He also argues that the novel's frequent use of 'noun phrases without predicates' in place of complete sentences is 'a procedure that here is basically a modernist extension of the logic of biblical parataxis' (173). His final point with regard to the novel's paratactic syntax highlights its representation of a world in which our quotidian 'reasoned movement through temporal orders is no longer possible,' in which the protagonists exist only in the precarious present moment:

The paratactic march of brief sentences and sentence fragments conveys this apprehension of time as a sequence of discrete moments, each standing on its own, with no confidence that anything may develop through time or give it the aspect of a coherent continuum. (176–177)

While his treatment of *The Road* is undermined somewhat by its misattribution of a line of dialogue ('There is no God and we are his prophets,' which Alter mistakenly claims the man says to his son, whereas in fact the wanderer who calls himself Ely speaks this line to the man), his overall consideration of the novel's style is an otherwise careful and welcome contribution to the study of style in McCarthy's prose.

The most extensive allegorical analysis of McCarthy's parataxis can be found in Georg Guillemin's *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. Guillemin defines McCarthy's paratactic style as presenting 'a mosaic of self-contained elements' (25). His explication of this style becomes part of an argument identifying melancholy as one of the key features of McCarthy's own brand of pastoralism:

The rhythmic leveling of differences expresses the indifference of the melancholy mind, while the repeated enunciation of this indifference itself prescribes meaning where none seemed to exist before. Parataxis

thereby assumes an incantatory quality in its very repetitiveness, like a ritual chant meant to drown out the sorrow it articulates. (25-6)

The word ‘indifference’ here is key to the primary effect of parataxis in McCarthy – it both suggests the ‘leveling of differences’ evident in parataxis and also evokes the indifference, the lack of interest or concern, of the world with respect to the tribulations of the creatures, including the novels’ characters, which occupy it. The absence in the world of any kind of loving god has been a mark of McCarthy’s work from the outset, but where his first five novels more frequently intimate that the worlds depicted in their pages may be governed by a malevolent deity or demiurge, the SFI-period novels are more circumspect when it comes to implying the presence in the world of a theistic entity, and instead favour the repeated insinuation of a physical universe devoid of any deity, a universe in which the tribulations of humanity are as cosmically insignificant as the ‘trackless’ and ‘unremarked [...] path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond’ (TR 181).

Whereas Guillemin initially identifies paratactic style with the ‘indifference of the melancholy mind’, he later elaborates on its effect in a more universal manner when he suggests that it is one of the techniques deployed by McCarthy that ‘subverts the anthropocentrism that is essential in pastoral fiction’, and that it erases ‘the separation and distinction between what is human and what is nonhuman’ (30). The traditional anthropocentric dichotomy of human and nonhuman is subverted and blurred all the way through McCarthy’s corpus, and in fact the opening scene of his debut novel initiates what would become a recurrent motif in his work: a group of workers are trying to chop down an elm tree that has grown completely through and around a wrought-iron fence, engulfing the fence within its trunk. Frustrated in their efforts, the workers express amazement that the *fence* has ‘grewed all up in that tree’, inverting the relationship between the inanimate fence and the growing tree and complicating the traditional dichotomy between the man-made and the organic, the world of humanity and the world of nature (3-4). The two worlds, the novel suggests, are inseparably intertwined.

In each of McCarthy's subsequent novels, the relationship between the human characters and their environments is continually emphasised. The environments themselves are very often filled with traces of humanity gradually being reabsorbed into the natural world, such as the detritus in and around the quarry and the dumpkeeper's shack in *Child of God*: the 'ruins of an old truck [...] rusting in honeysuckle' and other 'artifacts [...] old stoves and water heaters [...] bicycle parts and corroded buckets' (37); stone block remnants of the quarry lie moss-covered in the woods, 'toppled monoliths among the trees and vines like traces of an older race of man' (26). Similarly, the novels abound with petroglyphs, ancient pictographs, and other such efforts of humanity to inscribe the world with its trace. These serve as remnants of cultures and social orders that have long since disappeared or been altered utterly, and as such they constitute repeated reminders in McCarthy's novels of the impermanence of civilisations and the utter contingency of any given social, political or cultural order. They are essentially memento mori on a grand scale, stamped liberally throughout the landscapes of his novels, and their presence in his work points emphatically toward the eventual composition of *The Road*, in which that civilisational contingency is rendered concrete in terrifying detail.

Few passages in McCarthy capture the ontological parity of the human and nonhuman as well as the following, from *Blood Meridian*:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

Here, the 'optical democracy' of the landscape suggests a profoundly non-anthropocentric ontological framework which, though presented in this



passage as being particular to the ‘neuter austerity’ of this specific geographical region, figuratively equates all elements of the terrain, whether human, animal, vegetable or mineral. There is no great chain of being in this world, we are invited to believe, no hierarchical ordering of physical entities with man perched above the others. Man is instead reduced to one equal part among others, akin to the rocks under his feet.

This passage, among others, has prompted Steven Shaviro to observe that in *Blood Meridian* ‘the prejudices of anthropocentric perceptions are disqualified. The eye no longer constitutes the axis of vision. We are given instead a kind of perception before or beyond the human’ (Shaviro 153). This pre- or supra-human perception of a non-anthropocentric world is granted to us by the novels’ narrative voices, which occasionally strain to reach for the heightened figurative language that might approximate what is fundamentally ineffable. While the novels strive to capture in the heightened register the indescribable supra-human world in itself, their paratactic syntax continues doing its own work, prompting and reinforcing the readerly sense of worlds in which anthropocentric claims and assumptions (often on the part of its characters) are demonstrated to be hollow in the face of the overwhelming suzerainty of nature over the human. Humanity is subsumed, along with everything else, into the paratactic logic of indifference and equality.

Throughout his texts, McCarthy’s metaphysic remains ambiguously framed, ever suggesting possible supernaturalist interpretations of his novels’ events while leaving the door open for purely naturalist readings and often overtly suggesting them. The resultant tension between the mystical and the natural lends a powerful mysterious charge to each narrative, a charge that finds its syntactical correlate in his paratactic style.

The levelling of the syntactical vista within each novel, presenting a succession of individual details, few of which are given any priority in relation to the others, creates something of an atomistic structure in his work. Each paratactically juxtaposed detail jostles with those surrounding it, their relationships to one another being unexpressed but buzzing with potentiality and demanding that we either supply a causal and hierarchical order onto the

text in accordance with our best approximation of that order, or that we leave those undelineated relationships in suspension and vibrating with a mysterious resonance.

In a causally deterministic reading of his metaphysic, relationships of causal determination must be extraneously supplied to the majority of juxtaposed sentences or clauses in the absence of overt signifiers of causation, and yet such a reading is frequently encouraged by tropes that figure causality, mechanism, and determinism. Take the passage in *All the Pretty Horses* in which John Grady Cole plays pool with Don Hector. This section of the novel is immediately preceded by John Grady and Hector's daughter Alejandra's first lovemaking in a lake at night, and opens with Cole and Rawlins smoking under the ramada of the bunkhouse as they wait for supper:

There was talking and laughing in the bunkhouse and then it ceased. Two of the vaqueros came to the door and stood. Rawlins turned and looked north along the road. Five Mexican rangers were coming down the road riding singlefile. They were dressed in khaki uniforms and they rode good horses and they wore pistols in beltholsters and carried carbines in their saddlescabbards. Rawlins stood. The other vaqueros had come to the door and stood looking out. As the riders passed on the road the leader glanced across at the bunkhouse at the men under the ramada, at the men standing in the door. Then they went on from sight past the gerente's house, five riders riding singlefile down out of the north through the twilight toward the tile-roofed ranchhouse below them. (146-7)

The sudden intrusion into the boys' idyllic world of these mysterious rangers, well armed and equipped, demands that we relate it to the illicit lovemaking that preceded it, as though it were an admonition directed towards John Grady himself. We later learn that Don Hector had not yet known of his daughter's relationship with the American boy at this time, and so the presence of the rangers has not in fact been determined by it. Yet the paratactic

juxtaposition of the two events invites us to read in the rangers' ominous appearance a causal relationship between John Grady's transgression and the foreboding sense that repercussions are imminent. This is immediately reinforced with the brief account of the subsequent nights:

The following night she came to his bed and she came every night for nine nights running, pushing the door shut and latching it and turning in the slatted light at God knew what hour and stepping out of her clothes and sliding cool and naked against him in the narrow bunk all softness and perfume and the lushness of her black hair falling over him and no caution to her at all. Saying I dont care I dont care. (147)

The ominous suggestion that John Grady's inability to call a halt to his nightly visitations from his boss's daughter could have grave consequences in the form of the heavily armed rangers is carried forward into the next scene. John Grady and Don Hector finish up their paperwork relating to the day's work on the horses, and Hector asks John if he plays billiards (147). John replies that he plays 'Pool anyways', so Hector leads him through the building to 'a darkened room that smelled of must and old wood' containing a billiard table (148). The far end of the room has 'a very old carved and painted wooden altar above which hung a lifesize carved and painted wooden Christ' (148):

This was a chapel as you see. You are not superstitious?

No sir. I dont think so.

It is supposed to be made unsacred. The priest comes and says some words. Alfonsa knows about these matters. But of course the table has been here for years now and the chapel has yet to be whatever the word is. To have the priest come and make it no longer be a chapel. Personally I question whether such a thing can be done at all. What is sacred is sacred. The powers of the priest are more limited than people suppose. (148-9)

In this consecrated room, the billiard table stands: the conventional metaphor for causation and mechanistic physics sitting in the centre of a ‘sacred’ space. This juxtaposition alone is worth lingering upon, for it seems to capture something of the essence of McCarthy’s metaphysics succinctly. Just as, in McCarthy, the sense prevails of the universe as determined, mechanistic, indifferent to the exertion of human will, this sense is always surrounded by a countervailing current of the sacred and mysterious. The metaphysical tension in his work arises, in large part, from the uneasy juxtaposition of these ontological frameworks and the indefinite suspension of any definite narrative judgement either way.

Don Hector relates some of his family history to John Grady, recounting how Francisco Madero and his brother, along with other young people, were sent to France for their education and returned full of ideas:

and yet there seemed to be no agreement among them. How do you account for that? Their parents sent them for these ideas, no? And they went there and received them. Yet when they returned and opened their valises, so to speak, no two contained the same thing.

He shook his head gravely. As if the lay of the table were a trouble to him. (150)

Again, we have a paratactic juxtaposition of this account of the differing effects of the French education on the young Mexicans alongside Don Hector’s grave shaking of his head. Whether he shakes his head in disapproval, incomprehension, or incredulity is not made clear, even after the qualifying sentence fragment – the noun ‘trouble’ could be interpreted in any number of ways. Furthermore, it is the ‘lay of the table’ which is analogically related by the ‘as if’ to the situation outlined in his tale, suggesting a correspondence between the inscrutable nature of unintended consequences and the metaphorical figuration of the same in the lay of the balls on a billiard table.

This theme is continued when Don Hector outlines his generation's disbelief 'that people can be improved in their character by reason': 'Beware gentle knight. There is no greater monster than reason' (150, 151). Attempts to impose reason on the ineluctable and unpredictable complexity of events in their causal interrelations is, for Don Hector, doomed to failure, presumably because the reduction required by reason necessarily misrepresents the chaotic nature of the world and of the human character. After missing his next shot, he says: 'You see? You see how this is bad for one's billiard game? This thinking?'

There is a notable difference between the effects of asyndetic and polysyndetic parataxis. Quite often McCarthy uses asyndeton to increase the tension of a scene, such as the following from *No Country for Old Men* in which Moss awaits the arrival of Chigurh in the Eagle Pass hotel room:

He went to the far side of the bed and dropped down and pushed himself underneath it and lay there on his stomach with the shotgun pointed at the door. Just space enough beneath the wooden slats. Heart pumping against the dusty carpet. He waited. Two columns of dark intersected the bar of light beneath the door and stood there. The next thing he heard was the key in the lock. Very softly. Then the door opened. He could see out into the hallway. There was no one there. He waited. He tried not even to blink but he did. Then there was an expensive pair of ostrichskin boots standing in the doorway. Pressed jeans. The man stood there. Then he came in. Then he crossed slowly to the bathroom. (110–11)

The telegraphic minimalism of the prose here, reduced at times to sentence fragments, imitates in its staccato rhythm the effect of cinematic montage, each full stop acting like a jump cut and contributing one further small element to the overall scene that is unfolding in temporal sequence. Or the brevity of the sentences could also be said to mimic the quickened rate of Moss's heartbeat against the floor and the laser-like focus on particular details, such as the 'Pressed jeans', reflects in part the heightened level of alertness of Moss's

adrenaline-jacked mind. McCarthy generates similar tension throughout all of his novels through the use of this asyndetic paratactic figure, but it is rarely used as much as it is in *No Country for Old Men*.

Polysyndeton, on the other hand, generates a fluid sense of proficiency through its rolling accumulation of coordinated clauses. McCarthy thus turns to this syntactical figure whenever a novel requires that a person's handiness is established, or an animal's fluent inhabitation of its world, or an overly familiar and routine action is performed by a character. Examples of all three of these can be found in each novel. In *No Country for Old Men*, Chigurh creates a distraction to facilitate his robbing supplies from a drugstore:

Outside the drugstore on Main he stopped and turned and leaned against a car parked there. He checked the street. No one coming. He unscrewed the gascap at his elbow and hooked the shirtsleeve over the coathanger and ran it down into the tank and drew it out again. He taped the cardboard over the open gastank and balled the sleeve wet with gasoline over the top of it and taped it down and lit it and turned and limped into the drugstore. (162–63)

His expertise is demonstrated by the polysyndeton making his actions and motions seem almost involuntary, each one part of an automatic sequence that just keeps rolling to the end once it has been started.

The fluent presence of animal being is captured polysyndetically in the following example, from *All the Pretty Horses*: 'the dogs were lean and silver in color and they flowed among the legs of the horses silent and fluid as running mercury and the horses paid them no mind at all' (101). And *The Crossing* here uses polysyndeton to ascribe a routine aspect to Billy's actions after sighting some wild turkeys:

He sat the horse and marked them with his eye. Then he rode down off the trail and stepped down and tied the horse and unhitched the rope and tied the wolf to a tree and took the rifle and jacked forward

the lever to see that there was a shell chambered and then set off across the little valley with one eye on the sun where it was already backlighting the trees at the head of the draw to the west. (89)

All of these uses of polysyndeton imply a fluency that borders on the automatic and mechanical, contributing to the sense in McCarthy that characters lack any freedom or self-awareness. But at the same time, they celebrate a proficiency of inhabiting the world such that the poetic and mysterious grace of animals and the expert manual dexterity of humans are brought into close proximity, cast in the same light. In doing so, such polysyndetic passages constitute further instances of McCarthy conflating the human and the non-human and thus subverting anthropocentric ontology, much as the parataxis nullifies, or at least greatly obscures, ontological distinction and hierarchy with the novels' worlds.

Throughout *The Road*, paratactic descriptions of the devastated environment abound. The novel frequently describes a new scene through a paratactic list of phenomena, the lack of subordination lending equal weight to each element:

They passed through the city at noon of the day following. He kept the pistol to hand on the folded tarp on top of the cart. He kept the boy close to his side. The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather. Grimacing at the day. (12)

Here we have a series of sentences, many of which are grammatically incomplete, laid out horizontally without any subordinating conjunctive tissue to establish syntactical hierarchy or causal relationships. On one level, the effect of this style is a levelling of distinctions between the assembled sentences or clauses, suggesting the non-anthropocentric worldview of the 'optical democracy' quote from *Blood Meridian*. In *The Road*, parataxis also

performs the additional function of approximating the state of mind of the man as he scours the apocalyptic landscape for items that may assist in the survival of himself and the boy. In this sense, parataxis suggests an inventory of their surroundings as they scan each abandoned house and gas station for food, oil, tools, and clothing:

He crossed the yard and pushed open the door, still holding the gun. It was a sort of garden shed. Dirt floor. Metal shelves with some plastic flowerpots. Everything covered with ash. There were garden tools standing in the corner. A lawnmower. A wooden bench under the window and beside it a metal cabinet. He opened the cabinet. Old catalogs. Packets of seed. Begonia. Morning glory. He stuck them in his pocket. For what? (132-3)

In the kitchen there was cutlery and cooking pans and english china. A butler's pantry where the door closed softly behind them. Tile floor and rows of shelves and on the shelves several dozen quart jars. He crossed the room and picked one up and blew the dust from it. Green beans. Slices of red pepper standing among the ordered rows. Tomatoes. Corn. New potatoes. Okra. (206)

These two aspects of the paratactic style as deployed by McCarthy are not unrelated. The paratactic descriptions of landscape have a flat, inventory-like quality themselves, each feature being listed with the indifference of someone performing a stock-check:

They trucked on along the blacktop. Tall clapboard houses. Machinerolled metal roofs. A log barn in a field with an advertisement in faded ten-foot letters across the roofslope. See Rock City. (21)

As mentioned already, Fletcher argues that another effect of the paratactic style is the imitation of 'the piecemeal behavior of young children or



primitive peoples' (Fletcher 163). The use of free indirect style in *The Road* limits itself to the voice of the man, but this function of parataxis brings the narrator's voice more closely into alignment with the boy's perspective on the world, while also reflecting the primitive nature of their lives in the 'caustic waste' (188).

McCarthy's vision of the world acknowledges the anthropocentric limits of epistemology. The structure of the human cognitive apparatus imposes its own kind of order on reality, and therefore 'no man's mind can compass' the true order of existence as it is in itself. The only knowledge to which we can ever have access is by definition anthropocentric, while the hidden order in the world could be considered ecocentric. A sense of the mysterious gulf between the epistemic and the ontological thus conceived is the final effect of the paratactic style at work in *The Road*. Auerbach's claim that the paratactic Hebrew Bible 'remains mysterious and "fraught with background."' thus equally applies to the parataxis deployed in *The Road* (Auerbach 11-12)

By placing equal emphasis on a series of propositions about the man and the boy's encounter with the world, the narrative of *The Road* becomes 'fraught with background'. Furthermore, the novel displays a fractal self-similarity in its use of a paratactic structure on a larger scale, with the text broken up by section breaks, sometimes into single-paragraph units. On one level, this technique reflects the novel's world 'shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities', the diminution of signification once the 'sacred idiom [is] shorn of its referents' (88-9). Alongside this, the paratactic style and structure all but erase the concepts of causality and hierarchy, stripping the world of anthropocentric epistemological categories and thus creating a space for the 'background' to take prominence.

The interplay of stylistic effect and narrative content with respect to contingency in the SFI-period novels is what is of interest in this thesis. I have attempted to sketch here an account of McCarthy's paratactic effects, the different ways the effects can be interpreted, and the augmentation of the flat

paratactic vista through McCarthy's regular departure into a second, heightened register which is equally paratactic in effect but which uses pronounced figuration and allusive, often archaic language and rhythm to convey something beyond that which is being described at the literal level.

While there are numerous ways one could read these stylistic effects with respect to the fictional worlds' metaphysics or narrative content, my subsequent chapters address the topic of contingency in more detail in each of the five SFI-period novels. Hopefully a clearer picture will emerge of how the stylistic effects of McCarthy's parataxis might relate to the novels' thematic and narrative content, and of how his familiarity with complexity science research might have played a part in the construction of those novels' worlds.

## 2 – ‘Naming responsibility’: Causality, Consequences and Contingency in The Border Trilogy

Among the many different thematic strands presented by the Border Trilogy, its references to the world’s failure to match our plans are frequent and conspicuous enough to warrant close attention. The central idea of the unpredictable contingency of the world, and the consequent impossibility of preparing for its eventualities, sets the trilogy apart from McCarthy’s earlier work because nowhere else in his preceding fiction does he elaborate on this theme with the same insistence. While *No Country for Old Men* takes up this theme again and casts it in a different light, and *The Road* takes the idea of the provisionality of the world to its extreme, the trilogy initiates the sequence of novels in which the world’s contingency is explored to an extent not seen in McCarthy’s early work, and it does so by focusing on the problems of causality, moral responsibility and how we interpret the given material of the world in the context of our lives. The trilogy asserts that tracing the causal source of sometimes tragic unintended consequences is a vexed and perhaps futile endeavour, and the plans that are made by its young protagonists never correspond with the ultimate course of events. By returning again and again to this topic, the novels develop a set of questions and ideas that, while carrying on the tradition of metaphysical speculation common to McCarthy’s Appalachian novels and *Blood Meridian*, form a coherent unit when explored alongside *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*.

By tracing the appearances and contexts of the words ‘plan’, ‘plans’, ‘planning’ and other such variants, it is clear that connotations of this word in McCarthy’s other novels do not occupy such a central position as throughout the trilogy and after. *The Orchard Keeper* includes the words ‘plan’ and ‘plannin’, but neither is used in relation to the broader idea of making plans for one’s future life (*TOK* 208, 16). *Outer Dark* contains no use of any variant of ‘plan’ whatsoever, which is fitting given the geographic and temporal isolation of that novel’s quasi-mythic nameless setting and its characters’ perpetual

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peregrinations. The word ‘plans’ appears in *Child of God* twice, each instance of which is relatively inconspicuous and unconcerned with the trilogy’s idea that plans and reality are always inherently at odds with one another (*CoG* 53, 132). *Suttree* uses the words ‘plan’ and ‘plans’ in similarly cursory fashion, dealing most of the time with short-term plans such as where Harrogate plans to sleep (*S* 115, 141, 154, 175, 335, 363, 435).<sup>8</sup> *Blood Meridian*, of all the novels prior to the trilogy, most closely approaches the later focus on the mismatch between plans and reality even though it still doesn’t quite touch the concept of plans as it is developed in *All the Pretty Horses* (*BM* 41, 50, 133, 322, 347). When the kid first falls in with Captain White’s filibusters he goes out on the town for a night of drinking with a few other recruits, and the narrative ominously foreshadows the death of one of them, also foreshadowing the SFI-period novels’ focus on this theme, when it asks: ‘How many youths have come home cold and dead from just such nights and just such plans’ (41).

The trilogy, then, marks the first time McCarthy overtly and repeatedly emphasises the theme of derailed plans and the unintended consequences of seemingly innocuous actions. A number of related images and ideas constellate around this central theme in the trilogy. The metaphysical problem of determinism and freedom is encapsulated in *All the Pretty Horses* by the metaphors of the blind coiner and the infinite puppet show. The problematic, if not futile, speculation about counterfactuals, about alternative possibilities, on which rest many of the characters’ decisions and regrets is stressed multiple times in the three novels. The game of chess which partly characterises John Grady Cole figures the way that careful deliberation and ironbound rules nevertheless give rise to such complexity that foresight and planning quickly become speculative and highly contingent. The trilogy’s ultimate paean to the primacy of narrative and the act of witnessing constitutes something of a salve

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<sup>8</sup> The one exception to this in *Suttree* is when Suttree stands over his son’s grave and the close narrative voice grows heightened and approximates his confusion about the horror of mortality and the suffering of this child: ‘Pale manchild were there last agonies? Were you in terror, did you know? Could you feel the claw that claimed you? And who is this fool kneeling over your bones, choked with bitterness? And what would a child know of the darkness of God’s plan? Or how flesh is so frail it is hardly more than a dream’ (154).

to the troubling contingency and indifference of the harsh, unpredictable and often tragic world.

This chapter focuses on a number of exemplary or especially telling passages or concepts within each novel as they relate to the central topic of contingency. For the sake of clarity and convenience, the three novels are addressed in sequence. The intention is to tease out some of the more prominent thematic and symbolic gestures towards the world’s contingency in the Border Trilogy, and to ultimately relate this metaphysical theme back to Chapter One’s interpretation of McCarthy’s style. I want to thus contribute another element to my overall thesis that in McCarthy’s SFI-period fiction his stylistic idiosyncracies and the content of the novels work in concert to portray a universe that is at bottom indifferent, contingent and radically non-anthropocentric, but with which we engage through our interpretive narratogenic capacities to enrich and enlarge the value-free physical substrate with a complex edifice of stories, ideas and culture.

### *All the Pretty Horses*

*All the Pretty Horses* unfolds, for the most part, like a classic romantic tale of a boy’s thwarted desire to find somewhere in the world to match the future he had dreamed of for himself. It is bookended by two deaths, the first being that of his beloved maternal grandfather whose demise leaves the ranch in his actress mother’s hands. Her insistence on selling the property prompts the young Cole to head for the border, joined by his friend Lacey Rawlins, beyond which they hope to find adventure and perhaps some hope of maintaining the cowboy life that is fast becoming redundant in a Southwest where oil extraction has overtaken agriculture as the primary industry. Their journey south to Mexico is complicated by the arrival of a younger boy calling himself Jimmy Blevins who is riding an apparently stolen horse and falls in with them despite their reservations (and the insistent vocal objections of Rawlins). The stolen horse is lost and retrieved; Blevins is separated from Cole and Rawlins, who end up discovering an idyllic paradise of ranching and breaking horses;

## 2 – ‘Naming responsibility’: Causality, Consequences and Contingency in The Border Trilogy

John Grady falls in love with the hacendado’s daughter and the idyll is eventually shattered after his affair is discovered and their old association with Blevins catches up with them. The boys are arrested, Blevins is executed, and a brutal stint in a Mexican prison forces Cole to become a killer himself. Following their sudden release, Cole’s compulsion to administer justice leads him to heroically retrieve the horses that were taken from them and to try and return the stolen Blevins horse to its original owner. By the time the novel ends Cole no longer knows where he belongs in the world, and the events of their time in Mexico weigh very heavily on his heart and on his conscience.

On the face of it, the novel employs fairly standard western tropes, such as the elegiac nostalgia for a passing way of life, the love of a beautiful Mexican girl and the attempts of the hero to administer justice and redress the wrongs inflicted upon him and his friends. This western, however, subverts those traditional tropes and gradually darkens the world around its hero as he comes to realise that it will not conform to the romantic idea he has of it. Central to Cole’s development in the novel, and to the dark melancholy of its final pages, is the difficulty of morally accounting for events whose enormity challenges romantic notions of justice and responsibility, highlighting the unpredictable contingency and utter indifference of a callous world.

That contingency is foregrounded multiple times by events in the novel, but the conversations between John Grady Cole and the Dueña Alfonsa – the grandaunt of Cole’s lover Alejandra – form the nexus on which pivot all of the novel’s other moral and metaphysical speculations. The Dueña presents the young cowboy with two similar, yet fundamentally different, visions of the ‘connectedness of things’. After asking John Grady if he believes in fate, the Dueña encapsulates the first of these visions of the novel’s (and the wider trilogy’s) determinist problematic:

My father had a great sense of the connectedness of things. [...] He claimed that the responsibility for a decision could never be abandoned to a blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences. The example he gave was

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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*. [...] 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 selection. Perhaps hesitating a moment. While the fates of what unknown worlds to come hang in the balance. (236)

This coiner image presents a worldview that is something of a compromise with respect to determinism and free will, allowing as it does for the free operation of the will, and thus of moral responsibility, but suggesting also that a moral agent is responsible for unforeseen consequences far removed from the initiating action and which follow from that action in a deterministic fashion.

The tribulations of Cole, Rawlins, and Blevins can, if viewed in this way, be traced to one or more of the decisions they made along their journey: Cole and Rawlins’ decision to allow the shifty Blevins to travel along with them into Mexico; their decision to retrieve Blevins’ horse from the Mexican villager who had appropriated it after it bolted during the storm; John Grady’s decision to continue his love affair with Alejandra, despite his awareness that her father (his employer) will severely disapprove. All of these decisions are expressly questioned or doubted in the novel, either at the time of their being taken or in retrospect, as the boys attempt to trace the cause of their eventual troubles. As a consequence of any or all of these decisions, according to the blind coiner allegory, their happiness is destroyed, Blevins is executed, the boys are imprisoned and Cole has to kill a ‘cuchillero’ in self-defence. Rawlins seems to implicitly subscribe to this idea of moral responsibility when he blames their arrest on Cole’s love affair, but Cole protests: ‘You dont get to go back and pick some time when the trouble started and then lay everthing off on your friend’ (159). John Grady recognises the difficulty involved in naming some singular causal origin of their troubles.

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The Dueña Alfonsa insists that her father’s view of the world is insufficiently deterministic. He assumed that the origins of causal chains are accessible, or at least terminate ultimately in a responsible agent, but her own conception of causality takes determinism to its logical extreme:

For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet more puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on. In my own life I saw these strings whose origins were endless enact the deaths of great men in violence and madness. Enact the ruin of a nation. (236)

The Dueña’s vision of the world appears to be one of hard determinism, the philosophical position that holds that determinism is true and is incompatible with the existence of free will, therefore making free will an illusion at most, although she later qualifies her position to something closer to compatibilism.

Figurative or literal references to puppetry are a regular feature of McCarthy’s novels. *The Orchard Keeper*, in its depiction of the calamitous collapse of the precipitously situated Green Fly Inn, figuratively describes the bar’s patrons rushing for safety like ‘*so many marionettes on one string being drawn in violent acceleration toward the door* (emphasis in original)’ (26). Rinthy Holme in *Outer Dark*, as she follows her brother Culla to where he claims their baby has been buried, is ‘like a crippled marionette’ (32). The corpses collected by Lester Ballard in *Child of God* are often described in terms that liken them to puppets, such as when the bodies are eventually discovered and are being hauled out of the ground: ‘The rope drew taut and the first of the dead sat up on the cave floor, the hands that hauled the rope above sorting the shadows like puppeteers’ (186). *Suttree* is littered with such references: the men going through the motions in prison are made into a silhouette ‘puppet show’ by the hall light (54); the crazed evangelist who shouts obscene execrations from his window at passersby is ‘like a broken puppet’ (105); as Cornelius Suttree waits in the cemetery for his son to be buried, he sits ‘with his hands palm up on the



grass beside him like a stricken puppet and he thought no thoughts at all’ (153); as he rows along the river ‘Suttree’s silhouette lay long and narrow down the river among the frail line shadows like a rowing marionette’ (322); Suttree and two others in a Ford Model A are ‘hunched up like puppets on the front seat’ (333). Likewise, *Blood Meridian* contains many puppetry allusions: after Glanton shoots an old woman in a small presidio, ‘faces that had been watching from the doors and the naked windows dropped away like puppets in a gallery before the slow sweep of his eyes’ (104); ‘a solitary lobo, perhaps gray at the muzzle, hung like a marionette from the moon with his long mouth gibbering’ (124); during their exhausting flight through the desert from General Elias’ troops, the kid ‘sat a hideless and rickety saddle astride the dead man’s horse and he rode slumped and tottering and soon his legs and arms were dangling and he jostled along in his sleep like a mounted marionette’ (230); as the kid and Toadvine flee the ferry massacre, they see the pursuing Yuma ‘assemble upon the trembling drop of the eastern horizon like baleful marionettes’ (293). McCarthy’s use of this trope contributes significantly to the sense in his novels of an utterly determined world without agency.<sup>9</sup>

The image of an endless chain of puppets in control of puppets, signifying the infinite regress involved in attempting to trace responsibility back through a causal chain in a determinist universe, reverberates throughout the novels of the trilogy in numerous ways. In *All the Pretty Horses*, numerous subtle puppetry allusions abound. The most apparent of these is in the use throughout the novel of ropes, hobbles, and hackamores to break and control wild horses. Significant portions of *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*

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<sup>9</sup> The use of puppetry comes from a long tradition in literature and philosophy. Heinrich von Kleist’s dialogic ‘On the Marionette Theatre’ presented the mindless marionette as possessing a level of grace only matched by God, as opposed to the gracelessness which afflicts a self-conscious humanity. Charles Baudelaire, in ‘The Philosophy of Toys’ refers to a child’s ‘first metaphysical stirring’ being the urge to twist and pull apart a toy to find its soul, but the success of the child’s destructive metaphysical quest results in ‘the beginnings of stupor and melancholy’ when they cannot find the soul they seek in the object. More recently, Kenneth Gross and Victoria Nelson examine the nature of puppets and puppetry in light of their uncanny dimension and the human desire for spiritual transcendence, respectively. Perhaps the most significant, for McCarthy, of all of literature’s uses of puppetry is Plato’s depiction in *Republic* of the *thaumatopoiói* who control the shadow puppet show which the residents of his cave mistake for reality (514a-520a). All of these examples are more complex and/or subtle, however, than the relatively simple way in which the Dueña uses the trope as a traditional image of human unfreedom and absolute determinism.

focus on John Grady Cole’s almost preternatural ability to break wild horses. *All the Pretty Horses*, in particular, devotes some narrative space to detailing the process whereby the horses are rendered into tools for the use of their human owners.<sup>10</sup> The seeming autonomy of captured wild three-year-old colts is stripped from them one by one through the elaborately described use of hackamores and hobbles. Before their hobbling the horses are described as being collectively ‘bunched against the fence at the far side of the enclosure’ (101). They ‘shifted and stood, gray shapes in the gray morning’, abstract forms almost indistinguishable from their surroundings (105). When Cole side-hobbles the first of the colts, the ‘other horses flared and bunched and looked back wildly’ (106–7). The impression is of collective, swarming animals, their flaring and bunching being evocative not only of the wildness of these specific horses but of wildness in general, of the expansion and compression of a flock of starlings or a school of sardines. The novel portrays the flock of horses in their wild state as an ontological unity, an emergent form that is gradually riven asunder and annihilated by their breaker as they are turned into individual instruments:

Coming to reckon slowly with the remorselessness of this rendering of their fluid and collective selves into that condition of separate and helpless paralysis which seemed to be among them like a creeping plague. [...] They looked like animals trussed up by children for fun and they stood waiting for they knew not what with the voice of the breaker still running in their brains like the voice of some god come to inhabit them. (108)

The colts’ wild autonomy is stripped from them, an autonomy that is ‘fluid and collective’. The hobbling of the colts is described in terms evoking a calamitous

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<sup>10</sup> In his analysis of the warrior-like nature of horses in *All the Pretty Horses*, Wallis R. Sanborn III makes the interesting point that, with respect to horse-breaking, ‘what it takes to permanently control a horse is the inverse of the willing warrior of the ancient times,’ and that the horse is thus in a ‘complex role and relationship’ with man because it ‘is a warrior, and the horse is a partner to man in labor, and the horse is also a broken animal, broken by man, not by choice’ (119).

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sundering and again the emphasis is on their prior collectivity, as the ‘creeping plague’ of ‘paralysis’ wrought by the hobbles is qualified by the adjective ‘separate’, stressing the alienness to the wild animals of this new individuated dispensation.

When the horses are submitted to the process of breaking they are essentially turned into puppets, controlled by their masters who pull on the puppet strings of their reins. The question of who is indeed responsible for the actions of the broken horses is explicitly asked by the narrator as Cole rides a stallion:

While inside the vaulting of the ribs between his knees the darkly meated heart pumped of who’s will and the blood pulsed and the bowels shifted in their massive blue convolutions of who’s will and the stout thighbones and knee and cannon and the tendons like flaxen hawsers that drew and flexed and drew and flexed at their articulations and of who’s will all sheathed and muffled in the flesh and the hooves that stove wells in the morning groundmist and the head turning side to side and the great slavering keyboard of his teeth and the hot globes of his eyes where the world burned. (132)

The passage strongly suggests that the horse’s actions are mechanistic, a suggestion that starts with the pumping of the heart and the shifting of the bowels. The articulation of the horse’s knee joints between the thigh and cannon bones further underlines the sense of mechanism. This is achieved through its rhythmic repetition (both of the exact phrase ‘drew and flexed’ and of the half-rhyming syllables *flax/flex* and *haw/drew*), its deliberate reference to the ‘cannon’ bone with that word’s mechanical connotation, and its use of the nautical simile ‘flaxen hawsers’ to refer to the drawing and flexing tendons. That all of the horse’s innards are ‘sheathed and muffled’ further suggests that, if exposed, they would be as audible as the firing of pistons in an engine. The whole passage in itself is articulated polysyndetically like an elaborate mechanism, hinged and jointed by each ‘and’.

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The repetition throughout this passage of ‘of who’s will’ is a curiosity in the prose of a writer who assiduously minimises his use of punctuation marks, considering its non-standard apostrophised spelling of the possessive adjective. The choice of ‘who’s’ rather than ‘whose’ draws attention to the question and isolates the pronoun from its adjectival form, prompting the reader to ask *who is* the ‘who’ in the phrase. John Grady’s control of the horse suggests that he may be the referent of the pronoun, the puppetmaster of the horse, but one could expand that further and ask whether or not John Grady himself is controlled by figurative reins or puppet strings in the hands of others, who are in turn determined by antecedent and exterior wills, ad infinitum. The question expands, then, to a question about whether any of the supposed ‘wills’ in a deterministic causal chain can be thought of as being wills in any recognisable sense at all – ‘who’s will’ as a contraction of the question ‘who has will?’, perhaps. As in all of McCarthy’s work, the question of whether or not any of his characters possess agency remains a central one, however irresolvable it may be. The phrase ‘who’s will’ could also be read as something of a pun on the horse-commanding interjection *whoa*, which can trace its etymological roots back to the original spelling *who* (‘who, int.’). If read in this way, the equine imperative thus functions as the instrument of the will, but that will resides in the utterer of the command and again begs the question as to whether the utterer is not similarly controlled by external forces.

The related difficulties of trying to plan the course of one’s life and of accepting responsibility for the unintended consequences of one’s actions pervade the narrative of *All the Pretty Horses*. These difficulties reside at the centre of the contingency problematic in the later McCarthy, and they reappear time and again in all of his SFI-period work. It is impossible to imagine the kid in *Blood Meridian* agonising over the nature of causality, contingency and, consequently, moral responsibility. *Suttree* comes closest to presenting a McCarthy protagonist for whom the metaphysical architecture of the world is a puzzle, but Cornelius Suttree’s self-conscious reflections are centred on somewhat different metaphysical problems: his terror in the face of mortality and the vexatious haunting of his every move by the shadows and reflections

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of a vestigial inherited dualism. With the Border Trilogy, the contingency of the world assumes a central position and becomes a source of deep anxiety for a number of its characters. In *All the Pretty Horses* it is often vocalised by the novel’s characters in relation to the plans that they might have, or the consequences they might have expected from a given action.

When the two boys are incarcerated in Saltillo prison, they are asked by the de facto leader of its brutal society, Pérez, how long they plan to stay there. Rawlins’ response highlights the irrelevance of their plans to the situation in which they have found themselves: ‘We never planned to come here in the first place [...] I dont believe our plans has got much to do with it’ (192). He again makes the same point later when, while recuperating from wounds inflicted in a prison knife fight, he says to Cole: ‘Dyin aint in people’s plans, is it?’ (216). It is the Dueña Alfonsa, the novel’s gnostic sage of causal determinism, who offers the most salient commentary on this failure of the world to match up to one’s plans: ‘The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting’ (244).

She continues, relating this idea to the futility of speculating about counterfactuals, of fretting over alternative courses our lives may have taken:

When I was in school I studied biology. I learned that in making their experiments scientists will take some group—bacteria, mice, people—and subject that group to certain conditions. They compare the results with a second group which has not been disturbed. This second group is called the control group. It is the control group which enables the scientist to gauge the effect of his experiment. To judge the significance of what has occurred. In history there are no control groups. There is no one to tell us what might have been. We weep over the might have been, but there is no might have been. There never was. (244–5)

Here, a scientific concept is utilised in order to make a larger point regarding counterfactuals which is both epistemological and metaphysical. The

epistemological claim is that it is impossible to ever truly know the course that a counterfactual history would have taken, given the radical contingency that results from the complexity of the world. The metaphysical claim goes beyond this to state that ‘there is no might have been’: there is only one course of history, regardless of how contingent that course of history might be. In this broader metaphysical claim, the Dueña echoes Erwin Schrödinger’s dismissal of the existence of alternative possibilities when it comes to our supposedly free choices: ‘We must decide. One thing must happen, will happen, life goes on. There is no  $\psi$ -function in life’ (Schrödinger 13). Schrödinger’s point is that there is no range of alternative possibilities arrayed around each of our decisions in a manner analogous to the probabilism of the quantum mechanical wave function, at least in any ontological sense – those possibilities do not have any existence. Likewise, for the Dueña, there are no control groups and thus alternative possibilities can have no existence outside of pure speculation.

The notion of alternative possibilities and their existence is central to many philosophical debates about free will. Robert Kane provides the general outline of arguments for the incompatibility of determinism and free will when he says that they proceed from ‘the requirement that an agent acted freely, of his or her own free will, only if the agent had *alternative possibilities*, or *could have done otherwise* [emphasis in original]’ (Kane 10). From this ‘alternative possibilities’ condition, he outlines the two premises of the case for incompatibilism:

1. The existence of alternative possibilities (or the agent’s power to do otherwise) is a necessary condition for acting freely, or acting “of one’s own free will.”
2. Determinism is not compatible with alternative possibilities (it precludes the power to do otherwise). (11)

We can see from this that the Dueña (and other such McCarthy evangelists of unfreedom) would insist on the truth of the second of these two premises at least. Her insistence that ‘there is no might have been’ is another way of saying

that the world, being utterly determined, cannot possess alternative possibilities. Compatibilists, however, argue that a more sophisticated understanding of what constitutes free will may reconcile it with a deterministic world, and they have argued this position by attacking either one or the other of the two premises that make up the ‘alternative possibilities’ condition above (Kane 12–22). It is possible that the deterministic universe described by the puppetry metaphor might allow for some form of compatibilist free will, if one makes adjustments to the sense of what such a freedom of the will would entail: if one argued against the truth of the first premise of the alternative possibilities condition. This is just what is implied when the Dueña concludes her conversation with Cole.

At the end of their lengthy discussion, she revisits both of her allegories of the world’s determinism, the coiner and the puppets, when she explains that, despite the fact that all of the events of our lives may be determined by the infinite regress of puppets controlling puppets, ‘we cannot escape naming responsibility. It’s in our nature. Sometimes I think we are all like that myopic coiner at his press, taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work, determined that not even chaos be outside of our own making’ (247). She is admitting that even if our actions are determined, our nature is such that we cling to a belief in moral agency, laying blame on those perceived to have breached moral or legal codes and praise on those whose actions we deem virtuous, because the alternative would entail the collapse of society’s moral and legal frameworks. It is worth noting also that she says that we are ‘determined’ to be in control of even chaos itself. On the face of it, the sentence can be read as saying that we are *resolved* that this be so, but it is not a huge stretch to read the sentence differently, as claiming that even this desire to exert our control over the chaos of our lives is itself determined in the metaphysical sense.

Despite all that he suffers in the course of the novel and the lessons the Dueña tried to impart, John Grady shows that he has difficulty believing her as he continues to ‘weep over the might have been’. He worries specifically about having become a killer when he took the cuchillero’s life in the prison knife-

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fight. In a conversation with Rawlins shortly after the fight, he confesses that killing a man was not something he’d have ever considered possible:

I never thought I’d do that.

You didnt have no choice.

I still never thought it.

He’d of done it to you.

He drew on his cigarette and blew the smoke unseen into the darkness. You dont need to try and make it right. It is what it is. (221)

While he would on the face of it appear to stoically accept what happened (‘It is what it is’), it is also clear from the fact that he doesn’t think Rawlins needs to ‘try and make it right’ that he still believes what he did was wrong. Rawlins tries to assuage Cole’s guilt by reminding him that he had no choice but to kill the cuchillero, but Cole has difficulty accepting that, given the deontological moral code by which he tries to live.

Cole’s feelings of culpability are more apparent later, after he returns to Texas and tries to find the original owner of the Blevins horse. After hearing him recount his tribulations in Mexico, the judge presiding over a hearing to establish ownership of the horse tells him that ‘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’; the judge then awards Cole the horse (297). John Grady feels the need to correct the court’s estimation of his character, which he believes has been overly favourable, so he visits the judge in his home to clear his conscience about two particulars of his tale. Firstly, he tells the judge that ‘it kindly bothered me in the court what you said. It was like I was in the right about everthing and I dont feel that way. [...] I dont feel justified’ (298). What he doesn’t feel justified about is the fact that he made a man, Don Hector, go from respecting him to wanting to kill him:

I worked for that man and I respected him and he never had no complaints about the work I done for him and he was awful good to



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me. And that man come up on the high range where I was workin and I believe he intended to kill me. And I was the one that brought it about. Nobody but me. (298)

Secondly, Cole confesses to the judge that he ‘killed a boy’ in the penitentiary in Mexico and that it ‘keeps botherin me. [...] I dont know that he’s supposed to be dead’ (299). His difficulty in squaring the circumstances forced upon him in prison with his own sense of justice and morality (in essence, of squaring the consequences of unavoidable actions with his own belief in free will, in alternative possibilities and in the moral responsibility that entails) has led him to a crisis in his understanding of how the world ought to work. The judge’s response to Cole’s confession is telling in that it emphasises a lack of choice in the course of the judge’s life, once more revisiting the determinist problematic:

I didnt want to be a judge. I was a young lawyer practicing in San Antonio and I come back out here when my daddy was sick and I went to work for the county prosecutor. I sure didnt want to be a judge. I think I felt a lot like you do. I still do.

What made you change your mind?

I dont know as I did change it. I just saw a lot of injustice in the court system and I saw people my own age in positions of authority that I had grown up with and knew for a calcified fact didnt have one damn lick of sense. I think I just didnt have any choice. Just didnt have any choice. (299)<sup>11</sup>

The judge here is presenting John Grady with a potential response to the Dueña, whose determinist model of the world was so fundamentally at odds

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<sup>11</sup> The judge also tells John Grady that he ‘sent a boy from this county to the electric chair in Huntsville in nineteen thirty-two. I think about that. I dont think he was a pretty good old boy. But I think about it. Would I do it again? Yes I would’ (299–300). The way that this administration of justice troubles the judge, despite feeling that he would do the same thing again, is echoed later in *No Country for Old Men*, which opens with the line, from the point of view of troubled Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, ‘I sent one boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville. ... And I’ve thought about that a lot’ (3).

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with Cole’s earlier belief in the attribution of moral responsibility. Whereas she finished their earlier discussion by suggesting that ultimately we cannot avoid naming responsibility even if the world’s determinism and the unpredictable contingency of any action’s consequences render such moral judgement deeply problematic, the judge here is coming at the same problem from the other side, reminding Cole that although we should be held responsible for our actions we sometimes cannot avoid *necessity*. The necessity of naming responsibility can thus contribute to the application of justice and satisfy, at least partially, the vexed conscience of one so determined to feel justified in the world.

Cole, by the end of the novel, has yet to internalise the lessons that the Dueña and the judge tried to teach him, and the final few scenes project his uncertainty onto the world around him, a world in which the romantic way of life he had always wished for himself is all but an impossibility. His profound sense of loss, injustice, and the indifference of a contingent and changing world seeps into the narrative voice itself as he stands in the graveyard after the funeral of his ‘Abuela’, a woman who had worked on his family’s ranch for fifty years and helped raise him and his mother before him:

[He] turned and put on his hat and turned his wet face to the wind and for a moment he held 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 their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead. (309)

The word ‘turned’ occurs twice in quick succession, stressing his confusion, and the polysyndetic rush of the parataxis simulates the torrent of emotion and confusion he feels at this moment. The momentary extension of his hands is then elaborated through a sequence of three analogical similes which together reflect his conflicted state of crisis. He first appears to try and steady himself and finally to steady the indifferent headlong rush of the world around him, while between these two poles he is likened to one who is blessing the ground.

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His reverence for the natural world, exemplified throughout the novel by his preternatural empathy with horses, is challenged from one side by confusion about his own place in the world and on the other by the callous lack of interest the world shows toward those within it as it hurtles onward with no regard for human suffering. The shift from polysyndeton to asyndeton grinds the sequence to a halting stop as it moves from the headlong rush of the uncertain world to the hard certainty of everyone’s final end.

The novel then ends on an elegiac note, with John Grady passing pumpjacks in the Yates Oil Field which ‘rose and dipped like mechanical birds’, an image that conjures the novel’s allusions to the potentially mechanistic and determined nature of biological life while evoking the Texan oil industry which continues to encroach on and overtake the Texan agricultural sector (309). The young cowboy passes a group of ‘indians’ who stand silently watching with ‘no curiosity about him at all’, watching him ‘vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish’ (309). These Native Americans metonymically figure, for John Grady, the land he has loved, and in their lack of curiosity can be read something of the young cowboy’s aggrieved sense of that land’s indifference toward him, or toward anyone for that matter. The natives watching him ‘because he would vanish’ also serve to mirror and critique John Grady’s romantic daydream, at the start of the novel, of the vanished Comanche hordes riding south through the westernmost section of his family’s ranch ‘bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives’ (6). Now it is John Grady’s turn to vanish in the eyes of representatives of an almost-vanished culture, or to be something whose presence in the landscape is as ephemeral and contingent as the temporal presence of any culture, of any civilization. The old romantic cowboy way of life, if it ever even existed at all in the way John Grady imagined or desired, is nearing its close, and in its passing can be read the impermanent contingency and inevitable passing of all social orders and ways of life.

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He finally sees a ‘solitary bull rolling in the dust against the bloodred sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment’, this symbol of romanticised masculinity appearing as though undergoing ritual slaughter just as his romantic conception of a masculine frontier existence has been devastated and severely compromised by his ordeals since venturing south of the border (310). While the trilogy returns John Grady Cole to a life of ranching in *Cities of the Plain*, it is a lifestyle even more threatened by encroaching economic and political interests than it was in the course of *All the Pretty Horses*, and his romanticism with regard to the cowboy way of life is attenuated by the wisdom gained through his earlier trials. Nevertheless, he still remains sufficiently idealistic and ‘ardenthearted’ to get himself in serious trouble, and his acceptance and internalisation of both the Dueña’s lesson about naming responsibility and the judge’s one about accepting moral necessity contribute significantly toward the inevitable sequence of events leading to his tragic end.

### *The Crossing*

From very near the beginning of *The Crossing*, another McCarthy protagonist is once again confronted with the problem of accounting for the unintended consequences of seemingly innocuous actions. While out gathering wood for their family home, the sixteen-year-old Billy Parham and his younger brother Boyd encounter an armed Native American awaiting the arrival of game to the pool.<sup>12</sup> The Indian’s irritation at the boy’s noisy arrival (‘You little son of a

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<sup>12</sup> The description of Boyd’s discovery of the Indian contains an ominous hint of foreshadowing with respect to the young boy’s eventual early demise. As Boyd looks into the Indian’s eyes he sees himself reflected beside the reflection of the sunset:

He had not known that you could see yourself in others’ eyes nor see therein such things as suns. He stood twinned in those dark wells with hair so pale, so thin and strange, the selfsame child. As if it were some cognate child to him that had been lost who now stood windowed away in another world where the red sun sank eternally. As if it were a maze where these orphans of his heart had miswandered in their journey in life and so arrived at last beyond the wall of that antique gaze from whence there could be no way back forever. (6)

Such vatic intimations of Boyd’s death and of the broader series of tragedies set to befall the Parham family are of a piece with similar suggestions of prophetic sensitivities in the trilogy’s

bitch. [...] Spooked everthing in the country, aint you?’) develops into pushy requests for food, upon which Billy offers to bring him some food from his parents’ house (7). The intimation of violence during the encounter with the Indian is suggestively continued as the boys ride home in the sunset, Boyd’s ‘face red in the sun, his near-white hair pink in the sun’, with ‘the indian [...] coming along a half mile behind them in the dusk carrying the rifle loosely in one hand’ (8). When Boyd asks his older brother if he’ll carry the Indian some supper, Billy tells him ‘Yes. We can do that I reckon’, but Boyd reminds Billy: ‘Everthing you can do it dont mean it’s a good idea’ (9).

The nighttime landscape and sky themselves figuratively reflect Billy’s creeping unease about the presence of the Indian near the house, as the unrisen moon’s light lies first in a ‘sulphur haze’ before it rises ‘white and fat and membranous’ (9). There is an echo of the blind coiner image, symbolic in *All the Pretty Horses* of setting off causal chains of consequences increasingly remote from their origins, as Billy watches the night sky out of the window, the ‘earliest stars *coined* out of the dark coping to the south hanging in the dead wickerwork of the trees along the river [emphasis mine]’ (9).<sup>13</sup> The consequences of Billy’s generosity toward the Indian eventually reverberate throughout the novel as his parents are slaughtered during his initial sojourn in Mexico, and it is telling therefore that an allusion to the blind coiner allegory should come right at one of the most pivotal moments in the novel’s narrative for the Parham boys’ future.

Their creeping realisation of the danger posed by the Indian increases after he quizzes them on ammunition and other things their parents might have in the house. When he asks that Boyd stay with him while Billy returns to the house to fetch coffee the boys decline and head home, clearly regretting the situation they have placed themselves in:

We ought not to of gone out there to start with, Boyd said.

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characters. As such they constitute prompts to read the novels in light of a more supernaturalist worldview.

<sup>13</sup> Also cf. the coldforger dreamt of by the kid in *Blood Meridian*, ‘hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be’ (327).

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Billy didnt answer.

Ought we.

No.

Why did we?

I dont know. (12-13)

The Indian moves on from their property, but Boyd voices his worries: ‘You dont know what a indian’s liable to do’, to which Billy responds, ‘You dont know what anybody’s liable to do’ (14). Billy’s point suppresses the racial dimension of Boyd’s statement and stresses instead the impossibility of predicting anyone’s behaviour, given the utter contingent uncertainty of the world and its people. Their small act of kindness, prompted by a frontier code of hospitality, ultimately results in their parents both being shot and killed and their horses stolen by two Indians while Billy is away in Mexico, and the responsibility for the tragedy weighs heavily on the boys, most especially evident with Boyd, whom Billy has to remind that it ‘wasnt nobody’s fault. [...] You’ll just make yourself crazy’ (177).

Billy’s earlier assertion about the unpredictability of people and his insistence that they are not responsible for their parents’ murders reveals him to be a more pragmatic protagonist than John Grady Cole. Cole struggles to retain his romantic idealism in the face of the world’s contingency, but Billy is more adapted to the fickle vagaries of a contingent world. This becomes even more evident in *Cities of the Plain*, where Billy tries to temper Cole’s dangerous idealism with his own pragmatic outlook, an outlook in some senses hard-won through the trials of his border-traversing narrative of *The Crossing* but also very much a part of his disposition from the outset, as evidenced here.

The trilogy’s concern with consequences and causality is expressed in the opening line of the novel’s second section, after Billy’s first excursion into Mexico ends so tragically with the death of the pregnant wolf he had tried to return to safety: ‘Doomed enterprises divide lives forever into the then and the now’ (129). The ‘then’ was perhaps Billy’s life prior to his making the decision, after being seated ‘for a long time’ on his horse at something resembling a

literal crossroads (‘Robertson’s crossfence’), to try and return the wolf he had trapped to where she came from: ‘He turned the horse and crossed through the ditch and rode up onto the broad plain that stretched away before him south toward the mountains of Mexico’ (63). The ‘now’ is his carrying the dead wolf up the mountains and burying her, while ‘the little wolves in her belly felt the cold draw all about them and they cried out mutely in the dark and he buried them all’ (129). His pain over what has transpired is evident in the aimlessness with which he wanders the high country ‘for weeks’, both he and the horse growing ‘thin and gaunted’ as he feeds on trout shot in pools with a makeshift bow.<sup>14</sup> Billy’s pain over the loss of the pregnant wolf is a result of the time he has spent growing familiar with her, even if he can never truly know her or indeed control her as John Grady Cole controls his broken horses.

Even though Billy’s exploits with the she-wolf occupy less than a third of the narrative of *The Crossing*, the beauty and pathos of the novel’s naturalistic evocation of their fraught relationship have ensured that they have received significant critical attention. Dianne C. Luce argues that the wolf’s direct apperception of the world via its sense of smell transcends the ‘temporal and physical proximity’ required by our visual sense and, more closely than vision, resembles ‘the human capability for narrative—not for language, which is another kind of artifact, but for formulating the tale that carries our past, gives meaning to our present, and right intention to our future’ to access and communicate ‘the thing itself: the world which is a tale’ (‘The Road and the Matrix’ 208). Wallis Sanborn sees in the wolf a warrior, not unlike his reading of the horses in the preceding novel, but one whose absence from New Mexico ‘becomes a negative metaphor for man’s ceaseless appetite for control over the natural world’ (131). The wolf, for Sanborn, is another ‘controlled animal’ in McCarthy which ‘may be different from the animals of other McCarthy texts, but the controller is always the same (148). In Molly McBride’s

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<sup>14</sup> The description of the trout is remarkably similar to another such description in *The Road*: ‘the boy shot trout with his arrows where they stood above their shadows on the cold stone floors of the pools’ (*TCr* 129). cf. the similar description in *The Road*: ‘Where once he’d watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath’ (*TR* 30).

insightful reading of the novel, a parallel between wolf and native American Indian is drawn in the course of an argument which examines how both cowboy and Indian are ‘equal agents and/or victims of an imperialist ideology, one which has been, in part, shaped by the very mythology in which these characters participate’; the adversaries established in the novel are thus not cowboy and Indian but ‘empire [...] versus a succession of entities that are of no use to it’ such as the wolf (71, 82). Peter Josyph, in one of his typically irreverent and digressionary essays on his engagement with McCarthy’s work and biographical artefacts, expresses his high opinion of the wolf section of the novel when he claims that ‘McCarthy at his best’ is McCarthy ‘from *The Orchard Keeper* to page 127 of *The Crossing*’, that is, right up until the end of the she-wolf section of the novel (*Cormac McCarthy’s House* 94).

After Billy traps the wolf, there is no question of getting her to respond to his ‘will’ in the same way that a broken horse might respond to its rider, but the limited mastery over the wild animal granted by his rope echoes the Dueña Alfonsa’s puppet motif from *All the Pretty Horses*. When the wolf manages to chew through her rudimentary muzzle during the night, Billy carefully loops the rope over a tree-limb and uses it to pull her away from him: ‘he pulled the rope until her forefeet were all but off the ground’ (78). He then slacks the rope just enough to allow her to lie down ‘curled under the tree with the rope ascending vertically in the firelight’ (80).

Later in *The Crossing*, when the wolf has been taken from Billy and is being forced to fight dogs in a pit, the dog handlers are described as though they were puppeteers controlling the dogs:

They were now at the farther side of the pit crouching and feinting in such postures of attack and defense as they would have the dogs adopt and calling out in highpitched chants to seek the dogs on and twisting and gesturing with their hands in an antic simulation of the contest before them. (116)



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Billy, trying to stop the barbaric pit fight, hauls a dog by its chain and mimics a puppeteer himself as he ‘walked it on its hindlegs to the other handler’ (116).

While our encounter with the physical world gives rise to the myriad anthropogenic narratives with which we each make some sense of that world, McCarthy also tries to represent the perceptual constructs of nonhuman sentience. *The Crossing* contains a few such moments which describe lupine or canine sensory engagement with and cognitive modelling of the physical world. When Billy rides out to check on the camp of the Indian who demanded food from him, his dog ‘stood beside him testing the air with quick lifting motions of its muzzle, sorting and assembling some picture of the prior night’s events’ (13). Likewise, the wolf’s actions are described through a sympathetic third-person narrative voice which strives to verbally represent the wolf’s behaviour in the same way that the narrative voice elsewhere in McCarthy strains to figuratively capture the human encounter with the world, such as through the use of the ‘as if’ analogical simile in the following description of the wolves’ killing of cattle:

The wolves in that country had been killing cattle for a long time but the ignorance of the animals was a puzzle to them. The cows bellowing and bleeding and stumbling through the mountain meadows with their shovel feet and their confusion, bawling and floundering through the fences and dragging posts and wires behind. The ranchers said they brutalized the cattle in a way they did not the wild game. As if the cows evoked in them some anger. As if they were offended by some violation of an old order. Old ceremonies. Old protocols. (25)

The novel here evokes the atavistic wildness of the wolves by contrasting their usual prey, inured to predation and thus more equipped to try and avoid it, with the ‘ignorance’ and ‘confusion’ of the cows. Thus the cattle’s alienness to the wolves, and their domestication, is directly related to their knowledge of the world in which they find themselves, a world so much more adeptly navigated by the wolves.

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The wolf's behaviour in constantly trying to outsmart trappers is portrayed in a manner that suggests the behaviour is in response to a changed world: ‘She would not return to a kill. She would not cross a road or a rail line in daylight. She would not cross under a wire fence twice in the same place. These were the new protocols. Strictures that had not existed before. Now they did’ (25). One of the noteworthy things about this passage is how much her strictures have the flavour of superstition about them. They are patently pragmatic and very reasonable prohibitions which together make her movements that much more difficult for trappers to predict and thus exploit, and yet they resonate with superstitious human prohibitions which may in turn have roots in concerns or considerations as warranted as those which motivate the wolf.

The nature of the wolf is much discussed in the first part of *The Crossing*, and the attempt to bridge the epistemological divide between human and animal knowledge comprises much of the action as Billy tries to trap her through methods and materials passed on from those much more experienced in such things. When he visits Don Arnulfo seeking to buy some scent for his traps, the Don expresses his belief in the impossibility of bridging that gap:

El lobo es una cosa incognoscible, he said. Lo que se tiene en la trampa no es mas que dientes y forro. El lobo propio no se puede conocer. Lobo o lo que sabe el lobo. Tan como preguntar lo que saben las piedras. Los arboles. El mundo. (45)

The wolf is an unknowable thing, that which one has in the trap is no more than teeth and fur. One cannot know the true wolf. Wolf or what the wolf knows. It's like asking what the stones know. The trees. The world. (Campbell 1)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Such intimations of a sort of panpsychism abound in McCarthy, from the suggestion of human kinship with rocks in the ‘optical democracy’ passage of *Blood Meridian* to the reference to the Foucault pendulum in *The Road*, which is described as somehow ‘knowing’ by virtue of its function, which in turn suggests that our ‘knowing’ may be no less mechanistic and determined than the swaying of a suspended weight (*BM* 261, *TR* 15).

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Despite asserting that one cannot know ‘what the wolf knows’, the Don goes on to make just such a claim when he says ‘that the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there’ (45). The wolf, being a ‘cazador’ (‘hunter’), creates its own order in the world through its ‘ceremonies’ and ‘protocols’, which are centred, as they must be for such a hunter, on death. This ‘knowledge’ of the wolf is part of the infinitely varied and parallel world beyond or before the human, the being of a world that we will never be able to access, trapped as we are within our own conceptual and perceptual limitations:

Between their acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them. (46)

The Don here tidily encapsulates the central dichotomy in McCarthy between the world in itself, or at the very least the world prior to human perception, and the epistemological overlay with which we construct our own approximate model of the world through naming its parts and acting upon it.

Yet the novel, and the trilogy as a whole, suggest that the imaginative capacity, so advanced and sophisticated in humans, allows us to approximate the supra-human world of animal perception even if it can never truly capture it. Just as the ability to craft stories out of the bewildering contingency of the world, to dream a dense and rich layer of meaning into existence where there was none before, is celebrated by the close of *Cities of the Plain* and becomes in retrospect a trope that unites many of the trilogy’s disparate tales told to its protagonists, so is the human empathic capacity occasionally celebrated, never more so than when the novels describe the relationships between humans and animals.

In *The Crossing*, this reaches an affective height during and after the sequence culminating in Billy shooting the pregnant wolf rather than let her

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continue to be forced to fight dogs for a baying crowd. Billy’s feelings towards the wolf are expressed simply through his tender gestures and through his empathic reimagining of the life she once had:

He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth. The eye turned to the fire gave back no light and he closed it with his thumb and sat by her and put his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun’s coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her. Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from. (127)

This imaginative reverie is dreamed by both Billy and the narrator – the heightened prose is not of Billy’s own thinking – and it suggests that this reimagining of the life of the wolf is an integral part of the capacity to interpret and model the world, despite the limitations of that capacity. It enjoins the reader to view this creature for a moment not as something abstract or distant or even terrifying. It asks that we use our own imaginative faculties to approximate, however imperfectly, an understanding of the world from the perspective of the wolf, ‘empaneled’ with rich olfactory information ready to be interpreted in turn by the wolf’s own imaginative faculties. The wolf’s perceptual engagement with the world, Billy’s empathetic imagining of that engagement and the attempt to represent that engagement through the imprecise tool of language are all thus aspects of the storytelling capacity which the trilogy gradually comes to celebrate through its numerous tales and the commentary of its characters on the telling of those tales.

Among the many tales Billy hears on his journeys in *The Crossing*, one of the most important for an understanding of the novel’s central metaphysical questions is that related to him by the ex-Mormon in Huisiachepic (141–158).

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This tale concerns a man from the town of Caborca whose parents are both killed ‘by a cannonshot in the church’ where they had gone to hide from American filibusters when he was just a boy (144).<sup>16</sup> After reaching manhood he gets married and has a son, but the son is killed in Bavispe in the 1887 earthquake, an earthquake of which the only sign in nearby Batopite was a ‘great crack in the mountain wall across the river like an enormous laugh’ (145). The tragedy turns him into a shell of a man, and he abandons his wife and wanders for years throughout the continent grappling with the question of why he was spared from calamity not once but twice, leaving him ‘severed from both antecedents and posterity alike. [...] a trunk without root or branch’ (147). He becomes ‘a heretic’ and works in the capital for many years, gradually coming ‘to believe terrible things of [God]’ (147, 148). His lifelong metaphysical ruminations lead him, as an elderly man, to one day pack up his possessions and return to Caborca where he was born and take up residence in the ruined church there, which ‘stands on three legs, so to speak. The dome hangs in the sky like an apparition and so it has hung for many years. Most improbably’ (149–150). He rails against God under ‘the shadow of the perilous vault’ and is visited daily by a priest whose own faith becomes shaken, ‘Both of them heretics to the bone’ (150–151). The man continues to ‘pace and rend his clothes over the accountability’ of a God who would preserve his life ‘out of the ruins of the earth solely in order to raise up a witness against Himself’, until eventually he falls ill and dies (154–157).

The priest of the tale is the teller himself, and he claims at the end of his story that what he eventually came to understand was the importance of the witness in lending meaning to a life, because only ‘the witness has power to take its measure’, and that despite the railing of the heretic in the Caborca church ‘God needs no witness. Neither to Himself nor against’ (158). The existence of God, for the ex-Mormon, gives the world its identity and thus ensures the very possibility of witnessing, and ‘nothing is real save his grace’ (158).

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<sup>16</sup> The man has very little memory of his parents, but he does remember ‘his father lifting him in his arms to see puppets performing in the alameda’, evoking once again the puppet trope of *All the Pretty Horses*.

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Despite the note of devotion with which the ex-Mormon ends his tale, what emerges from it much more prominently are the various railings of the heretic against God and the metatextual commentary of the ex-Mormon on the nature of story and witnessing. Both of these aspects of the tale centre around the human encounter with the world’s fundamental contingency, with the former supplying some of the more prominent theodicean questions raised in McCarthy and the latter exemplifying the trilogy’s ultimate response to the world’s contingent ineffability.

As the heretic’s renunciation of God and the world begins to develop, his position recapitulates the central theme of *All the Pretty Horses* in its assurance that ‘every act soon eluded the grasp of its propagator to be swept away in a clamorous tide of unforeseen consequence’ (147). Moreover, the central puppetry motif of the earlier novel is revisited and reframed again in the heretic’s observation of passersby in the park:

He has become convinced that those aims and purposes with which they imagine their movements to be invested are in reality but a means by which to describe them. He believes that their movements are the subject of larger movements in patterns unknown to them and these in turn to others. He finds no comfort in these speculations I can tell you. He sees the world slipping away. All about him an enormous emptiness without echo. (148)

He becomes more troubled by the determinism he sees in the world when he considers the role of God within it and the act of supplication through prayer, wondering how could ‘anything from his own hand do aught to please Him more than had it acted otherwise’ (148).

The God that the heretic sees in his dreams is a weaver God consumed only in his own work and utterly unconcerned with the entreaties of his creations:

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Spoken to He did not answer. Called to did not hear. The man could see Him bent at his work. [...] Weaving the world. In his hands it flowed out of nothing and in his hands it vanished into nothing once again. Endlessly. Endlessly. So. Here was a God to study. A God who seemed a slave to his own selfordinated 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 woke weeping. (149)

The ‘blessed and fraughtful’ ground of the ruined Caborca church under whose teetering transept the old man chooses to stage his final daily execrations upon God’s name is a literal stand-in for the view of the world that has been inculcated in him during a life in which both his immediate forebears and progeny were torn violently from him by acts of inexplicable contingency. Such a view is in keeping with the worldview that pervades all of the trilogy along with *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, a worldview in which the world’s inhabitants are repeatedly reminded of ‘the nature of such ground, perilous and transitory’ (152). The symbolic overdetermination of the old man railing against God under the treacherous overhang of a barely supported dome makes this point apparent.

The tale also contains the crux of the trilogy’s ultimate theme, if such a diverse and rich sequence of novels can be said to have an overarching theme: the power of story itself to grant meaning to the world and to the lives of the people who have to bear its inexplicable tragedies and its apparent indifference to suffering.<sup>17</sup> The ex-Mormon repeatedly interrupts his own tale to comment upon the nature of storytelling and the unity of all narrative, such as stating that the ‘storyteller’s task is not so simple’ (157), or:

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<sup>17</sup> The world’s indifference is directly spoken of when the ex-Mormon tells Billy ‘the world itself can have no temporal view of things. It can have no cause to favor certain enterprises over others. The passing of armies and the passing of sands in the desert are one. There is no favoring, you see. How could there be? At whose behest?’ (148).

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The task of the narrator is not an easy one, he said. He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one. Always the teller must be at pains to devise against his listener’s claim—perhaps spoken, perhaps not—that he has heard the tale before. He sets forth the categories into which the listener will wish to fit the narrative as he hears it. But he understands that the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside its purview. All is telling. Do not doubt it. (155)

The manifold tellings are of the one tale, which is the world, the path of which ‘is one and not many and there is no alter course in any least part of it for that course is fixed by God and contains all consequence in the way of its going’ (158). The ex-Mormon is here reasserting his belief in a predetermined world, but the heretic in his tale goes even further than this in stating that ‘every man’s path is every other’s. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell’ (156–157).

The ‘telling’ of the solitary world into its innumerable tales is achieved through the redemptive power of the witness, whose observance allows meaning to enter the world: ‘Acts have their being in the witness’ (154). The manifold tales told in the world trouble the heretic initially, as he sees ‘the world pass into nothing in the multiplicity of its instancing. Only the witness stood firm. And the witness to that witness. For what is deeply true is true also in men’s hearts and it can therefore never be mistold through all and any tellings. [...] If the world was a tale who but the witness could give it life?’ (154).

The tale of the ex-Mormon twists through numerous convolutions and contains in itself more than one position on the nature of the world, thereby functioning as a type of the broader narrative structure of *The Crossing*. It would be remiss to claim absolute precedence for one strand of thought from within



the multiplicity of metaphysical positions presented in this tale, or in this novel more broadly, without acknowledging the array of contradictory outlooks encountered in the novel. In order to maintain thematic focus it is necessary to single out individual notes from the general cacophony of irresolvable worldviews represented by the people encountered by Billy on his travels through Mexico. There are tales in this novel amenable to any number of valid readings, so it is important to note that this particular reading of its central themes, based for the most part on arguably its most representative tale-within-a-tale, is by no means an exclusive one. Nevertheless, the importance of the ex-Mormon’s tale, meandering and tangled though it may be, lies in its explicit framing of the novel’s prime functional dynamic – the attempt to account for the world’s violent, tragic contingency in the context of a universe believed by many to be governed by an omnipotent deity.

The ex-Mormon’s tale, among its many different facets, presents a world in which the arbitrary and contingent tragedies that befall its participants are only given meaning through the act of telling, through the narratogenic capacity of sentient intelligence to assemble the materials of the world into some kind of order. A ‘tale’ is thus any interpretive encounter with the world, from the wolf’s olfactory perception of the ‘rich matrix’ of creatures that passed its way earlier in the night to the numerous tangled stories told to Billy during the course of his travels. The underlying materials of the world in itself are all fundamental to the stories that rest on them, because ‘the seams are hid from us, you see. The joinery. The way in which the world is made’, but ultimately the world ‘which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them’ (143). The telling of this tale, or of any of these tales that are part of and stand in for the overarching tale, is how we have traffic with the world and with one another: ‘Of the telling there can be no end. [...] I say again all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one’ (143).

*Cities of the Plain*

John Grady, in the course of his journey south of the border in *All the Pretty Horses*, learns some hard lessons about the contingency of the world. His childhood assurance that his ranching way of life might continue is initially shattered after his grandfather dies and his mother decides to sell her inheritance. The belief that the life he is losing could still be found in the mythologised space south of the border (its openness to adventure perfectly captured by the boys’ road map being completely blank south of the Rio Grande) sends him to Mexico, where he discovers at great personal cost that Mexico is already fully formed and complex, with its own history, politics and culture, a culture in which a boy of his lowly and foreign background would not make a suitable match for the daughter of a wealthy hacendado. The harsh reality of the contingent world that lies ‘between the wish and the thing’ strikes repeated blows against his idealistic conception of a just world in which ardour, honesty and fairness are rewarded or are at least able to flourish.

Once we meet him again in *Cities of the Plain*, he is only a year older but appears on the face of it to be less troubled than he is at the close of the earlier novel. For one thing, he has found a ranch on which to work, if only for the time being before the Department of Defense purchases all of the property in the region for military purposes. He remains as laconic as before, and he still has an almost preternatural ability with horses. Most significantly, he retains the same romantic obsession with members of the opposite sex who are in dangerously unattainable positions – in this case, he falls in love with a teenage Mexican prostitute whose pimp is reluctant to part with her. His attempts to rescue this girl, Magdalena, from the pimp Eduardo are fatal for all concerned, and the novel once again stresses the impossibility of knowing what the consequences of one’s actions will be.

One way in which it does this is through its depiction of chess. Both of the John Grady Cole novels in the trilogy feature scenes of chess-playing, whereas *The Crossing* contains not a single reference to the game. It could be argued that the narrative episodes in Billy Parham’s tale in *The Crossing* circle

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more around notions of performance and representation, as the young Billy grapples with myth and reality in his three trips south of the border during which interlocutors relate metafictional tales and gradually demonstrate that the truth of the world is discovered or created in the telling or performing of it. John Grady Cole’s character, on the other hand, is associated a number of times with the game of chess and by extension with some of that game’s inherent imperatives, in particular with the need to plan meticulously in the face of a rapidly increasing complexity which makes it impossible to exhaustively consider every possible alternative sequence of moves.<sup>18</sup>

In *All the Pretty Horses*, Cole is invited to play chess with the Dueña Alfonsa, and the three games they play function as an ‘obvious symbolic counterpart’ to the conversation they hold, which at its heart deals with the fate of Alejandra, the ‘queen’ each player is determined not to lose (Snyder 217). While Cole wins the first two games, he is perhaps just being tested because in the third the Dueña ‘used an opening he’d not seen before. In the end he lost his queen and conceded’, just as he also comes to lose Alejandra to the Dueña’s plans for her (138). The Dueña’s later pronouncements concerning determinism, contingency and counterfactuals become associated, through her, with the game of chess and it is not difficult to see the similarities between her hard-nosed insistence on the acceptance of responsibility, regardless of the extent to which bad fortune may have determined one’s circumstances, and her ability in playing a game that makes no allowances for the operation of luck and instead depends solely on the decisions of its players, a ‘fairy tale of 1001 blunders’ though that game may be (Timmer 83).

The chess motif returns to the trilogy again in *Cities of the Plain*. Cole regularly plays with his employer, Mac McGovern, and clearly often comes out on top, as JC lightheartedly warns him during the game: ‘Son, you better cut the old man some slack. You might could be replaced with somebody that cowboys better and plays chess worse’ (39). Cole proceeds to roundly beat his

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<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Defense* (1930) remains one of literature’s most thorough and complex uses of the potential of chess as a motif and organising principle. It also shares some features with the McCarthy novels here, particularly in its exploration of the workings of fate, which in Nabokov’s case are its inextricable and maddening complexities glimpsed by Luzhin.

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employer twice. Later, Mac beats John Grady after what appears to have been a carefully studied and tense game – ‘It’s a long road, said Mac, that has no turning’ – and when Billy questions Cole as to whether he ‘slack[ed] up on him just the littlest bit’, Cole insists that he didn’t: ‘No. I dont believe in it’ (93). It’s perhaps not coincidental that the very next scene depicts John Grady going to a *pawnshop* to try and raise money to see Magdalena again, as it is not too far of a step from the puppets metaphor to the idea that we are all pawns in the grip of larger forces beyond our control, much as Magdalena is in a sense a pawn in a power struggle between John Grady and Eduardo. One last time John Grady plays chess with Mac, in which Cole sacrifices a bishop to win the game, subtly prefiguring the sacrifice he is about to make for the sake of his own honour and that of his beloved (213–214).

The centrality of chess to Cole’s characterisation allows the novels to associate his earlier vision of the world – one in which careful deliberation and consideration of potential consequences should be sufficient to justify one’s actions – with that game’s fundamental imperative. At the same time, the infinite complexity of potential chess moves, which branch out and proliferate exponentially, encapsulates a large part of what Cole comes to learn in the course of the trilogy: that there is never going to be any degree of certainty when it comes to the plans one makes for one’s life, owing primarily to the sheer contingent complexity of a world whose dynamics are so recursive and nonlinear as to amplify, counteract, or problematise any attempt to bring about a particular consequence from an act in the world, especially when the consequences become more temporally removed from the initiating action.

The novel is littered with images of reflective surfaces, which on one level figure the ways in which the narrative echoes and recapitulates what has gone before in the trilogy while introducing imagery suggestive of the advance of modernity<sup>19</sup> (even though only a couple of years have passed since the

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<sup>19</sup> As well as this reflection-distorted image of neon lights, appearances of electric light in *Cities of the Plain* are often similarly distorted, like how those same ‘colored lights lay slurred and faintly peened in the fine rain’ or later, as Cole arrives to finally confront Eduardo, ‘the garish lights reflected in the black water dishing and wobbling and righting themselves again in [the cab’s] wake’ (56, 246). Just as often, electric lighting in the novel is accompanied by functional problems, such as the taillight of a truck whose puncture Billy helps repair, a

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events of *All the Pretty Horses*): ‘the rain slashed through the standing water driving the gaudy red and green colors of the neon signs to wander and seethe and rain danced on the steel tops of the cars parked along the curb’ (3).<sup>20</sup> More importantly, images of reflection carry with them suggestions of the Platonic opposition of *doxa* (belief) and *episteme* (knowledge). The crux of the trilogy, at least with respect to each novel’s bildungsroman aspect, is the difficulty encountered when its protagonists, boys immersed in the moral and historical certainties of frontier myths, dime novels, western movies, and local legend, have their beliefs challenged and reshaped by some of the hard contingent realities of life both north and south of the border. Thus it is appropriate that John Grady Cole’s first glimpse of Magdalena, the young prostitute with whom he falls in love, is in the reflection of ‘the backbar glass’ of a Ciudad Juárez brothel (6). This reflection-mediated gaze is again repeated later as ‘he watched the whores in the glass of the backbar. [...] When he looked into the glass again she was sitting by herself on a dark velvet couch with her gown arranged about her and her hands composed in her lap’ (66).

The condition that afflicts Magdalena, epilepsy, is in itself a metaphor for the sudden, violent turn of events that often characterises McCarthy narratives. The unpredictability of the seizures foregrounds their contingency just as their violence and intensity lend to them an air of the otherworldly, giving rise to superstitious beliefs regarding them and according semi-mystical status to Magdalena:

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taillight which ‘had a short in the wiring and it winked on and off like a signal until the truck had rounded the curve and vanished’ (33), or the faulty light in the barn: ‘Ever time I reach for that son of a bitch I get shocked’ (13); ‘Someone threw the lightswitch. Oren was standing there flapping his hand about. Goddamn it, he said. Why dont somebody fix that thing’ (17).

<sup>20</sup> Compare this with the opening sentence of *All the Pretty Horses*, which uses the reflection motif but without any overt markers of modernity such as neon lights: ‘The candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door’ (*AtPH* 3). Such imagery abounds throughout all of McCarthy, very often allusive of the Platonic dichotomy of *doxa/episteme* (belief/knowledge), or of the related Platonic duality of appearance and reality or indeed of Kantian phenomena and noumena. *Suttree* is saturated with such images, as they inscribe in figurative terms his central struggle with inherited dualisms (from his childhood Catholicism, his intellectual immersion in metaphysical problems, and his haunting by his stillborn twin, his ‘gauche carbon’) and thus supply narrative pressure in a novel made up of largely interchangeable vignettes.

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The old one-eyed criada was the first [...] to find her bowed in the bed and raging as if some incubus were upon her. [...] But the housewhores were gathering in the doorway and they began to push through into the room [...] and one pushed forward with a statue of the Virgin [...] The girl’s mouth was bloody and some of the whores came forward and dipped their handkerchiefs in the blood as if to wipe it away but they hid their handkerchiefs on their persons to take away with them [...] (72)

The superstitious attribution of miraculous or mystical powers to the girl, such that her blood might be kept as though it were the relic of a saint, is repeated by the blind maestro visited by John Grady, who offers his own take on her condition: ‘My belief is that she is at best a visitor. At best. She does not belong here. Among us. [...] I do not mean in this house. I mean here. Among us’ (82). John Grady, while not outwardly displaying either acceptance or rejection of the blind maestro’s thesis, manages to fulfil the prophecy through his interference by ultimately causing Eduardo to kill her rather than lose her to the young American.

The use of the term ‘cold pneuma’ to describe her perception of the imminent onslaught of a seizure is suggestive of supernaturalism, being particularly evocative of the concept of *pneumatics* in Gnostic and early Christian thought (183, 224). The Greek for ‘breath’, the image of *pneuma* has been used since at least as long ago as the Hebrew bible to refer to spirit, and it is in keeping with McCarthy’s frequent descriptions of the fog of breath in cold air or his literal references in *The Road* to the ‘breath of God’ that passes ‘from man to man’ that he should evoke the breath/spirit image here in the person of one of the most doomed characters in the trilogy (*TR* 286). Additionally, the seizure when it comes is felt ‘like the hum of a current running in her bones’, incorporating another common McCarthy motif, that of the ‘hum’ or ‘resonance’ which figures the mystery of life.

The epilepsy is presented as one which is photosensitive, because twice in the novel a seizure is either triggered or almost triggered by the periodic

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passing of light through railings or spokes, as in the following passage whose polysyndetic rhythm approximates the periodicity of the wheel’s turning:

The cart rattled past and the spoked wheels diced slowly the farther streetside and the solemn watchers there, a cardfan of sorted faces under the shopfronts and the long skeins of light in the street broken in the turning spokes and the shadows of the horses tramping upright and oblique before the oblong shadows of the wheels shaping over the stones and turning and turning. (208)

Later she is more successful at staving off the seizure which is almost initiated by a similar light effect as the ‘sudden thin iron palings of a fence that ratcheted silently past the window from right to left and which in their passing and in the period of their passing began to evoke the dormant sorcerer within before she could tear her gaze away’ (224–5). She manages to make the ‘cold pneuma’ pass by covering her eyes and breathing deeply, but the narrator ominously states that ‘She should have called it back’, because she soon realises that she is not to be delivered to John Grady and freedom but is instead about to be met by Eduardo’s employee Tiburcio and her subsequent death.

Magdalena’s epilepsy marks her as another damaged or imperfect creature that John Grady cannot resist trying to help, like the ‘squirrelheaded son of a bitch’ horse the young cowboy persists with despite it throwing him and spraining his ankle because ‘he just dont like to quit a horse’ (15–17). The epilepsy itself, despite suggesting an otherworldliness which resonates with Cole’s lifelong romanticism, is an example of contingency rendered concrete by its unpredictable synaptic storms through the physical stuff that constitutes our selves. As such it figures the uncertainty and unpredictability that occupy the thematic heart of the trilogy. Despite John Grady’s evident yearning for the simple romantic certainty of a pastoral life (without the upheavals that plague his quest for that life) throughout *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*, it is interesting that much of his greatest affection is reserved for the ‘ardentheated’, the ‘squirrelheaded’, the lame and the imperfect, both in horses

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and in people. Against his conscious best wishes for careful order and deliberation, figured by his chess proficiency, he appears to yearn for the abrupt unpredictability of unruly young horses and an epileptic lover. Nevertheless, his journey through the trilogy remains one of a boy who struggles to come to terms with that unpredictability, however much he may unconsciously seek it out. He must come to terms, above all, with the world’s contingent singularity and the consequent non-existence of counterfactual paths through the world which ‘might have been.’

The stranger encountered by an elderly Billy Parham toward the end of *Cities of the Plain* recapitulates the Dueña’s dismissal of counterfactual speculation in very similar terms as those she earlier used:

You call forth the world which God has formed and that world only. Nor is this life of yours by which you set such store your doing, however you may choose to tell it. 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. Of what could it be made? Where be hid? Or how make its appearance? 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.  
(*CotP* 285)

His central point here is that counterfactuals are meaningless, given his view that the world, and each person’s life, is determined utterly ‘at the onset’. It is interesting, then, that in a statement so apparently insistent on the determined nature of our lives he seems to allow for some measure of choice. The kind of choice he speaks of, however, is a choice of how to ‘tell it’. This paradoxical acceptance of choice, but only with respect to how one interprets, or ‘tells’, one’s life gets to the heart of the broader schema of the trilogy. The chronological unfolding of the physical world may be utterly determined from the dawn of time, with there being no such thing as alternative possibilities (or ‘might have been[s]’, to use the trilogy’s terminology) but the future always



remains obscure and unpredictable due both to our own epistemological limitations and to the chaotic behaviour of the world (its ability to amplify small causes into very large effects, for example). Billy Parham and John Grady Cole’s respective lives may be as unfree and determined as the movements of marionettes, but the unpredictability of those lives renders them no more fatalistic than if there were no predetermined course at all. Fatalism suggests an inability to avoid a particular fate and the pointlessness, therefore, of doing anything about it. From a purely determinist point of view, it is never pointless to ‘do anything about it’. Even if the ‘anything’ that one might ‘do about it’ is itself determined, we may still have something like the freedom to at the very least *appear to ourselves* to be acting freely in the world.

Such a compatibilist view of what constitutes freedom may be as much as can be hoped for, if one accepts the determinism of Dueña Alfonso, and it calls to mind Sam Harris’s somewhat flippant remark in his *Free Will* (2012): ‘Compatibilism amounts to nothing more than an assertion of the following creed: *A puppet is free as long as he loves his strings*’ (Harris 20). In order to preserve the idea of justice in a world dangling from puppet strings it may be necessary to ‘nam[e] responsibility’, regardless of whether such responsibility relates to truly self-willed actions. And regardless of the true nature of the world with respect to freedom and determinism, we nonetheless appear to be able to read into it the motivations, decisions, blame and praise that allow us to maintain the illusion of freedom and make our lives worthwhile. Our decision to do that may in itself not be truly free and may be just as determined as the rest of physical reality, but the stranger’s message to Billy at the end of *Cities of the Plain* insists that we have the power to dream and to witness.

The world’s underlying radical contingency, its terrifying dearth of certainty and its indifferent and relentless trampling of human anthropocentric fantasies, is overlaid by our conceptual panoply of varied and multiform interpretations, from science’s imaginative theoretical edifices assembled painstakingly and beautifully around rigorously gathered empirical evidence right through to the confused ravings of a mad man. As the stranger tells Billy: ‘The events of the waking world [...] are forced upon us and the narrative is

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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’ (283).

The Border Trilogy’s parataxis is an integral part of its world-building project, and the stylistic shifts in the three novels reflect their thematic shifts. Whereas the start of the trilogy marked a change in McCarthy’s development, from the feverish abundance of heightened descriptive passages and the quasi-biblical register of *Blood Meridian* to the prevalence, in *All the Pretty Horses*, of more subdued declarative prose, this shift to a more pronounced paratactic effect fits the tale of John Grady Cole. The young cowboy’s feelings of increasing alienation from a world that no longer has much use for his abilities are reflected in the prose’s spare parataxis. More significantly, the conspicuous privation of causal connectives reflects the novel’s concern with the problems of causality and determinism, as embodied in the coiner and puppet motifs. The impossibility of foreseeing the ultimate consequences of one’s actions and the troubling difficulty in tracing moral accountability pervade and illuminate the syntactic structure of the novel, which in turn amplifies the themes through its allegorical complementarity. On the other hand, there are quite a few heightened figurative passages amid the more declarative prose which frequently correspond with John Grady’s affective response to landscape, to horses, and to Alejandra.

The shift to *The Crossing*, then, is somewhat surprising, as its style is more reminiscent of *Blood Meridian* than of its immediate precursor in the trilogy. Richly philosophical and meandering, with a dense fabric of heightened figuration, the prose of *The Crossing* conforms to that novel’s thematic concerns. The elaboration of complex stories, most of which reflect upon themselves and upon the act of storytelling, generates a convoluted matrix of jostling, contradictory worldviews which Billy has to navigate, and the more regular flights of heightened figuration befit such an odyssey through a mythic landscape made as much of corridos as it is made of stone. It is also worth noting that, because *The Crossing* is set prior to the events of the other two

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novels, the chronological sequence of the three novels reveals a gradual diminution of the figurative and heightened elements in the prose.

*Cities of the Plain* then uses the most telegraphic and simple prose of the three, pointing towards the hardboiled and minimalist prose of *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*. Its style is the logical conclusion of the trilogy’s chronological sequence, perhaps suggesting a gradual impoverishment with respect to its characters’ engagement with the natural world. Such a reading would fit that novel’s change of setting, with a much higher proportion of scenes occurring indoors and in urban environments in relation to the more external and rural *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*.

The events of *All the Pretty Horses* demonstrate to John Grady Cole that the contingent nature of the world, with its arbitrary vicissitudes and unpredictable consequences, means that justice is necessarily compromised and complicated. The disparity between his romantic conception of a world rich with the promises of frontier mythology and the disappointing reality forces him to confront some hard truths about his insignificance and his lack of control over the events of his life. The callous indifference of the world to the suffering of its inhabitants is something that almost all McCarthy characters must face, but rarely do they grapple with it as much as Cole does. Numerous interlocutors discuss the world’s contingency with him, but by the close of the novel the young cowboy’s evident confusion and sadness demonstrate his difficulty absorbing the lessons they have tried to impart to him. By the time we meet him again in *Cities of the Plain*, his ‘ardenthearted’ nature once again leads him into trouble, but some of the lessons taught him during the course of *All the Pretty Horses* about moral responsibility and justice influence his final march to his own doom in the service of a romantic ideal. Ultimately, as Billy Parham learns throughout his parallel adventures in *The Crossing* and the final, metafictional recapitulation of some of the trilogy’s central themes during his extended conversation with the roadside stranger in *Cities of the Plain*, it is not the indifferent, contingent and meaningless underlying physical reality that matters in one’s life, but the human capacity to construct narrative out of the haphazard materials to hand. It is story itself that invests the world with its

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magic and wonder, story as conceived in the broadest possible sense. To witness the world is to create it.

The stranger’s lesson about the world, and about the scheme of the trilogy as a whole, is that it is our dreaming a world of meaning into existence from the world’s inherently valueless and indifferent physical substrate that allows us to shape our lives, both in retrospect and in progress. The three novels echo and resonate with one another in all manner of ways, most notably in the broader strokes of their narratives of doomed border crossings and paired protagonists, and this intertextual resonance contributes to the metaphysical thesis at the heart of the trilogy, encapsulated by the tangled and gnomic convolutions of the stranger’s dream-within-a-dream story.

Our plans may mean little in the face of the world’s contingency, and our speculation about the ‘might have been’ may be as idle and frivolous as a daydream, but those plans involve an imaginative capacity that must project a narrative into the future, however unlikely it is that the future will accord with such projections. Likewise, daydreaming about counterfactuals lies in many ways at the heart of our narrative capability and thus is a necessary component of that which makes the indifferent world bearable to its inhabitants. This capacity to craft narrative out of sensory qualia through which the world’s quiddity is imperfectly relayed is not the sole province of human cognition. In *The Crossing*, the perceptual encounter of the wolf with the sensory data of the physical world is represented by the narrator on more than one occasion, and the knowledge and beliefs of horses are discussed at length throughout the trilogy, particularly in *Cities of the Plain*.

Through this narratogenic capacity, the trilogy suggests, the world’s inherent contingency and indifference are interpreted and reframed in the context of narratives that can be chosen by the teller. Human and animal characters in McCarthy novels read the world, but the world’s openness, its paratactic atomism and lack of inherent meaning or value, allows for the proliferation of creative misreadings of that physical foundation. Such misreadings give rise to mythology, superstition and supernaturalism as much as they prompt, in the more rigorous hands of scientists, instrumental

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explanations and theories that hold fast to reductive physicalism and metaphysical naturalism as they parsimoniously and consiliently craft conceptual models of the world. The tension between those two worldviews, between an openness to the mysterious resonances of supernaturalism and a recognition of the cold and callous indifference of a naturalistic universe, supplies McCarthy’s novels with much of their power, and this tension becomes most evident in his SFI-period novels where the overt supernaturalism that marks the earlier works is attenuated and the naturalism is allowed to hold more sway over the fictive metaphysic.

### 3 – ‘I wont push my chips forward’: Contingent Fortune in *No Country for Old Men*

With *No Country for Old Men* McCarthy stripped down and hard-boiled his prose to deliver a novel quite unlike any of his others – something that is part airport thriller and part modern western, but which gradually dismantles and confounds generic expectations in a way that left many viewers of the Coen brothers’ 2009 movie adaptation bemused and disappointed.<sup>21</sup> The stylistic economy and headlong pace of the novel may reflect in part its origin as an unproduced screenplay which McCarthy later revisited and expanded into prose (Wallach, ‘Introduction’ xii). More importantly, in the context of this thesis, the novel’s terse style and complementary thematic emphasis on contingency are consistent with his other SFI-period work. The style of *No Country for Old Men* is in keeping with the later McCarthy’s tendency towards increasingly paratactic prose and points toward the further rejection in *The Road* of baroque ornamentation in favour of minimal, telegraphic simplicity.

The concerns of *No Country for Old Men* likewise pick up some of the threads of his preceding westerns. The Border Trilogy’s preoccupation with causality, determinism, and moral agency is again taken up by *No Country*, as are those earlier novels’ explorations of the utility (or futility) of counterfactual speculation and the regret felt by characters about the ‘might have been’. The trilogy’s concern with the consequences of human actions and the difficulties associated with tracing accountability, however, are tempered in *No Country* with a more insistent and prevailing emphasis on the role of blind luck in determining the course of human affairs. Notwithstanding some countervailing

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<sup>21</sup> In Lynnea Chapman King’s preface to *No Country for Old Men: From Novel to Film* (2009), she relates how on both of her visits to the movie theatre to view the Coens’ adaptation, ‘after the final image of Tommy Lee Jones had cut to black, there were audible exclamations from the patrons around me: “That’s it?” “What happened?”’ (King v). One need only glance through user comments and reviews on internet sites such as IMDb.com to see the extent to which some viewers were exercised at the fact that the ostensible protagonist’s death occurs offscreen with little fanfare, that towards the end the villain disappears, injured but alive, and that the movie ends elliptically with the defeated Sheriff Bell describing two cryptic dreams he had about his father.

gestures towards supernaturalism, the novel can very easily be read as maintaining a thoroughgoing naturalism when considered as a whole, and its vision of the world is of a piece with the world depicted in the Border trilogy: dangerous, contingent, and utterly indifferent to the wishes and concerns of its human inhabitants.

In this world, the fickle blessings and arbitrary tribulations of contingency are codified in the concept of luck and layered with the quasi-pagan trappings of superstitious beliefs, rituals and talismans. In *No Country for Old Men*, all of these trappings are conspicuously evident, as are direct invocations of luck and figurative evocations of chance and gambling. Games of chance are referred to throughout the text, with one particular game loading the binary simplicity of its coin-flipping action with arguably the greatest stake (one’s own life) with which one can gamble and thus becoming the novel’s central symbol of the arbitrary slings and arrows of fortune. Images of wheels and circles are inscribed throughout the text, suggesting the *rota fortunae*, or wheel of fortune, which encapsulates McCarthy’s insistence on contingency and the centrality of blind chance.

The narrator of *Blood Meridian* remarks, in relation to the Glanton gang’s wanderings: ‘Notions of chance and fate are the preoccupation of men engaged in rash undertakings’ (161). While this may be true, in *No Country for Old Men* we are witness to a trio of men preoccupied in various ways with notions of chance and fate, only one of whose undertakings can truly be called rash. The novel examines how these three men respond to their situations and to the central role that chance plays in the shaping of their lives and the web of other people’s lives in which theirs are entangled. This emphasis on the centrality of chance continues McCarthy’s examination of the contingency of life while continuing his SFI-period work’s shift towards a metaphysically naturalist understanding of the universe.

Nowhere is the nexus of moral responsibility, determinism, and contingency more apparent than in the games to which the different novels refer. John Grady Cole’s skill at playing chess is emphasised in both *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*, and such an emphasis is significant: firstly

because of that game’s famed purity with respect to chance – no coin tosses, dice rolls, or card deals interfere with its utter and exclusive dependence on the decisions of its two players; and secondly because much of the skill of playing chess resides in accurately sifting predictions of future moves out of the proliferating branches of possibility (John Grady Cole’s love of chess thus reflects two of the trilogy’s central themes). *No Country for Old Men*, on the other hand, is littered with references to games in which the role of chance ranges from being a major constitutive element (in the case of poker and mumbledypeg) to being the sole determiner of a game’s outcome (the flipping of a coin). The kinds of games referred to in the various novels thus contribute to and emphasise each novel’s central metaphysical explorations with respect to contingency, blind luck and personal responsibility.

The use of games throughout McCarthy is noted by Marty Priola in his brief sketch of the function of chess in the Border Trilogy. Priola persuasively reads the games between John Grady Cole and the Dueña in *All the Pretty Horses* as representing a kind of power struggle between the two characters over the fate of Alejandra, and he argues that, in the Trilogy, chess ‘reminds us of the judge’s pronouncements in *Blood Meridian* that life is *not* a game to be played lightly’ (56–57). For Jeremy Cagle, who reads the novel through the lenses of game theory and Lyotardian paralogy, ‘games and gaming in *No Country for Old Men* denote a particular relationship between spatial and temporal energies operating within, and upon, the novel’s narrative structure’ (7). Cagle argues that the novel’s narrative deferral – its crime scenes that ‘emerge and re-emerge’, its repetitive acts of violence, and its close ‘which allows neither adequate resolution nor a satisfactory discharge of textual energy’ – formalises ‘a structure of “vacillating rhythm” informed by game-theoretic logic’ (7–8). Linda Woodson’s reading of the novel is more closely aligned with some of my own arguments (in both this chapter and throughout the thesis) than Cagle’s more discourse-focused essay, as she explores how *No Country* continues a thread from his other border fiction: “The philosophical question being asked (though not answered), becomes, “Is there a way to view ourselves as morally responsible agents even if determinism were true?”” (2).



Woodson’s essay discusses the nature of moral responsibility in light of the potential truth of determinism, and she lays groundwork for my discussion of *No Country* here when she suggests that the border fiction ‘offers characters who exhibit varying degrees of their sense of responsibility’ (11).

Through its literal and figurative references to games and ‘notions of luck’, its narrative content, and its paratactic style, *No Country* gives life to three protagonists who demonstrate the fickle nature of fortune in their changing circumstances, in their actions, and in their reflections and expressed personal philosophies. By doing so, the novel continues the Border trilogy’s project of constructing fictional worlds whose metaphysical architecture reflects naturalistic principles while inspiring supernaturalistic interpretations in their human characters who otherwise struggle to account for the world’s callous indifference and radical contingency.

The world of SFI-period McCarthy is one in which the contingency of the physical world is apprehended with varying degrees of perplexity and confidence by its characters. The Border Trilogy chronicles the attempts of its protagonists to come to terms with the world’s apparent contingency, complexity, and indifference. The trilogy suggests, ultimately, that our capacity to invest the world with narrative meaning is the principal, if not the only, tool at our disposal when addressing the apparent silence of a world devoid of the balancing justice of a deity. *No Country for Old Men* once again takes as its thematic core the contingency of the world, but this novel, in the guise of a hardboiled western thriller, presents the reader with three different attitudes toward that contingency and explores what happens when events bring the avatars of those three attitudes into one another’s orbits.

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell’s engagement with the world is shown throughout to be one of increasing bewilderment at the injustice evidenced by the prevalence of luck and at his inability to redress the feeling of imbalance with which this injustice leaves him. Llewelyn Moss is somewhat more at ease with the lack of justice displayed in the operation of fortune, as he attempts to make the most of the lucky hand he’s dealt and has to live and die by the consequences. For Chigurh, fortune *is* justice, and he views himself as, among

other things, the indifferent agent of that fortune. The novel interweaves the narratives and monologues of these three characters, exploring as it does how each one deals with the vicissitudes of his own particular path through the tangled complexity of a world that shows little interest in the affairs of its inhabitants, in whether or not any of them are deserving of the snakes and ladders scattered arbitrarily in their paths.

If, as Billy is told at the end of the Border Trilogy, ‘each man is the bard of his own existence’, then *No Country for Old Men* allows us glimpses of three quite different self-authored selves in the forms of Bell, Moss and Chigurh. The human need to impose narrative once more becomes paramount in the protagonists’ respective positions, as each of them use metaphor and narrative tropes to describe the situations in which they find themselves and the forces that they believe to be operating in the world. With Moss and Chigurh, their interior lives and the stories they tell themselves about their own existence are revealed only partially, through dialogue and action, whereas McCarthy allows Bell to speak directly to us through the monologues that open each chapter. In each case, however, the novel suggests that the characters’ each put their individual spin on the contingency of reality. The physical being of the world may be indifferent, contingent, and inherently unjust, but part of the blessing (and curse) of consciousness is that we impose pattern and order on the world that allows us to tell ourselves who we are while simultaneously generating a proliferation of stories, theories, superstitions and the rest of the narratogenic gamut.

## Llewelyn Moss

The event that propels the novel’s plot forward is the discovery by welder and Vietnam veteran Llewelyn Moss of a drug deal gone fatally awry in the south Texan desert, amidst the carnage of which he finds and appropriates a case filled with \$2.4 million in cash. This windfall sends him on the run from both the Mexican drug gang to whom the money belonged and, more terrifyingly, from the relentless pursuit of the ‘true and living prophet of destruction’

Anton Chigurh (4). Far from being a stroke of good fortune, then, Moss’s discovery of the money in the desert and the subsequent pursuit is, in fact, his death sentence. Furthermore, it also leads eventually to the death of his young wife and numerous others who happen to cross his path and the path of his pursuer.

Moss’s first appearance in the novel establishes his character as a practised hunter – stalking antelope less than a mile away on the desert below him. The low rising sun casts long shadows on the floodplain before him, so that ‘Somewhere out there was the shadow of Moss himself’ (8) – this is both a literal and figurative foreshadowing, as Moss’s eventual ‘shadow’, Anton Chigurh, is somewhere out there and travelling a path that will converge with Moss’s.

Moss’s competence with the rifle is emphasised not only through telling details such as his knowledge of ‘the exact drop of the bullet in hundred yard increments’ (9). In keeping with McCarthy’s regular use of polysyndeton in depictions of proficiency, the novel also utilises that particular rhetorical figure to capture the routine adroitness of Moss’s actions: ‘He wallowed down in the scree *and* pulled off one boot *and* laid it over the rocks *and* lowered the forearm of the rifle down into the leather *and* pushed off the safety with his thumb *and* sighted through the scope [emphasis mine]’ (9). The steady, additive syntactic scheme captures the almost automatic nature of the practised, deliberate sequence of actions typical of an expert. It also allows us to identify Moss as a man for whom the instrumentality of his weapon is of a piece with the instrumentality of his skill with that weapon – a typical western hero, in other words.

The choice of the verb ‘wallowed’ to describe Moss’s settling down into the scree is worth noting, as it is the first of many points where the novel makes suggestive references to pigs in relation to Moss. His association with the pig is reinforced throughout, and indeed just after he is shown to have wallowed down in the scree, his choice of personal decorative accessory is focused upon during the still moment before he pulls the trigger: ‘The boar’s tooth he wore on a gold chain spooled onto the rocks inside his elbow’ (9).

Whereas almost all of Moss’s pursuers are figuratively linked to predatory animals, Moss himself is associated with the wild boar, or more generally with pigs, through his wearing of this boar’s tooth necklace throughout the novel. His approach to fortune is opportunistic and resourceful, two characteristics traditionally associated with pigs.

Alongside the boar’s tooth’s function as a symbolic gesture towards an animal that shares some of Moss’s characteristics, other aspects of this item of personal jewellery are worth noting. The first is its possible function as a talisman, an object endowed with the ability to ward off bad fortune and attract the good, much like a rabbit’s foot or a horseshoe. When he follows the trail of blood from the scene of the botched drug deal and stands looking from a distance at the corpse that holds the case of money, contemplating the potential risks and rewards involved in what he is doing, he is depicted ‘fingering the boar’s tusk at the front of his shirt’, as though it might guide him or protect him as he faces a decision of life-altering significance (15). This talismanic function of the tooth echoes the many other references in the novel to superstitious beliefs, to how people feel that fortune might be swayed through the observance of prohibitions such as not speaking ill of the dead, or through the proximity of charmed objects such as a lucky coin.

The tooth’s operation as a lucky charm also calls to mind an allusion, albeit slightly more lateral, carried by that object. According to Moss’s father in his discussion with Bell late in the novel, Moss was a sniper in Vietnam and ‘the best rifleshot I ever saw’ (293). US Marine scout snipers, once they complete their training, are granted the honorific appellation ‘hog’, derived from the acronym for ‘hunter of gunmen’. According to tradition, they then receive a bullet shell that they carry with them at all times and which is referred to as a ‘hog’s tooth’. This tradition spread from the US Marine Corps to other branches of the US military. US Marine Staff Sergeant Neil Kennedy Morris notes: ‘if you happen to see a Marine or soldier with a bullet hanging on a chain around his neck, chances are he’s a trained sniper’ (Roberts and Sasser

237).<sup>22</sup> Moss’s ‘boar’s tooth’, while apparently not being a literal ‘hog’s tooth’ bullet, nevertheless suggests the sniper tradition and is thus another reference to talismanic superstition in the novel.

Moss takes an unsuccessful shot at an antelope, the animals scatter and the resultant dust settles until the ‘barrial stood silent and empty in the sun. As if nothing had occurred there at all’ (10). The barrial’s silence and emptiness figures the indifference of this harsh environment to the events that occur in it; it suddenly seems as though nothing has happened at all, despite the brief scene of predation and startled animal flight. There may be a wounded animal out there, and there are clues for those who might read them (in the dust of the antelope’s passing, for example, or the ricochet mark of the bullet off the ground), but of what has just occurred there is little trace. The transience of all things, no matter how enormous and unstoppable certain aspects of the world might appear to people like Sheriff Bell, is reinforced here, as Moss almost immediately passes rocks that ‘were etched with pictographs perhaps a thousand years old. The men who drew them hunters like himself. Of them there was no other trace’ (11). He then takes another step towards his own eventual oblivion when he spots through his binoculars three vehicles surrounded by ‘men lying on the ground’, leading him to discover the case whose contents will continue to inspire violent deaths until his own demise (11).

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<sup>22</sup> Staff Sergeant Kennedy claims to have first invented the acronym in order to mollify his superiors:

Marine sniper students were “pigs” until they graduated from training, after which they were known as “hogs”; in keeping with the motif, instructors were called “boars.” The acronyms PIG and HOG evolved out of that, created on the spot when I was called on the carpet at Quantico because of an article on snipers published by the *New York Times*. Headquarters Marine Corps had a fit about Marine snipers being compared to swine. As the old saying goes, shit rolls downhill.

I stood before Colonel Willis, commanding officer of WTBN, Quantico, and answered his questions about the terms, thinking fast.

“Pig,” I said. “P-I-G: professional instructed gunman. Hog. H-O-G: hired-on gunman [later, hunter of gunmen].”

Colonel Willis kind of grinned. He knew I was bullshitting, but it satisfied him and it satisfied the Marine Corps. The practice of handing out a bullet on a chain, a hog’s tooth, caught on and became a tradition.

It wasn’t long before the idea spread. Other sniper schools in both the Marine Corps and the Army were soon handing out hog’s teeth. (237)

After finding the cash-filled case alongside a dead man – ‘Moss absolutely knew what was in the case and he was scared in a way that he didnt even understand’ (17) – and calculating the case’s total of ‘Two point four million’, Moss realises immediately that the consequences of finding this bounty will require very careful consideration: ‘You have to take this seriously, he said. You cant treat it like luck’ (23). In other words, this windfall cannot be handled like a lottery win and requires serious deliberation and planning in order to ensure that he can retain the money without putting himself or his wife in harm’s way. The ultimate irony of Moss’s narrative arc is that the mercenary appropriation of the money in itself does not initiate the train of fatal consequences that ensue so much as an act of selflessness on Moss’s part does.

Moss manages to get away from the scene of the botched drug deal with the money, without leaving any significant trace, but an act of conscience returns him to the scene with water for the one parched and dying survivor he had earlier discovered. In that earlier encounter, the wounded *narcotraficante*, along with begging Moss for ‘agua’, asks him in Spanish to close the door of the truck, because there are wolves around:

La puerta. Hay lobos.

There aint no lobos.

Sí, sí. Lobos. Leones. (14-15)

The wolves and lions that prowl the drug dealer’s imagination figuratively hint at the threats that circle the situation in which Moss places himself upon returning with water for the dying man. The predatory nature of Moss’s pursuers is associated here with wolves and lions; elsewhere it is echoed in similarly suggestive predator imagery such as the crocodile boots worn by both the dead drug-runner from whom Moss takes the case of money and by hitman Carson Wells, and the Barracuda car driven by the Mexicans who finally catch up with Moss (18, 154, 236).

Moss’s pragmatic opportunism in the face of the world’s contingency, his pig-like character, makes him possibly the closest of the three main characters to being an outright naturalist when it comes to accounting for the injustice of luck in the world. Unlike Bell and Chigurh, Moss appreciates that luck is ultimately blind, and he endeavours to take advantage of its occasional arbitrary graces and stoically weather its equally arbitrary vicissitudes. Some of the people who cross his path recognise the dangers inherent in travelling alongside him. When Moss returns to the motel in which he has hidden the case of money, for example, he gets the driver to slowly drive past the rooms and the driver senses that there might be danger here:

I dont want to get in some kind of a jackpot here, buddy.

[...]

Moss leaned forward and held a hundred dollar bill across the seat. You’re already in a jackpot, he said. I’m tryin to get you out of it. Now take me to a motel. (86)

The word ‘jackpot’ is used ironically here, but it once again invokes gambling and fortune in the driver’s assessment of the potentially life-altering consequences of taking this particular fare on this night.

Moss’s path through the novel is marked by lucky escapes and references to luck and gambling, with the entire arc being propelled by that initial lucky discovery of the money in the desert. At certain points the novel reveals how much he is aware that his continued survival is a matter of pure chance: ‘He thought about a lot of things but the thing that stayed with him was that at some point he was going to have to quit running on luck’ (108). When Chigurh finally catches up to him in the hotel in Eagle Pass and he hides in the darkened room with the shower running to create the illusion that he is in the bathroom showering, he feels that ‘he’d already taken more chances than he had coming’ (112-3).

After the ensuing shootout in which Chigurh and Moss injure each other and a number of Mexican gunmen are killed, another hitman, Carson

Wells, is dispatched to track down the money. As Wells inspects the scene of the shootout, something catches his eye on the second floor level of the Aztec Theatre:

Two bulletholes in the windowglass. He tapped at the door and waited. Then he opened the door and went in.

A darkened room. Faint smell of rot. He stood until his eyes were accustomed to the dimness. A parlor. A pianola or small organ against the far wall. A chifferobe. A rockingchair by the window where an old woman sat slumped. (147)

The asyndetic parataxis of observation is used here to approximate Wells’ encounter with and gradual accustoming to the gloomy room until he sees the old woman dead, hit by a stray bullet ‘through the forehead’, once again emphasising the arbitrary nature of fortune’s cruelties: ‘Not what you had in mind at all, was it darling? he told her’ (148). Wells later uses photographs of this scene to try and speak to Moss’s conscience in the hospital in Piedras Negras (151); after Wells leaves Moss to think on what he has offered him and on his vague threats against his wife, the novel once again deploys a gambling metaphor when it relates that Moss ‘turned up the photographs lying on the bed. Like a player checking his hole cards’ (156).

Moss had also been told by Wells that even if he gave Chigurh the money he would still kill him and that there’s ‘no one alive on this planet that’s ever had even a cross word with [Chigurh]. They’re all dead. Those are not good odds’ (153). Wells uses similar language throughout the conversation, stressing luck and probability in his attempts to get Moss to just hand over the money to him rather than having to deal with the psychopathic Chigurh. He points out at the outset how much of a part luck played in Moss’s surviving the shootout, reminding him that if ‘Acosta’s people hadnt shown up when they did I dont think you would have made out so good’, and telling him that a mere two centimetres is ‘the distance that round missed your liver by’ (149). Moss maintains a somewhat arrogant confidence despite the facts, suggesting



that Wells’ taking only three hours to find him was in itself more the result of fortune than of any differential in ability between the hunter and the prey: ‘You might not get so lucky again’ (152). Wells ultimately invokes luck one last time with Moss in order to press home the inadequacy of relying on good fortune when confronted with the relentless Chigurh and other employees of the drug cartels: ‘Even if you got lucky and took out one or two people—which is unlikely—they’d just send something else. Nothing would change. They’ll still find you. There’s nowhere to go’ (156).

The majority of Moss’s most revealing reflections on his situation come in the final sequence of his sections in the novel, after he picks up the hitchhiking teenage girl. He stresses to her the contingent nature of life’s events when he tells her: ‘Three weeks ago I was a law abidin citizen. Workin a nine to five job. Eight to four, anyways. Things happen to you they happen. They dont ask first. They dont require your permission’ (220). This stoic lesson is continued when he gives her a thousand dollars to help pay her way to California:

What’s that for?

To go to California on.

What do I gotta do for it?

You dont have to do nothin. Even a blind sow finds a acorn ever once in a while.

(223)<sup>23</sup>

This colloquialism perfectly sums up Moss’s discovery of the money in the desert and its being an occurrence of sheer chance and fortune (or perhaps misfortune). The blindness of the sow also evokes the blindness of fortune and echoes with other images of or references to partial blindness or compromised vision, all of which gain figurative force through such an explicit reference to blind chance. It also continues the association of Moss with pigs, and it is

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<sup>23</sup> This is followed by a touch of trademark McCarthy humour when the hitchhiker, after a few moments of reflection, asks Moss: ‘You wasnt callin me a sow back yonder was you?’ (223).

noteworthy that the novel once again brings the boar’s tooth necklace into the frame when Moss reveals to the hitchhiker that the ‘tush off a wild boar’ that he wears on a chain ‘aint mine. I’m just keepin it for somebody. [...] a dead somebody’ (225).

The hitchhiker ponders the counterfactual, the ‘might have been’, when she says ‘I wonder where I’d be right now if I hadnt of met you this mornin’, and she echoes Bell’s similar claim for himself when she tells Moss how she has always been fortunate:

I was always lucky. About stuff like that. About meetin people.

Well, I wouldnt speak too soon.

Why? You fixin to bury me out in the desert?

No. But there’s a lot of bad luck out there. You hang around long enough and you’ll come in for your share of it.

I think I done have. I believe I’m due for a change. I might even be overdue.

Yeah? Well you aint.

Why do you say that?

He looked at her. Let me tell you somethin, little sister. If there is one thing on this planet that you dont look like it’s a bunch of good luck walkin around. (234)

Moss expresses a statistical understanding of luck when he tells the girl that if she hangs around long enough she’ll come in for her share of misfortune, but he introduces a different conception in the last sentence here, touching on the idea that some kinds of luck are in many ways self-made and that this particular girl doesn’t look likely to attract a lot of good fortune into her life. Not all circumstances commonly attributed to luck fall into the same category of contingency. The bad luck of being hit and killed in one’s home by a stray bullet is of a different kind than the bad luck of winding up homeless through a series of bad decisions, for example. The first of these events is utterly contingent with respect to the actions of the victim, and while a determinist

could say that the bullet entering the room on just such a trajectory at just such a time and the person’s having been sitting in just that place were all determined events which resulted in the equally determined death, the degree of contingency with respect to that person’s foresight, the absence of risk factors in choosing that place to live, etc., is enough to warrant thinking of that event as contingent. On the other hand, a person might be referred to as ‘down on her luck’ or the victim of bad luck if she wound up living on the streets through a series of unfortunate but partially self-inflicted vicissitudes. To talk of her bad luck is to talk of something slightly other than the bad luck of being hit by a stray bullet in your apartment, and it is that kind of luck that Moss hints at here as opposed to the ‘blind sow finding an acorn’ of his own monetary windfall.

In a significant part of his exchange with the hitchhiker, Moss seems to reveal through a lecture to his young interlocutor that he realises the extent to which his own actions and his own life are enmeshed in the lives of those around him:

He looked at her. After a while he said: It’s not about knowin where you are. It’s about thinkin you got there without takin anything with you. Your notions about startin over. Or anybody’s. You dont start over. That’s what it’s about. Ever step you take is forever. You cant make it go away. None of it. You understand what I’m sayin?

I think so.

I know you dont but let me try it one more time. You think when you wake up in the mornin yesterday dont count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there. Your life is made out of the days it’s made out of. Nothin else. (227)

The lesson that Moss here tries to impart to his naive young fellow traveller is not unlike the lessons learned by John Grady Cole and Billy Parham in the Border Trilogy – every step you take is forever, just as ‘there is no might have been’ (*AtPH* 245). Once embarked upon, the roads travelled by Llewellyn

Moss and his cowboy antecedents cannot be retraced and rerouted, nor can the various possible roads be weighed and judged with accuracy prior to choosing one particular course, any more than one can accurately predict the weather one year hence. The operation of chance, coupled with the amplifying effect of nonlinear dynamics, inserts the world between the wish and the thing, to paraphrase the Dueña Alfonsa’s memorable phrase.

When the cartels do eventually catch up with Moss, it is the outcome of both blind luck and self-determined ill fortune. His entire narrative has been one propelled by the finding of the ‘acorn’ coupled with his own decision to return to the scene of the bloodbath in order to bring water to a dying man, and this coupling of blind luck with risky choices characterises Moss as a man who has won a large pot and struggled to hold onto it after a hazardous gamble. His end, which comes to the reader second-hand through an eyewitness account rather than being narrated immediately, demonstrates once again his stoic acceptance of life’s surprises and the core of altruism that makes him more than a mere greedy opportunist.

He and the hitchhiking girl are staying at a motel, where they have their final discussion about luck and life. Moss apparently remains faithful to Carla Jean despite the hitchhiker’s repeated offers of physical companionship: ‘Well darlin you’re just a little late. Cause I done bought. And I think I’ll stick with what I got’ (235). Despite maintaining an honourable loyalty to his wife, an act of selflessness towards the young hitchhiker costs him dearly. As described by an eyewitness:

[The Mexican] drug the woman out of her room and the other man come out with a gun but when he seen the Mexican had a gun pointed at the woman’s head he laid his own piece down. And whenever he done that the Mexican shoved the woman away and shot her and then turned and shot him. (237)

Moss relinquishes his only defence in order to help the young woman, even though given what we know of his character it is almost certain he would

have been under few illusions about the efficacy of his disarming himself. If he realises, as per his earlier discussion with the hitchhiker, the mistake in ‘thinkin you got [where you are] without takin anything with you’, perhaps he suspects that Chigurh is likely to follow through on his threat against Carla Jean and is feeling some guilt about the culpability that Chigurh has tried to pin onto him regarding that. To retain his weapon when confronted by the threatened hitchhiker would ensnare Moss in a similar, if similarly dubious, culpability, so he chooses not to do that despite the unlikelihood of his surrender making any difference. His ultimate tragedy is that in his final moments he is no doubt aware that his wife is now almost certainly going to be targeted by Anton Chigurh; but whether he would view himself as being culpable in this situation is not very clear, this owing in part to his pragmatic stoicism in the face of the world’s injustices and misfortunes.

The character of Moss sits somewhere at the intersection of both Bell and Chigurh. Like Chigurh, he appreciates that the world hinges on contingency and that it does not respect people’s hunger for justice or reward moral rectitude with anything resembling balance or fairness. His relative ease with the world’s unfairness is leavened, however, by a modicum of the honour and compassion which are so dear to Bell’s heart. Part of the difference in their characters could be attributed to Bell and Moss’s respective experiences of war and how they reflect, to a certain degree, changes in the American character between those wars. Bell’s struggle to maintain his lifelong belief in honour and the administration of fair but unwavering justice is in keeping with the spirit of that earlier generation for whom participation in the global struggle against totalitarianism was largely deemed both right and necessary, complicated though that belief might have been by the brutal realities of conflict with its attendant moral complications. Moss is a veteran of a much more ambiguously framed conflict which ended in a messy and embarrassing United States withdrawal and was forever tainted by reports of US atrocities and civilian massacres. Thus, Moss’s hard-nosed opportunism is characteristic of a generation of Americans for whom the moral certainty and idealism of many of their forebears were viewed with suspicion and cynicism. Additionally, his

character conforms to the traits sought after in US military sniper recruits, as Captain Jim Land related them to Martin Pegler (in relation to US Marine Corps snipers, but in terms equally relevant for US Army snipers like Moss): ‘they were men who were confident, self-reliant, and often economical with words [...] They also had to possess great patience, as well as above-average shooting ability. [...] Psychologically, the only motive that will sustain the sniper is knowing he is doing a necessary job and having the confidence that he is the best person to be doing it’ (Pegler 181–182).

McCarthy also plays a little with nominative symbolism in this novel, with Moss, like his namesake plant, being somewhat rootless and associated throughout the novel with water. This association begins when the dying man begs him for ‘agua’, and the man’s thirstiness is reinforced as Moss is shown afterwards having ‘a long drink of water’ in the gas station on his way home with the money (12, 19). Later, as Moss deliberates over what he should do, his drinking of cold water appears to influence his ultimate decision:

He took the jar of water from the refrigerator and unscrewed the cap and stood there drinking in the light of the open refrigerator door. Then he just stood there holding the jar with the water beading cold on the glass, looking out the window and down the highway toward the lights. He stood there a long time. (22-23)

Water again seems to play a significant part in Moss’s thought processes when he realises, while drinking some water, that the case of money contains a transponder: ‘[He] got a glass of water and came back and sat on the bed again. He took a sip and set the water on the glass top of the wooden bedside table. There is no goddamn way, he said’ (107). When Carson Wells, whose own name is also evocative of water, approaches a hospitalised Moss in an attempt to retrieve the money, their discussion turns to how Chigurh found Moss. Moss’s reaction is subtle but reveals much about his own understanding of how his return to the dying man with water resulted in Chigurh finding his trail: ‘There was a pitcher of water on a plastic tray on the bedside table. Moss

no more than glanced at it’ (154). In the final moment of this scene, after Wells leaves Moss to reflect on the photographs of the old woman who was accidentally shot in Eagle Pass, the same pitcher again figures in his thinking as he ‘looked at the pitcher of water but then the nurse came in’ (157).

The association of water with Moss contributes to the novel’s portrayal of Moss as a man willing to take the best advantage of whatever life throws his way, a man who is able to go with the flow, so to speak. Carson Wells, for as much as we see of him, appears to possess a comparable pragmatic outlook in keeping with his similarly aqueous name.<sup>24</sup> Unlike Chigurh, however, Moss does not allow his appreciation of life’s contingency to become the sole prism through which he views the world. His moss-like nature is also reflected in the way his adaptability is complemented by a fierce loyalty, which keeps him emotionally anchored to his wife despite being propositioned multiple times in the motel, and by a degree of resilience and an obstinate refusal to let go when it comes to holding on to what he has acquired. That this obstinacy ultimately results in Carla Jean’s death is not necessarily reason enough to lay the blame at Moss’s feet, as Chigurh does. Moss’s character is such that he could never have surrendered when Chigurh offers to spare Carla Jean (Moss’s own life was never up for negotiation): ‘You bring me the money and I’ll let her walk. Otherwise she’s accountable. [...] I wont tell you you can save yourself because you cant’ (184). Llewellyn Moss, veteran Twelfth Infantry sniper confident of his own ability, decided to gamble on being able to get Carla Jean to safety and kill a pursuing Chigurh rather than sacrifice the money and still have to reckon with the uncompromising agent of fate. That Moss loses this gamble and Chigurh follows through on his threat even after Moss has died and the money has been retrieved is a reflection of Chigurh’s psychotic observance of his own rules; it is not, as Chigurh claims to Carla Jean, solely a matter of being ‘at the mercy of the dead here. In this case your husband’, except by Chigurh’s self-

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<sup>24</sup> Sheriff Bell, on the other hand, has a name which evokes clarity and uniformity, thus resonating with his moral rectitude and reactionary traditionalism. Farmer has pointed out that Anton Chigurh’s name suggests ‘ant on sugar’, evoking the almost blindly instinctual actions of an ant gathering food and the way that the larger complex superorganism of the ant colony emerges from such locally determined simple individuals (qtd. in Ellis, *No Place for Home* 301)

exonerating causal logic (255). Chigurh tries to lay moral culpability on Moss’s head but doing so is only a final cruelty towards Carla Jean as he convinces her that Moss wanted her dead: ‘I’ve suffered a loss of everthing I ever had. My husband wanted to kill me?’ (256). In the end, Moss is no more to blame for refusing Chigurh’s offer than a cornered wild boar would be to blame for coming out fighting.

The blindness of fortune brings Moss both his initial monetary windfall and his ultimate downfall. His appreciation of the arbitrary, contingent and indiscriminate nature of this luck is apparent in his stoical attitude, his wry commentary on the nature of unfolding events, and his opportunistic determination to cling on to this unexpected bounty that has fallen into his lap. This acceptance of fortune’s contingency is reinforced through Moss’s association with the adaptability of moss and water and with the clever opportunism of pigs and boars. His acceptance of fortune’s graces and pitfalls is a stoic and pragmatic one, however, unlike the psychotic exaltation of chance displayed by his pursuer, Anton Chigurh.

## Anton Chigurh

In Anton Chigurh, McCarthy has created a worthy descendant of the ‘grim triune’ that stalk the world of *Outer Dark* and Judge Holden, the monstrous force at the centre of *Blood Meridian*. Like the triune, he hounds the trail of the protagonist throughout the novel and the destruction he wreaks along the way is interpretable as a consequence of some failing or sin of the protagonist (in *Outer Dark*, Culla Holmes’ dual transgressions of incest and attempted infanticide; in this novel, Moss’s appropriation of the drug deal cash). Despite Chigurh’s more outlandish aspects, however, the novel is at pains to portray him in a more naturalistic light than the mysterious and borderline supernatural threesome in *Outer Dark*. Whereas the triune is portrayed as some kind of unholy inversion of the Trinity, a ‘consubstantial monstrosity’ (130) whose appearances in the novel are marked by a heightened supernatural tone and the sense that they are an invincible malevolent force at work in the world,



Chigurh comes off the page as more human and fallible. His insistence on the supremacy of fate and the justice of chance does not protect him from gunshot wounds or a sudden car crash; he is as much at the mercy of the vagaries of fortune as are his victims.

Like Judge Holden, Chigurh represents and articulates his own particular vision of the universe, but his *Weltanschauung* appears to be much more straightforward than Holden’s. Through his actions and his conversations with his victims, employers, and adversaries, Chigurh’s insistence on the absolute authority of fate takes shape and becomes a fatalistic counterpoint to both Bell’s aggrieved yearning for metaphysical justice and Moss’s opportunistic pragmatism.

From his first scene in the novel, Chigurh’s lethal credentials are established when a deputy who has arrested him makes the mistake of blithely assuming that handcuffs are sufficient to disable him:

He was slightly bent over when Chigurh squatted and scooted his manacled hands beneath him to the back of his knees. In the same motion he sat and rocked backward and passed the chain under his feet and then stood instantly and effortlessly. If it looked like a thing he’d practiced many times it was. (5)

Chigurh proceeds to throttle the deputy with his handcuffs, in a cinematic, paratactic display of simple declaratives: ‘He was gurgling and bleeding from the mouth. He was strangling on his own blood. Chigurh only hauled the harder. The nickelplated cuffs bit to the bone. The deputy’s right carotid artery burst and a jet of blood shot across the room and hit the wall and ran down it’ (6). After the deputy dies, Chigurh calmly and methodically gathers the deputy’s keys, revolver, and cash, washes and wraps his bleeding wrists, and then collects his pneumatic ‘stungun’ and leaves in the deputy’s vehicle.

Needing to switch to a less conspicuous mode of transport, Chigurh then stops an unfortunate driver on the interstate and gets him to ‘step away from the vehicle’ (so as to avoid getting blood on the car) before placing

[...] his hand on the man’s head like a faith healer. The pneumatic hiss and click of the plunger sounded like a door closing. The man slid soundlessly to the ground, a round hole in his forehead from which the blood bubbled and ran down into his eyes carrying with it his slowly uncoupling world visible to see. (7)

The figurative allusion to faith healing ironically subverts the ostensible benevolence of that particular practice as the ‘door’ closes on this man’s consciousness. The man’s ‘slowly uncoupling world’ is carried forth physically and visibly from his brain in a physicalist depiction of the moment of death which is echoed later on when Chigurh kills Wells.<sup>25</sup>

Over the course of a handful of introductory paragraphs, then, the reader is shown enough of Chigurh to understand that this man is someone for whom murder is as routine and unemotionally enacted as washing his wrists or keeping a car from getting soiled. His terrifying murderous credentials thus established, the novel proceeds to allow him pontificate and outline his personal fatalistic philosophy, the dubiousness of which is rendered more frightening by the preceding violence and our understanding of the ease with which this man can take a life.

In one of the key scenes for the establishment of Chigurh’s fatalistic philosophy, the owner of a filling station finds his life hanging in the balance over a coin toss. Gambling is figuratively evoked at the outset of the encounter, as the proprietor ‘stacked the change before [Chigurh] the way a dealer places chips’ (53). Chigurh initiates the proprietor’s terrifying ordeal when he asks him: ‘What’s the most you ever saw lost on a coin toss?’. ‘Chigurh took a twenty-five cent piece from his pocket and flipped it spinning into the bluish glare of the fluorescent lights overhead. He caught it and

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Everything that Wells had ever known or thought or loved drained slowly down the wall behind him. His mother’s face, his First Communion, women he had known. The faces of men as they died on their knees before him. The body of a child dead in a roadside ravine in another country’ (178).

slapped it onto the back of his forearm just above the bloody wrappings. Call it, he said’ (55).

Chigurh then outlines for the proprietor his understanding of fate and the instrumental role that this coin flip is now playing in this man’s life:

Just call it.

I didnt put nothin 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. (56)

The polysyndetic string of additive clauses demonstrates Chigurh’s belief in the justice and inevitability of this arbitrary tribunal, each ‘and’ functioning as an unbreakable link in the chain of causation carrying what would appear to be an innocuous quarter from its origin to this moment of grave import for the life of the proprietor. Chigurh clearly believes that this heads-or-tails choice is just, as he insists that the man call the coin flip himself because for Chigurh to call it ‘wouldnt be fair’ and ‘wouldnt even be right’ (56).

After calling the coin toss correctly, the proprietor is given the coin – ‘It’s your lucky coin’ (57) – and advised not to put it in his pocket because amongst other coins he wouldn’t know which one it is. Chigurh continues:

Anything can be an instrument, Chigurh said. Small things. Things you wouldnt even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People dont pay attention. And then one day there’s an accounting. And after that nothing is the same. Well, you say. It’s just a coin. For instance. Nothing special there. What could that be an instrument of? You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of

some other moment. How could that be? Well, it’s just a coin. Yes. That’s true. Is it? (57)

From the proprietor’s perspective, this coin is ‘just a coin’, albeit one in whose binary instrumentality his own mortality was ensnared; for Chigurh, this very instrumentality elevates the mere coin to something of much greater import and accords the object itself a kind of fatalistic sanctity. The impossibility of our simplistically imagined counterfactual histories (the ‘might have been’ in *All the Pretty Horses*) is once again emphasised when Chigurh points out that all of the ‘thing[s]’ that participate in each moment in history are by their very participation irreplaceable with respect to those moments. To switch the coin used in the flip would be to introduce new variables into the moment (subtle differences in shape, heft, wind resistance; the initial position of the coin before being flipped; potentially different handling of the coin prior to the flip because of its different position on the fingers and thumbs), and so for Chigurh such a switch it is not even a metaphysical possibility. Only one coin has participated in this very grave trial for the proprietor and enabled the positive outcome, and therefore that one coin should be treated with respect, according to Chigurh’s understanding of fate.

Chigurh differs from earlier McCarthy ‘prophet[s] of destruction’ in at least one significant respect – whereas the ‘grim triune’ and Judge Holden manifest numerous overt signs that their origins may be supernatural, Chigurh is portrayed in a much more naturalistic light relative to those antecedents, notwithstanding occasional touches of the uncanny and the inhuman in his scenes.<sup>26</sup> Such a shift away from supernaturalistic explanation or suggestion is in keeping with the SFI-period McCarthy’s turn towards metaphysical naturalism and his insistence on the fallibility and contingency of all of his novels’ characters.

One of the ways in which Chigurh is humanised is in his making himself at home in other peoples’ residences as he waits around or takes his

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<sup>26</sup> The Coens cleverly picked up on the naturalistic aspects granted him in the novel and added at least one more of their own in the movie adaptation, when Chigurh almosts chokes on a peanut during his coin-tossing conversation with the shopkeeper.

time looking through their properties for clues as to the location of Moss and the bag of money. When he first visits Moss’s trailer in the Desert Aire trailer park, the use of very simple and fragmentary paratactic and polysyndetic sentences to describe his actions initially makes him appear mechanical: ‘He stood, the deputy’s revolver in his hand. He looked in the kitchen. He walked back into the bedroom. He walked through the bedroom and pushed open the bathroom door and went into the second bedroom. Clothes on the floor. The closet door open. He opened the top dresser drawer and closed it again’ (80). The earlier characterisation of him as terrifying, relentless and assured is then undermined in a few humorous touches as Chigurh ‘opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of milk and opened it and smelled it and drank’ and then sits down on the sofa in the livingroom: ‘There was a perfectly good twenty-one inch television on the table. He looked at himself in the dead gray screen’ (80). The surreality of this otherwise terrifying self-professed agent of fate conducting himself in a manner that parodies domesticity lends the scene a somewhat comic tone, and it contributes to the overall sense that he is not in the same demonic supernatural category as the grim triune or Judge Holden.

This is echoed again later in the novel when he breaks into Carla Jean’s mother’s house, as he ‘opened the refrigerator and looked in. He put the shotgun in the crook of his arm and took out a can of orange soda and opened it with his forefinger and stood drinking it’ (203). After looking through the house, he then props a chair under the handle of the bedroom door, ‘pulled off his boots and stretched out and went to sleep’; he gets up in the morning and has a shower before he ‘shaved and dressed and went down to the kitchen and ate a bowl of cereal and milk, walking through the house as he ate’ (204-5). The thought of Judge Holden or the ‘grim triune’ being portrayed in such a semi-comedic and humanising light is unimaginable, and it is a testament to McCarthy’s naturalistic turn that Chigurh is given these somewhat surreal moments in which his basic animal needs (for liquids, nourishment, rest) are foregrounded rather than obscured and are presented in something like a parody of a domesticity that seems so alien to him.

3 – ‘I wont push my chips forward’: Contingent Fortune in *No Country for Old Men*

Chigurh is further humanised through his vulnerability and the time spent self-administering medical attention and slowly healing from his wounds. Carson Wells makes explicit Chigurh’s mortality when his employer asks him for his opinion:

I’d like to know your opinion of him. In general. The invincible Mr Chigurh.

Nobody’s invincible.

Somebody is.

Why do you say that?

Somewhere in the world is the most invincible man. Just as somewhere is the most vulnerable.

That’s a belief that you have?

No. It’s called statistics. (140-1)

Wells insists on Chigurh’s mortality but his employer makes a point regarding statistics that McCarthy would later echo, with respect to luck rather than vulnerability, in his interview with Oprah Winfrey. After McCarthy explains to Winfrey that he ‘was always very lucky’, she pointedly asks him if there was ‘something else going on’, the implication of the question being that perhaps he was blessed in some way or touched by some kind of grace. His disbelief in such notions is visible in his facial expression and body language as he tells her that he ‘wouldn’t get...superstitious about it’:

The laws of probability operate everywhere, and that being the case, somewhere in the world there is the luckiest person. I mean, if you were to go around the world and make a record of the luck in the lives of all the people on earth and put ‘em on a chart you’d have [draws a bell curve in air with his finger] a chart like this. And there would be the unluckiest person at one end and the luckiest person at the other end. (Winfrey, ‘Cormac McCarthy on Luck and Money’)

McCarthy is repeating his SFI-period novels’ insistence on the naturalism of luck and superstitious practices, by appealing to the very understandable and non-mystical nature of normal distribution and its blind and arbitrary apportionment of good and bad fortune. Even if, as Wells’ employer suggests, Chigurh may happen to be ‘the most invincible man’, there are eventual limits to such invincibility, and besides, the accounting of such things as how invincible a person is (if such an accounting were even possible) could only occur after the fact, once a life has transpired and its relative invincibility weighed against that of all others (an accounting of the shape of a life that Chigurh is partial to dispensing to his victims in their final moments, as it happens). Additionally, Chigurh is not portrayed as being invincible. On the contrary, he suffers a few close brushes with mortality in the course of his path through the novel, and the time that the novel spends dwelling on these injuries is part of its overall insistence on the blind operation of fortune and the ultimate contingency of each person’s life and the various events that comprise it.

The first major injury Chigurh sustains in the novel is during his shootout with Moss in Eagle Pass. A waiting Moss ambushes Chigurh, who has followed the transponder signal to the motel in which Moss had been staying. Chigurh’s absolute comfort and ease with this setback, owing to his personal belief in the irrevocable supremacy of the extant, is demonstrated as he ‘didnt even look at [Moss]. He seemed oddly untroubled. As if this were all part of his day’ (112). Chigurh’s otherness is emphasised by the ‘odd smell in the air’ like some ‘foreign cologne’, and his gaze at Moss with ‘Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly exotic. Beyond Moss’s experience’ (112). Moss makes his escape across the border, but not without getting shot by Chigurh’s pistol. After a Cadillac full of Mexicans arrives on the scene, a general gunfight breaks out in which Chigurh is shot through the upper right leg (119).

Chigurh procures some veterinary and pharmaceutical supplies to take care of his injury and books into a motel (161-3). The novel then pays close attention to how he goes about carefully cleaning and dressing his wounds:

He laved water over the wounds with a washcloth. He turned his leg in the water and studied the exit wound. Small pieces of cloth stuck to the tissue. [...] He dropped his boots in the water and patted himself dry with the towel and sat on the toilet and took the bottle of Betadine and the packet of swabs from the sink. He tore open the packet with his teeth and unscrewed the bottle and tipped it slowly over the wounds. Then he set the bottle down and bent to work, picking out the bits of cloth, using the swabs and the forceps. (164)

The scene continues in this vein, evoking routine expertise through its use of polysyndeton as it details Chigurh’s careful dressing of the wound and injection of antibiotic tetracycline.<sup>27</sup> We are then told that he ‘stayed in the motel for five days. Hobbling down to the cafe on crutches for his meals and back again’, keeping his wounds clean and continuing his course of antibiotics (165).

Such attention paid to the slow and painful process of healing from such a wound, and to the necessity of careful hygiene and administration of antibiotics, adds a touch of vulnerability to the novel’s portrait of Chigurh. The sense of vulnerability renders him just as much at the mercy of contingency and chance as his victims and the other unfortunates in the novel, contributing to the novel’s naturalism while still maintaining the strange otherness and terrifying lethality of this latest McCarthy ‘prophet of destruction’. Chigurh later maintains to Wells that ‘Getting hurt changed me [...] Changed my perspective. I’ve moved on, in a way. Some things have fallen into place that were not there before. I thought they were, but they werent. The best way I can put it is that I’ve sort of caught up with myself. That’s not a bad thing. It was overdue’ (173). Perhaps he is suggesting that he has now

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<sup>27</sup> cf. similar displays of self-medication and self-surgery in other SFI-period McCarthy novels: John Grady Cole cauterises a gunshot wound using a red-hot gun barrel (*AtPH* 280–281); the man disinfects and sutures an arrow wound in his leg (*TR* 266). All such instances deploy a pronounced polysyndeton suggestive of expertise and/or familiarity, and they comprise a subset of the more general McCarthy trope of taking pains to polysyndetically describe the handiness of manually skilled men.



accommodated himself more comfortably into his fatalistic worldview, that he now allows for his own utter enthrallment to the scheme of contingent chance and blind fortune rather than considering himself to be outside of that scheme as its indifferent agent. Or, then again, perhaps it is as Carson Wells claims, and Chigurh is just ‘goddamned crazy’ (175).

That accusation of craziness from Carson Wells comes after Chigurh has told him of the events that led up to his first appearance in the novel as a prisoner of the unfortunate deputy. He had just killed a man who had ‘said something that was hard to ignore’ in a cafe near the border (174). According to Chigurh, he allowed himself to be arrested by the sheriff’s deputy outside Sonora, when he could, presumably, have prevented his arrest quite easily: ‘I’m not sure why I did this but I think I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will. Because I believe that one can. That such a thing is possible. But it was a foolish thing to do. A vain thing to do’ (174-5). Despite having managed to extricate himself just as he believed he could, Chigurh realises that the consequences of his act of will are just as exposed to the influence of unwilled contingent factors as the life of the shopkeeper that depended on the outcome of a coin flip. The actuality of any given moment, Chigurh claims, is ultimately the sole judge of the wisdom or otherwise of past events: ‘If the rule you followed led you to this of what use was the rule? [...] I’m talking about your life. In which now everything can be seen at once. [...] It calls past events into question’ (175).

Chigurh’s fatalism, while granting dreadful agency to aleatory occurrences, still attempts to lay the responsibility for a life’s outcome on the various decisions or rules made or adopted along the way, regardless of the extent to which chance may have played an instrumental part in shaping that life. His fatalism is thus one that gives the impression of being thoroughgoing but which is attended by just the same hubris and self-regard that Chigurh believes he has vanquished in himself and which he sees as the primary flaw in many of those involved in the border drug trade:

Not everyone is suited to this line of work. The prospect of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities. In their minds. They pretend to themselves that they are in control of events where perhaps they are not. And it is always one’s stance upon uncertain ground that invites the attentions of one’s enemies. Or discourages it.

And you? What about your enemies?

I have no enemies. I dont permit such a thing. (253)

Here, Chigurh manages to characterise the hubris of certain people in ‘this line of work’ and immediately exemplify the same hubris in the space of a few lines. His apparent ease with the many unplanned and chance occurrences that impede or injure him in the course of the novel masks a supreme belief in his own ability to control events in his favour.

His hubristic pontificating continues when he confronts Moss’s wife Carla Jean. He tells her that there’s ‘a reason for everything’ and reminds her that ‘None of this was your fault. [...] You didnt do anything. It was just bad luck’ (256, 257); he thus simultaneously insists on a deterministic account of the world’s causality and on Carla Jean’s blamelessness in the face of her misfortune. He does, however, blame her husband for her situation, demonstrating once again that he is capable of naming responsibility, like the Dueña Alfonsa claims that we cannot avoid, in order to suit his own purposes. In this case, his purpose appears to be little more than self-aggrandisement and cruelty towards a woman whose life has been jeopardised by Moss’s gamble and by Chigurh’s psychotic observance of his own promise to her now dead husband.

His cruelty and psychotic self-delusion continue in his insistence on the justice of the coin toss he offers to her as ‘the best I can do’: ‘[He] held it up. He turned it. For her to see the justice of it. He held it between his thumb and forefinger and weighed and then flipped it spinning into the air and caught it and slapped it down on his wrist. Call it, he said’ (258). After first refusing, Carla Jean calls the coin flip incorrectly, but she challenges Chigurh about the verity of his fatalistic pronouncements when she tells him that ‘You make it

like it was the coin. But you’re the one. [...] The coin didnt have no say. It was just you’ (258). His attempt to excuse himself echoes his discussion with the shopkeeper at the outset of the novel, but it rings false now in light of the many things he has said throughout: ‘look at it my way. I got here the same way the coin did. [...] For things at a common destination there is a common path’ (258–259).

He then proceeds to once again outline his fatalistic *Weltanschauung*:

Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. [...] 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. (259–260)

This speech recapitulates the central determinist problem of *All the Pretty Horses*, with Chigurh insisting on the futility of counterfactual speculation and its attendant regret about the ‘might have been’. The ‘shape’ of one’s life is drawn and cannot be changed after the fact, and that shape is comprised of numerous ‘turnings’ and ‘choosings’ the responsibility for which rests with the chooser. There is no scientific control; there is only the extant. The attribution of moral accountability for completely unpredictable consequences far removed from the choices that, in part, led to them is the kind of ‘naming’ of responsibility which plagues John Grady Cole’s conscience in the earlier novel. This does not mean that such naming of responsibility is necessarily right, with respect to the radical determinism encapsulated in the puppet allegory, but the Dueña claims that it is unavoidable and in this instance Chigurh uses it to cruelly undermine Carla Jean’s love for her dead husband despite the fact that if Chigurh truly followed his own fatalistic logic he should not really be able to blame any person for their actions. Furthermore, as with all of McCarthy’s pontificating characters, it would be a mistake to assume that Chigurh’s gnostic

philosophical pronouncements somehow express the author’s own *Weltanschauung*, or even the novel’s overarching ontological vision. As should be obvious from a reading of any of his novels, such gnomic visions of the world are very frequently contradicted by their speakers themselves (as in the case of the Dueña Alfonsa in *All the Pretty Horses*, for example, or the tangled convolutions of the stranger’s story at the end of *Cities of the Plain*), by other characters with similarly ponderous philosophical discourses on the nature of the world (any of the numerous people encountered in *The Crossing*), or by the events of the novels themselves (as evidenced by the surprising good fortune of the child’s encounter with the apparently benevolent group of people at the end of *The Road*, contrary to the predictions and ruminations of the man himself throughout that novel).

All this being the case, it is worth remembering that Chigurh’s presence and frightening appearance at the black heart of *No Country for Old Men*, his own unsettling claims to be an agent of an irrevocable and indifferent fatalism, and his elevation to a ‘true and living prophet of destruction’ the likes of which never existed before in the country, according to Sheriff Bell, can be interpreted naturalistically and incorporated into the novel’s vision of a contingent world exposed to the arbitrary buffetings of fortune’s turbulence. Chigurh’s self-contradictions and his own exposure to the world’s contingency make it clear that we are not here dealing with anything like the anti-Christian triune of *Outer Dark* or the seemingly immortal evangelist and avatar of war, Judge Holden.

Indeed, Chigurh’s exposure to contingency is manifested in the most literal way when, after killing Carla Jean, his departure from her neighbourhood is violently impeded by a car that runs a stop sign and slams into the side of his truck, literally sideswiping and badly injuring him: ‘although he saw the vehicle coming and threw himself to the other side of the truck the impact carried the caved-in driver side door to him instantly and broke his arm in two places and broke some ribs and cut his head and leg’. A glance at his arm is enough to confirm the severity of the break: ‘Bone sticking up under the skin. Not good’ (260). His vision is partially compromised also, the literal representation of

which suggests its figurative analogue as it does with most McCarthy evocations of blindness or partial vision, as the blood ‘kept running into his eyes and he tried to think’ (261). Chigurh’s earlier confidence in his own ability to control circumstances through his will is thus shown to be just as illusory as the confidence of a gambler who just happens to have been having a run of luck.<sup>28</sup> Just as Chigurh and the coin had both travelled their separate paths which were to converge in front of the shopkeeper at the start of the novel, so did Chigurh and this carload of Mexicans driving under the influence of marijuana.

Chigurh’s presence in the novel serves a number of purposes with respect to the novel’s tripartite examination of contingent fortune and its effect on the lives of three quite different men. Firstly, he is in many ways a personification of the callous indifference of the world’s contingency and the often-fatal impact of sheer luck in the determination of our lives and deaths. His coin-flipping concisely figures the arbitrariness of the world and the terrifying enormity of consequences that can result from seemingly innocuous decisions. He thus becomes, for Moss and Sheriff Bell respectively, a representative of the radical contingency of fate and a harbinger of the contingent world’s inexorable decline.

Secondly, and more interestingly in the context of McCarthy’s oeuvre, Chigurh is granted a number of scenes that demonstrate that he is human and vulnerable. This reinforces the sense of the world’s unavoidable exposure to the maelstrom of contingency by showing that even this self-appointed agent of fate is at the mercy of fortune’s reversals. It thus differentiates Chigurh from his counterparts in *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian* by undermining any

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<sup>28</sup> In the Oprah interview, when discussing the normal distribution of luck, McCarthy relates a tale of a gambler some years ago in Las Vegas:

who just simply won everything. And he didn’t have any system, he didn’t know how he did it, but when he went and bet money on the number on the roulette wheel it would turn round to that number. And it was so outrageous that the casinos wouldn’t let him play any more. I think he was finally reduced to try to go in disguise. [laughs] And then one day it stopped. And he never [...] had it any more. [...] Somewhere in the world there is such a person. At least for a period of time. (Winfrey, ‘Cormac McCarthy on Money and Luck’)

suggestion of supernatural invincibility and instead rendering him in a much more naturalistic light than the ‘grim triune’ and Judge Holden.

Thirdly, Chigurh’s discourses on the nature of fate, luck and contingency, though they include many points against which it might be difficult to argue, are revealed as self-contradictory and self-aggrandising when one considers them in light of his proclaimed fatalistic philosophy. When last we see him his vision is partially compromised by blood in his eyes, his restricted vision suggesting as it often does in McCarthy the limitations of human knowledge as to the true nature of the world, and it is telling that he must extricate himself from his last predicament by essentially purchasing his freedom (he buys a shirt to use as a tourniquet off the boys who approach him after his crash). Despite all of his bloviating about fate, his own fate must ultimately be bought using the very currency whose acquisition motivates all of the players in the border drug trade.

## Sheriff Ed Tom Bell

Atypically for McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* contains a number of sections in the first-person voice. Each chapter begins with one of these vernacular monologues from Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, which vary from folksy old-time reminiscences to deeply personal confessions of regret and sadness, and it is probably no coincidence that there are thirteen such chapters in the novel, that number being, as it is, so weighted with superstitious baggage. The preferential placement of Bell’s first-person monologues at the start of each chapter contributes to the sense that he is in many ways the protagonist of the novel and that his observations about the world are the heart of the novel’s *Weltanschauung*, with Moss and Chigurh’s own worldviews serving as counterpoints on either side of Bell’s more troubled engagement with the world’s unpredictable contingency and apparent descent into greater violence. In contradistinction to Moss’s stoic pragmatism or Chigurh’s fatalistic faith in chance, Bell’s is an aggrieved sense of the absence of justice in a contingent world where rewards and punishments are often undeserved, and his trouble in

coming to terms with the world’s injustice and indifference ultimately contributes to his decision to retire and the novel’s melancholy end. Alongside his arc, the sense that his worldview represents the novel’s as a whole diminishes as his position is complicated slightly and as his outlook on the world is shown to be insufficient to shore up his resolve in the face of a perceived descent into a more violent era.

In the first of his monologues, Bell reflects on the nature of evil as it appeared to him in the person of a young man who was sent to the ‘*gaschamber*’ at Huntsville on Bell’s testimony.<sup>29</sup> The condemned told Bell ‘*that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said if they turned him out he’d do it again. Said he knew he was goin to hell*’ (3). Confronted by this evil, Bell wondered ‘*if maybe he was some new kind*’ of person – ‘*But he wasnt nothin compared to what was comin down the pike*’ (3–4). He then gives the first hint about what was coming down the pike when he states that out there is ‘*a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him*’; the novel’s first use of a gambling metaphor then follows: ‘*I wont push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him*’ (4).<sup>30</sup> That Bell thinks of his relationship to this ‘prophet of destruction’ in terms of gambling is significant not only in its being the novel’s first instance of many such figurative references to games of chance but also because this ‘prophet of destruction’ views himself as an agent of fate through whom the vagaries of contingent fortune operate and exact their toll on the lives of those unfortunate enough to meet him.

The arbitrary contingency of misfortune is remarked upon extensively throughout the novel by the Sheriff and other characters in his narrative strand, with victims very often being described in terms of their luck or lack of it. The man Chigurh pulls over and kills at the start of the novel is later identified at the crime scene as Bill Wyrick, and his having the misfortune to

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<sup>29</sup> It has been noted by participants on the Cormac McCarthy Society’s online forum that this reference to Huntsville is erroneous as Texas has never executed anyone in a gas chamber. As stated in *The New York Times* around the time of the novel’s publication: ‘When asked about the line, McCarthy said through his publicist at Knopf, “I put it in there to see if readers were on their toes”’ (Garner).

<sup>30</sup> Compare the Dueña Alfonso’s use of this same ‘chips’ metaphor in her conversation with John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*: ‘My grandniece is the only future I contemplate and where she is concerned I can only put all my chips forward’ (245).

cross paths with Chigurh is summed up by Sheriff Bell as ‘just dumb luck’, while the deputy whose life and vehicle Chigurh took is described using a gambling metaphor: ‘Straight as a die’ (42, 46). Later still, after the discovery of Wyrick’s stolen car burning in the desert, Sheriff Bell and his deputy colloquially invoke the concept of fortune’s daily vicissitudes and additionally return to the recurring McCarthy theme of the unpredictability of the world with respect to our plans for it:

It wasnt his day, was it Sheriff.

It surely wasnt.

[...]

Wendell turned and spat. Wasnt what the old boy had in mind when he left Dallas I dont reckon, was it?

Bell shook his head. No, he said. I’d guess it was about the farthest thing from his mind. (69–70)

Another innocent bystander’s death is framed in terms of bad fortune when Bell is told the apparent manner of death of the nightclerk of the hotel in Eagle Pass where Chigurh and Moss have their shootout: ‘About as bad a piece of luck as you could have, I reckon. Caught a stray round’ (136). Bell immediately suspects it was not a stray round, however, after he asks where the nightclerk had caught it and is told that it was ‘Right between the eyes’ – Bell has seen such a death before and intuits that this is another instance of the ‘cattlegun’ being used to kill: ‘He wasnt shot [...] You get the lab report and you’ll see’ (136).

In one of Sheriff Bell’s monologues, he is lamenting what from his reactionary viewpoint looks like the decline of civilization and recounts an event that serves as an example of such decline:

*Here a while back they was two boys run into one another and one of em was from California and one from Florida. And they met somewheres or other in between. And then they set out together travelin around the country killin people. I forget how*



3 – ‘I wont push my chips forward’: Contingent Fortune in *No Country for Old Men*

*many they did kill. Now what are the chances of a thing like that? Them two had never laid eyes on one another. There cant be that many of em. I dont think.* (40)

He is astonished at the fortuity of two such rare instances of a particular kind of evil finding one another by pure chance. The same ‘dumb luck’ that marks an innocent man out to have a particularly bad day also results in the meeting of two people similarly extreme in their malevolence, and this blind arbitrariness of chance emerges in the novel as the cause of many of Bell’s struggles with guilt and notions of justice.

While the Border Trilogy’s representative game is chess, *No Country for Old Men* is marked by poker and other games in which luck plays a significant role. The references to such games of chance are mostly comprised of gambling metaphors and the coin-flipping ordeal through which Chigurh puts some of his victims. But one other game is explicitly mentioned in the novel. Sheriff Lamar, the Sonora officer whose deputy was so brutally killed by Chigurh at the start of his narrative strand, walks out to the courthouse lawn to talk with Bell about what has happened. His grief and astonishment at the violence of the murder are such that he is visibly shaken and he shares with Bell a feeling that ‘we’re looking at somethin we really aint never even seen before’. His stunned sense of a world in decline prompts his recollection of a game he used to play as a child: ‘I used to play mumbledypeg here when I was a boy. Right here. These youngsters today I dont think would even know what that was’ (46). Though his reminiscence serves to illustrate his reactionary point regarding how changed the world is, it is noteworthy that the old-time game is mumbledypeg, a game in which players must throw a pen-knife as close as possible to their own foot in order to win, thus combining both skill and an element of chance in a game in which bad luck might result in personal injury.

It is unsurprising that superstitious beliefs and observances proliferate in a world everywhere governed by the dice rolls of fortune, despite people’s best efforts to self-determine the course of their lives. Some people accord talismanic import to ‘lucky’ coins or other objects kept on one’s person, and

many ascribe significance to coincidences as a result of the natural human reliance upon induction and the tendency to confuse correlation and causation. The observation of received pieties and prohibitions is one way that Bell is shown to give at least some credence to their supposed importance.

After Bill Wyrick’s remains are discovered in the trunk of Sheriff Lamar’s car, Bell’s deputy Torbert is assigned to drive that car to deliver the corpse to Austin for an autopsy. Deputy Wendell jokes about what Torbert should say if he gets stopped ‘with that old boy in the turtle,’ suggesting that he tell them that ‘somebody must of put him in there while you was havin coffee.’ Wendell continues in the same lighthearted vein, saying that if they can’t get Torbert off death row they’ll get in there with him. Sheriff Bell makes his disapproval known: ‘You all dont be makin light of the dead thataway’ (44).

In a very similar exchange later, when Bell and Wendell visit the site of the botched drug deal in the caldera, Wendell’s remark that these ‘sumbitches are bloody as hogs’ is greeted with a pointed glance from Bell which is correctly interpreted by Wendell as reprobatory: ‘Yeah, Wendell said. I guess you ought to be careful about cussin the dead’, to which Bell replies, ‘I would say at the least there probably aint no luck in it’ (73). His concern about the possible negative effect on one’s fortune by disrespecting a traditional taboo contributes to his portrayal as a man for whom the world’s complexity and frightening contingency is best negotiated by adhering to the received wisdom he has inherited. The arc of Bell’s narrative in the novel demonstrates the difficulties faced by a man with such a reactionary worldview when the world seems intent on rendering that received wisdom all but obsolete.

Such superstitious beliefs are not exclusive to Bell: Moss, Chigurh and Carson Wells all evidence at least some faith in the potential of superstitious rituals or talismans to affect events in the world. Wells, when examining the scene in the apartment where the old lady was shot ‘through the forehead’ by a stray bullet during the Eagle Pass shootout, can ‘not help but notice’ a further detail of the scene: ‘A second shot had marked a date on a calendar on the wall behind her that was three days hence’ (147). Wells clearly attributes superstitious significance to this impact on the calendar, as it plays on his mind

during his fatal encounter with Chigurh. After asking Chigurh for the time and being told that it is 11:57, ‘Wells nodded. By the old woman’s calendar I’ve got three more minutes. Well the hell with it. I think I saw all this coming a long time ago. Almost like a dream. Déjà vu’ (178). When Chigurh then shoots him, leaving him ‘half headless’ with ‘most of his right hand missing’, the new day is ‘still a minute away’ (179), which could be read either as refuting the predictive power of the bullet in the old lady’s calendar or, because it was only one minute off being correct, demonstrating that it proved to be an almost precise portent of Wells’ end. This gesture towards potential supernaturalism is in keeping with McCarthy’s tendency to construct a fraught fictive metaphysic within which the events and characters of his novels move, a metaphysic in which the tension between naturalistic and supernaturalistic readings is ever-present and unresolved. Because the novel elsewhere allows a probabilistic definition of ‘vulnerability’ to be expressed (to Carson Wells himself), and dwells throughout on ideas of chance and serendipity, it remains altogether possible that this bullet-marked calendar can be interpreted as little more than a very suggestive coincidence, and as such just one more example of the vagaries of luck and our consequent attribution of significance to things that only have the appearance of significance.

The difference between superstitious beliefs and inductive reasoning is in many ways a difference of degree rather than of kind. The procedural investigative details in the Sheriff Bell strand of the novel demonstrate the undisputed forensic power of inductive reasoning and of an intuition born of a long life of law enforcement. The epistemological problem of induction, though, is long documented and largely irresolvable. The provisionality of inductive inferences was very succinctly captured by Bertrand Russell in an image that has become known as ‘Russell’s chicken’: ‘The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken’ (Russell 44). When a sudden change in a previously regular and seemingly predictable course of events occurs, it throws into sharp relief the provisionality of inferences based on an assumption of uniformity. Bell, in one

of the first-person sections, talks about the peculiarity of attending an execution in Huntsville and discusses the justice of the death penalty, saying that he ‘cant say as I would rule it out altogether’, before admitting that the ‘ones that really ought to be on death row will never make it’ (62). His reservations about the imprecise correspondence between secular justice and its ethical or metaphysical mandate notwithstanding, he then goes on to mention the toll exacted upon those who work on death row:

*Quite a few people didnt believe in it. Even them that worked on the row. You’d be surprised. Some of em I think had at one time. You see somebody ever day sometimes for years and then one day you walk that man down the hallway and put him to death. Well. That’ll take some of the cackle out of just about anybody.* (63)

The passage subtly alludes to Russell’s chicken, particularly in its suggestive use of ‘cackle’, but perhaps the chicken in this case is not the prisoner whose keeper one day ‘wrings its neck’, so to speak, but rather the death row officer confronted by the sudden and unavoidable requirement to assist in the killing of someone who had become quite familiar to them.

While Chigurh sees a fatalistic justice in a chance occurrence such as the spinning of a coin, Sheriff Bell seems to be unsure whether justice operates in the world at all, given the prevalence of luck. One of his monologues explains that he ‘was always lucky. My whole life. I wouldnt be here otherwise. Scrapes I been in’, with the luckiest moment of all being the day he first saw his wife (91). He goes on to describe the arbitrary distribution of good fortune among people with respect to whether or not they deserve it:

*People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they dont deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did.* (91)

The similarity of Sheriff Bell’s statements such as this to some of the few published quotes of McCarthy prompted some critics and reviewers to assume that Bell speaks for the author. To take one example, William Deresiewicz, reviewing the novel for *The Nation*, asserted that Bell ‘is clearly McCarthy’s mouthpiece here [...] McCarthy the conservative has conscripted McCarthy the artist for service in the culture wars, and the result turns out about as happily as such arrangements usually do’. McCarthy has mentioned in an interview that he believes he was exceptionally lucky throughout his life, one of the most notable examples of which being the anecdote recounting the poverty in which he and his second wife lived and the fortunate appearance of a free toothpaste sample through the letterbox right when they had run out of toothpaste and couldn’t afford to buy any more (Woodward, ‘Cormac Country’). In the Oprah Winfrey interview, just before McCarthy gives his probabilistic account of the distribution of luck, he again echoes Bell when he says: ‘I was always very lucky. Something always happened. Just when things were truly, truly bleak, some totally unforeseen thing would occur’; as an example, he describes how penniless he once was while housesitting, with no money whatsoever to buy food, when a courier arrived at the door to deliver a \$20,000 fellowship from the newly established Lyndhurst Foundation (Winfrey, ‘Cormac McCarthy on Money and Luck’).

Those critics who use these similarities between Bell and McCarthy to therefore conflate the author’s voice with Bell’s and consequently read a reactionary polemic into the novel as a whole compound one fallacy with another and fail to recognise the ways in which the novel undermines or problematises Bell’s end-times tut-tutting. At the very least, he quite frequently contradicts himself on matters relating to responsibility, justice and fortune.

Despite Bell’s insistence that he didn’t deserve all of the luck he has had and that people who ought to be on death row will never make it there, he claims at another point to believe in a kind of karma: ‘*I believe that whatever you do in your life it will get back to you*’ (281). The context of his statement strongly suggests that he thinks Carla Jean’s death at the hands of Chigurh is in some way a consequence of Bell’s own failures as a sheriff or, more significantly, of a

great stain on his conscience with which he has lived for thirty-six years. This lifelong shame he confesses to his uncle Ellis just prior to his first-person reflections about his feelings of guilt and Carla Jean’s death, and it relates to his service in Europe in 1944.

Bell circles around the eventual crux of the conversation by first asking his uncle what his biggest regret in life is, and Ellis tells him that he doesn’t have all that many before outlining a relatively stoic worldview in which the unpredictable contingency of life’s hardship is more or less accepted: ‘You sign on for the ride you probably think you got at least some notion of where the ride’s goin. But you might not. Or you might of been lied to’ (265). It might be more accurate to say that Ellis has become resigned to the pain and hardship of life: ‘You wear out, Ed Tom. 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’ (267). He admits that the shooting that left him crippled resulted from his voluntary signing on as a deputy – ‘I done that my own self’ – but expresses the contingency of luck and the unknowability of the counterfactual when he says that ‘you never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from’ (267). His belief in God is no comfort to him either as he suggests that he ‘dont blame’ God for being indifferent toward him: ‘If I was him I’d have the same opinion about me that he does’ (267). A short while later, Bell asks him:

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. (269)

Eventually Bell gets round to asking his uncle, ‘Did you ever do anything you was ashamed of to the point where you never would tell nobody?’ before starting to make his confession ‘about bein a war hero’ (272–

273). His unit ‘was in a forward position monitorin radio signals and we was holed up in a farmhouse’. A mortar shell blows the house ‘all to hell’ and Bell is deafened by the blast but tries to move masonry and timbers to help one of the men trapped under the rubble (274). He sees German riflemen coming from a nearby patch of woods and sets up a .30 caliber belt-fed machine gun he finds in the rubble and opens a continuous stream of fire, pinning the Germans down ‘and all the while I could hear some of our men groanin and I sure didnt know what I was goin to do come dark. And that’s what they give me the Bronze Star for’ (275). Bell delays telling Ellis what he did when it got dark, by talking about how he tried to refuse the commendation owing to his guilt, but he eventually tells it simply and honestly: ‘I cut and run’ (276).

Ellis tries to get Bell to discuss what his other option was in order to suggest that he had no choice:

What would of happened if you’d stayed there?

They’d of come up in the dark and lobbed grenades in on me. Or maybe gone back up in the woods and called in another round.

[...]

You left your buddies behind.

Yeah.

You didnt have no choice.

I had a choice. I could of stayed.

You couldnt of helped em. (277)

Bell is admitting to cowardice in his abandonment of his buddies and the ‘blood oath’ that joined him to them, and he ‘thought after so many years it would go away. [...] Then I thought that maybe I could make up for it and I reckon that’s what I have tried to do’ (278). His troubled conscience has not been assuaged by his years of trying to ‘make up for it’, however, and he gets to the heart of his problem when he outlines the difficulty of confronting the reality of one’s oaths and promises:

When you're called on like that you have to make up your mind that you'll live with the consequences. But you dont know what the consequences will be. You end up layin a lot of things at your own door that you didnt plan to. 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. And some part of me has never quit wishin I could go back. And I cant. I didnt know you could steal your own life. (278)

Bell has been wracked with guilt his whole life about his dereliction of duty, but he realises with a heavy heart that he can never go back and make it right, and he seems to suspect that at least some of the tragedy and bloodshed that occurs in the novel has its karmic origins in his war-time failure and the undeserved commendation and reputation that he acquired. As a result, the uncertain and contingent nature of future consequences with respect to one's plans is a great trouble to Bell's conscience, and rather than facing that uncertainty with the stoic pragmatism of Moss or the cold fatalistic indifference of Chigurh, Bell's characterisation paints a portrait of a man for whom uncertainty and change are a source of fear and consternation. Perhaps it is as Ellis tells him, that it is '*a sign of old age*', but as Bell says himself, he '*dont have no more idea of the world that is brewin out there than what Harold [his uncle who perished in WWI] did*' (281, 283).

Bell's bewilderment and fear in the face of contingency and a changing world that appears to him to be getting more violent and lawless has been taken by some to suggest that the novel itself, and its author, endorse his reactionary viewpoint, romanticising a mythologised past. One glance at the rest of McCarthy's oeuvre, however, should be enough to dispel such notions, particularly when one considers the overwhelming brutality on display in the past of the same region in *Blood Meridian*. Bell's viewpoint is his own, however often it might occasionally overlap with McCarthy's and however much the novel places his worldview at the apex of its triad. He sees a world where '*you quit hearin Sir and Mam [...] the end is pretty much in sight*' (304). His inability to



3 – ‘I wont push my chips forward’: Contingent Fortune in *No Country for Old Men*

accommodate the changes in the world into his outlook and his bafflement at the contingent and arbitrary distribution of the world’s fortune and injustice lead him to a moment of crisis and he ultimately feels that he must quit his post as sheriff. He feels that he is being asked ‘*to believe in somethin I might not hold with the way I once did*’ (296).

The ‘somethin’ that he is being asked to believe in may be the efficacy or constancy of secular justice in a world rapidly shedding traditional pieties and taboos and descending into the violence of the border narcotics trade. It seems more likely, however, that the ‘somethin’ is the idea of being able to make a promise in the face of an utterly uncertain future. Bell’s final monologue comprises the whole of chapter XIII, and it begins with an image of a ‘*stone water trough*’ beside the house in Europe that played host to Bell’s most shameful memory. He remembers examining the trough, maybe one or two hundred years’ old, in which you ‘*could see the chisel marks in the stone*’, and thinking about the man who carved it out of the rock (307). Despite the country’s long history of war and turmoil:

*this man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years. Why was that? What was it that he had faith in? It wasnt that nothin would change. [...] the only thing I can think is that there was some sort of promise in his heart. And I dont have no intentions of carvin a stone water trough. But I would like to be able to make that kind of promise. I think that’s what I would like most of all.* (308)

Having broken one promise years ago that has haunted him his whole life, Bell is aware how hard and how costly promises can be, whether one keeps them or has to shoulder the guilt of breaking them. His uncle Ellis tells him as much when he says that ‘*some things cost more than what they’re worth. [...] You always pay too much. Particularly for promises. There aint no such thing as a bargain promise. You’ll see. Maybe you done have*’ (267).

At the end of the novel Bell reveals, through his recollection of the stone water trough, a glimpse of his desire to make such promises, despite the

3 – ‘I wont push my chips forward’: Contingent Fortune in *No Country for Old Men*

uncertainty of a contingent and rapidly changing world. The most substantial promise he can make is his loyalty and devotion to his wife Loretta, whose support and love is so frequently alluded to throughout Bell’s narrative that it becomes a kind of refrain. He remains bewildered by the pace of change, the collapse of old social rituals and codes, and the increasing violence of the Mexican drug wars spilling across the border, and he has decided that he can no longer keep a promise to an idea of justice that doesn’t seem to him to measure up to the changes ‘*comin down the pike*’ (3). Such promises, just like the ‘plans’ which concern the boys in the Border Trilogy, are ‘predicated upon a future unknown to us’ (*CotP* 195). That future is unknown because of the world’s contingency and our consequently occluded vision of its potential contours. Bell’s response to this contingency, to a world in which the edifice of justice teeters on a foundation of arbitrary fortune, is to abandon the attempt to counter the tide of change he sees apocalyptically engulfing his country. In a sense, he is the opposite of the judge met by John Grady Cole near the end of *All the Pretty Horses* who attempts to teach the young cowboy that the world, because of its very contingency, needs people who will name responsibility and contribute something to the world’s measure of justice, however imperfect and partial it may be.

*No Country for Old Men* establishes a world in which contingent fortune is one of humanity’s principle puppet-masters, if not the dominant one. The novel’s characters are at the mercy of chance factors outside their wilful control. They are also all aware of the singular contingent path through life each of them has taken at the expense of countless alternative paths they may otherwise have taken (if indeed they were ever free to do so) – what Judge Holden would call the ‘ultimate authority of the extant’ (*BM* 90). Their respective responses to these issues differ significantly, but they are united in their shared inhabitation of the fortune-buffed world McCarthy establishes. In earlier McCarthy novels, for example, a ‘prophet of destruction’ of Chigurh’s calibre would almost certainly have been portrayed in a much more supernaturalistic and quasi-invincible light than the Chigurh of this novel.

The symbolic prevalence of wheels and circles in the novel likewise links all three characters in the same regime of the *rota fortunae*, the wheel of fortune. Fans, windmills and similarly turning objects recur frequently and suggestively. When Chigurh breaks into Carla Jean’s mother’s house, he searches through the items in her bedroom: ‘There was a ceiling fan overhead. He got up and pulled the chain and lay down on the bed with the shotgun alongside him, watching the wooden blades wheel slowly in the light from the window’ (204). The wheeling of the blades figures the inexorability of Moss’s nemesis while also suggesting the eternal turning of fortune’s wheel. Bell’s increasing sense of being unable to fathom the inscrutable turning of fate is captured as he drives up to a wind-pumped well, parks the car, and walks over to the tank. After putting his hand in the water and cooling his head with it, an act that evokes Moss’s earlier association with water, he looks up at the windmill and then at its shadow:

He looked out at the slow dark elliptic of the blades turning in the dry and windbent grass. A low wooden trundling under his feet. Then he just stood there paying the brim of his hat slowly through his fingers. The posture of a man perhaps who has just buried something. I dont know a damn thing, he said. (213)

Bell’s automatic motion with the brim of his hat echoes the turning of the windmill blades and suggests both prayer wheels and prayer beads being turned by a man admitting his own ignorance in the face of the world’s ceaseless turning.

Other more subtle images of wheels and turning objects can be found throughout. Bell, while informally interviewing one of the boys who witnessed Chigurh’s car crash, turns ‘the saltcellar a half turn on the tabletop. Then he turned it back again’ (290). Steering wheels appear suggestively at key moments in the novel: the first dead body Moss finds at the drug deal site is ‘slumped dead over the wheel’ (12); when Bell is initially mystified by the autopsy report on Bill Wyrick, he is thinking over the curious fact that Wyrick’s head wound

contained no bullet as he ‘drum[s] his fingers on the steering wheel’ (78); after the Eagle Pass shootout, an injured and heavily bleeding Chigurh, trying to figure out how to get the medical supplies he will need to attend to his wound, sits in the car ‘with his hands at the top of the steering wheel. He sat there for about three minutes’ (161). Even Chigurh’s first victim in the novel is depicted literally turning, as Chigurh viciously strangles him with his handcuffs and the deputy begins to ‘walk sideways over the floor in a circle’ (6). As Chigurh tells Carla Jean, ‘Every moment in your life is a turning’ (259), and the accumulation of these images of wheels and turning circles collectively suggest the medieval symbol of the wheel turned by Fortune, whose fabled blindness assured the arbitrary and non-preferential distribution of the world’s incessant reversals.

It is significant, therefore, that this novel (like so many McCarthy novels) is littered with references to blindness or impaired vision. Such references perform dual figurative roles in that they suggest the blindness of fortune while also often indicating, via the metaphorical association of the visual and the epistemic, the partial knowledge accorded any person of their state of affairs and its consequences. When Chigurh kills the paymaster who had sent Carson Wells to kill him, the shotgun blast appears to destroy the man’s left eye, and this occurs right after the narrator relates Chigurh’s knowledge ‘that fear of an enemy can often blind men to other hazards’ (198–199). Blood runs into the eyes of both Moss and Chigurh at different moments of crisis in the novel, figuring their difficulties in correctly discerning their respective situations and the choices that face them (30, 261). When Bell visits the mortuary to identify Moss’s corpse in the end, Moss lies with ‘One eye partly opened’ (240). And Bell’s old uncle Ellis, troubled by the events of his life into a heretical position with respect to his faith in God, is another one-eyed character, his ocular deficiency figuring perhaps the unreliability of his worldview or at the very least its ambiguity (263). Even Bell himself, whose very name evokes clarity and surety, must ultimately admit that ‘maybe we are all of us lookin through the wrong end of the glass’ when it comes to accounting for the ways of the world and its apparent absence of the metaphysical justice that a naive Christian faith might expect (283). Vision, like

knowledge, is at best partial and imperfect, at worst completely erroneous, and the three central characters of *No Country for Old Men* are all in various ways afflicted by ignorance.

Moss’s boar’s tooth and the images of pigs throughout the novel suggest another possible interpretation of the wheel motif – the Buddhist *samsara*, or wheel of life, the karmic cycle of life and death in which we are all trapped unless we attain nirvana. This concept is often portrayed pictorially in elaborate mandalas at the centre of which reside the three poisons of Buddhism: ignorance, or delusion, represented by a pig; attachment, or greed, represented by a rooster or other bird; and aversion, or hatred, represented by a snake. Alongside the pig references in the novel, birds and snakes are frequently mentioned, such as the ‘ostrichskin boots’ worn by Chigurh, or when Chigurh shoots at ‘some kind of a large bird’ from his car (the fact that he fails in his shot is a further example that not even Chigurh is immune to luck’s vagaries) (111, 98–99). According to Buddhist tradition the root poison is ignorance, from which the others arise, and this ignorance is primarily an ignorance of the true nature of the world, or an overweening belief that one is in possession of an understanding of the world. All three of *No Country for Old Men*’s central protagonists display varying admixtures of these three poisons, as do secondary characters such as Wells, but ignorance is the most prevalent of the three as evidenced by the many bald declarations by Bell of being in such a state, the hubristic arrogance of Chigurh’s pronouncements, and the self-confident opportunism of Llewelyn Moss, which ultimately proves fatal to him and those near him.

Moss’s confidence in his ability to control the situation that rapidly spirals out from his initial windfall, notwithstanding his pragmatic acceptance of the contingent nature of the world, is rooted in an ignorance regarding the limits of his own capabilities. Such supreme self-confidence is in some ways the hallmark of the über-masculine western hero, and Moss’s inglorious and ‘off-screen’ death is a reminder that the world in a McCarthy novel almost never accedes to the wishes or suppositions of its characters. By making Moss’s death so sudden, so distant from the novel’s ending and mediated

through the account of a third-party, the novel continues McCarthy’s tradition of subverting inherited tropes of western masculinity.

Chigurh’s ignorance, like Moss’s, is comprised largely of a self-confidence that overestimates his own capabilities. Chigurh’s pronouncements on the metaphysical architecture of causality, determinism, and luck additionally reveal his ignorance as they belie the contradictions in his position and demonstrate his lack of awareness with respect to his own motivations and the nature of his role in the world. Rather than being the disinterested representative of fate and contingency which he purports to be, he is rather a psychopath with a code that he mistakes for metaphysical reality, or which at the very least he misrepresents to his victims as the unbendable will of a fatalistic force that operates through him and through the aleatoric judgements of his trial-by-coin-flip.

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell personifies the ignorance and bewilderment of a generation struggling to come to terms not only with the rapid social changes of the prior fifteen years but also with the dramatic upsurge both in the use of drugs by American citizens and in the money and consequent violence involved in the illegal drug trade between Mexico and the US: ‘It’s not even a law enforcement problem. I doubt that it ever was. There’s always been narcotics. But people dont just up and decide to dope themselves for no reason. By the millions. I dont have no answer to that’ (303). He regularly admits to confusion and ignorance in the face of the changes being wrought throughout society. His despair about the shape he sees the world taking is also a frequent refrain: ‘I wake up sometimes way in the night and I know as certain as death that there aint nothin short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train’ (159).

The ignorance of all three characters is the same ignorance that afflicts all SFI-period McCarthy protagonists, thrown as they are into worlds governed primarily by contingency and chance. It is in their differing responses to the fickleness of their world that the principle characters of *No Country for Old Men* differentiate themselves, from the stoic resolve of Moss, through the hubristic arrogance of Chigurh, to the confusion and fear of Bell. The Border Trilogy

explored the encounter between naive boyhood innocence and the painful vicissitudes of historical reality and the world’s indifference. It suggested, ultimately, that it is only our capacity to tell stories to one another, in all its manifestations, that gives shape to the underlying materials of physical reality and the temporal course each person navigates through that reality. The trilogy thus becomes a self-reflexive paean to the act of storytelling itself. *No Country for Old Men*, by placing much more of an emphasis on the role of luck in the lives of its characters, demonstrates how the narratogenic impulse gives rise to superstitious rituals, beliefs, and talismans that populate a naturalistic physical world with the fruits of our need to see meaningful shapes and patterns in that world. By suggesting that superstitions may be little more than heuristic cognitive shortcuts or fallacies resulting from relatively simple, understandable principles such as the concept of normal statistical distribution (in its distribution not only of ‘vulnerability’ but also of luck and of quasi-significant coincidences), the novel prompts naturalistic readings of ostensibly supernaturalistic phenomena. By doing so, it invites the naturalistic interpretation of not only luck or superstitious taboo; *No Country for Old Men*, along with McCarthy’s other SFI-period novels, contains the suggestion that perhaps even God may be accounted for naturalistically. In *The Road*, that suggestion becomes much more overt while the novel takes the world’s contingency to its extreme.

## 4 – The Hum of Mystery: *The Road* & Global Contingency

With the publication of *The Road*, McCarthy's preoccupation with contingency is taken to an extreme, as the unpredictable vulnerability of the entire global biosphere and our continued existence in it are rendered concrete through its story of survival in a world almost entirely devoid of life. Its protagonists, a man and his son desperately trying to survive both physically and morally, have to confront a world in which the 'absolute truth of the world', the naturalistic indifference of the contingent physical universe, is utterly unavoidable. This truth about the world is at the heart of McCarthy's metaphysical *Weltanschauung*, and yet it has never been the entire picture. Set against the world's 'implacable' darkness and indifference is the interpretative encounter of consciousnesses with that world – the being and the witnessing of the world are, as ever, two co-existing sides of McCarthy's metaphysical coin. The increasingly naturalistic slant of his SFI-period novels allows for more persuasive naturalistic readings of that duality than most of his earlier work does, and it is possible ultimately to turn to some concepts central to complexity science in order to provide a framework for reading the metaphysical architecture of his later worlds.<sup>31</sup>

When McCarthy agreed to sit down with Oprah Winfrey in 2007 to discuss *The Road*, which the television host had selected for her book club, it was a rare opportunity to hear the author talk about his work. Prior to this televised discussion, he had granted only three print interviews, and in none of those did he discuss his own work at much length. While Winfrey's questions often drifted close to the typical sentimental tone of her show, she managed to elicit a few comments on his own work and the writing process from an often uncomfortable-looking McCarthy. At one point, she asked him what he wanted people to 'get' from *The Road*. He replied that he hoped people 'just

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<sup>31</sup> A version of the discussion in this chapter was previously published as 'The Hum of Mystery: Parataxis, Analepsis, and Geophysiology in *The Road*.'



simply care about things and people and be more appreciative. Life is pretty damn good, even when it looks bad, and we should appreciate it more. We should be grateful. I don't know who to be grateful to, but you should be thankful for what you have' (Winfrey, 'Cormac McCarthy on Writing').

If we grant, for the sake of argument, that part of the novel's affective power lies in its encouragement of appreciation and gratitude for what we have, how is this affective response encouraged, and what stylistic, structural, and thematic techniques contribute therein?

There are a number of ways in which the novel instills gratitude in the reader by generating a sense of the mysterious, contingent and vulnerable nature of life itself. The first is through its use of parataxis, detailed in the first chapter of this thesis, which undermines the conceptual categories of causality and hierarchical importance, thus allegorically inscribing in the novel's syntax a profoundly non-anthropocentric ontological framework. The second is the novel's generation of stark contrast through its depiction of an utterly depleted world and the consequent vividness of its occasional analeptic depictions of the natural world prior to the unspecified catastrophe. Thirdly, the novel is replete with suggestive confluences of the physiological and geophysiological, thereby blurring the boundaries between the two and suggesting that the proper functioning of the ecosphere is as vulnerable to disruption and collapse as that of an individual organism. All of these techniques contribute to the novel's insistence on life's contingency and amplify the mysterious hum referred to in the novel's coda. Finally, *The Road* prompts a suggestive interpretation of its theological, spiritual and/or moral dimensions that may offer one particular resolution to some of the metaphysical tension that permeates McCarthy's work.

## Analepsis and Contrast

When McCarthy was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1981, he was invited to attend a dinner held in Chicago for the recipients. Fellowships had been awarded to a range of notable figures representing a variety of disciplines from

physics to literature, but in his 2007 interview with David Kushner for *Rolling Stone* magazine, McCarthy explained that he avoided the company of his vocational peers at the dinner: ‘The artsy crowd was all dressed and drugged and ready to party. [...] I just started hanging out with scientists because they were more interesting’ (Kushner). One of those scientists was Murray Gell-Mann, a physicist and then-director of the MacArthur Foundation whose work on the classification of elementary particles earned him a Nobel Prize. McCarthy and Gell-Mann subsequently developed a friendship that would play a significant role in the writer’s life.

Three years later, Gell-Mann was instrumental in the foundation of what would later become the Santa Fe Institute (SFI), a private, non-profit research institute devoted to the study of complex systems. Complex systems are systems in which many constituent parts interact in such a way that novel higher-order entities tend to emerge from them.<sup>32</sup> These emergent entities can be, for example, properties, substances, or patterns, and furthermore can act as components within larger complex systems, much as a human agent can be thought of as emerging from its manifold underlying biological and psychological components and can simultaneously act as an individual component within the larger complex system of an economy. In a phrase attributed to Gell-Mann, such systems demonstrate ‘surface complexity arising out of deep simplicity’ (Gribbin 3). The collective behaviour of a hive of social insects thus demonstrates complex patterns of self-organization that arise from the relatively simple instinctual behaviour of individual insects. Human consciousness has been considered, albeit controversially, by some to be a candidate for an emergent property arising out of the complex underlying neurological process in the brain.<sup>33</sup> Whole fields of scientific investigation may be emergent from the ‘fundamental’ realm of physics, as theoretical biologist

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<sup>32</sup> The definition of complex systems I provide here is of necessity a very general and simplified one. Even among those who study complex systems there is much disagreement over what constitutes complexity, and philosophers of science continue to argue over metaphysical and epistemological problems surrounding complexity and emergence. See Waldrop for both a fascinating introduction to the field for the lay reader and a narrative history of the Santa Fe Institute and some of the characters involved in its early days. Gribbin also provides an excellent layperson’s introduction, bringing his undoubted science-writing skills to bear on the related areas of chaos and complexity.

<sup>33</sup> For examples of this controversy, see Bedau and Humphreys.

Stuart Kauffman suggests: ‘the physicist cannot tell us why hearts exist. Biology is therefore not reducible to physics. Biology is both epistemologically and ontologically emergent’ (*Reinventing the Sacred* 39). Mary Midgley makes a similar point with respect to the traditional problem of consciousness, which she says has ‘been made to look much harder than it is by being conflated with the demand for physical explanation, and by the surprising notion that this kind of explanation would always be more “fundamental” than all others. This really is a mistake. Physical explanations are only fundamental for physics. Other kinds of question need other kinds of answers’ (Midgley, *Science and Poetry* 171).

The SFI was established to help find such other kinds of answers. It actively promotes interdisciplinary cross-pollination and its stated goal is to help ‘uncover and understand the deep commonalities that link artificial, human, and natural systems’ (‘Mission’). Towards the end of the 1980s, McCarthy started taking regular trips from his home in El Paso up to the Institute, eventually moving to the New Mexico town and becoming a regular presence. McCarthy enjoyed interacting with the scientists: ‘People drift in from all over the world—Nobel-winning chemists and biologists—and they’re sitting next to you at lunch. They’re just very generous. You ask them something and they’ll just stop what they’re doing and tell you all about it’ (Kushner). It is most likely that McCarthy’s regular conversations with SFI researchers played some part in his imagining a world in which the ecosystem, in itself a vast complex system, has been radically destabilized to the point where its many constituent components are either absent or utterly dysfunctional.

During the writing of *The Road*, McCarthy visited the office of SFI external faculty member Doug Erwin. Erwin is a palaeobiologist whose 2006 book *Extinction* deals with the planet’s greatest ever mass extinction, the so-called P-T boundary event of 250 million years ago. McCarthy questioned Erwin about a more recent event which is more familiar through its prevalence in popular culture: the K-T extinction event which claimed among its many victims the vast majority of the dinosaurs. Erwin told him what the world might look like after a catastrophic bolide impact such as the one believed to

have caused the K-T extinction: ‘Instead of having grey skies that look like Beijing, it would actually be blue skies, [...] There would also be a lot more ferns’ (Kushner). In *The Road*, McCarthy may have incorporated some elements of Erwin’s impression of what such a world might look like, but it is significant that he departed so radically from the blue-skied, fern-carpeted world described by the scientist. Erwin suggests why McCarthy might have done so: ‘because of what he was trying to achieve, he had to take some artistic license. That book was about his son’ (Kushner).

Putting aside for now the biographical reading of the novel suggested by Erwin, *The Road* succeeds in making us look anew at the richness of our contemporary world.<sup>34</sup> It does this by taking ‘some artistic license’ and presenting us not with Erwin’s world of blue skies and abundant vegetation, but instead with a world in which the nights are ‘dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before’ (3). The relentless grey of the blasted landscape, the choking atmosphere and the sepulchral ocean provide a uniformly drab substrate which heightens the poignancy of those occasional vivid memories and dreams of a world that no longer exists. The fragility of the material world we take for granted is emphasised even while the resilience of such incorporeal properties as morality, love, and hope are demonstrated by situating them within a world utterly bereft of sustenance both physical and spiritual.

The extremity of the biosphere’s devastation serves to heighten the affective power of the scattered analeptic references to the prelapsarian world. Amid the repetitive and monochromatic descriptions of the world’s ashblown wasteland, these occasional flashbacks are striking in their contrast to the contemporary world of the novel, blazing forth like campfires in the cold dark of night. Alongside their function as generators of stark contrast, the majority

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<sup>34</sup> In his televised interview with Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy accepts, with visible discomfiture, Winfrey’s suggestion that the *The Road* was to some degree a love letter to his second son, John Francis. At the time of that interview, in early 2007, John Francis was eight years old, so Cormac was either sixty-four or sixty-five when he was born and entered his seventies before or during the novel’s composition. A biographical reading of the novel thus readily suggests itself, but it is not relevant to my present focus.

of the novel's analepses depict scenes in which the environment is the central concern, as opposed to merely providing a setting for human action.

When both of these qualities of the flashbacks are combined, their overall effect serves to generate heightened awareness of, and appreciation for, the mysteries and wonders of the living world. The first relates the man's memory of crossing a lake near his uncle's farm in a rowboat to help his uncle collect firewood, and it is described as 'the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon' (13). The scene plays out without dialogue, the uncle silently rowing across the lake while smoking his pipe. The view across the lake is described, with dark evergreens forming the backdrop behind a line of 'bone pale' birch trees. The scattered remnants of windfall tree-stumps underneath are referred to as 'riprap', a word used for the loose stone used to form the foundation of a breakwater or other structure. The choice of such a word in this visual context suggests by extension that the dark evergreens rising above are the superstructure built upon the dead trees, thriving as all life does on the death of other organisms.

Once they come to shore, they walk along the beach 'while his uncle studied the treestumps, puffing at his pipe, a manila rope coiled over his shoulder', and after finding a stump and tying a rope to it, they 'tied the rope to a cleat at the rear of the boat and rowed back across the lake, jerking the stump slowly behind them' (13). In his 1992 *New York Times* interview with the author, Woodward states that *Moby Dick* is McCarthy's favourite book. This being the case, the manila rope used by the uncle in this scene cannot but suggest the whale-line described in 'The Line' chapter of Melville's novel. As Leo Marx puts it in *The Machine in the Garden*, 'Manila rope is made to seem the archetype of the physical bond between man and nature, whether industrial or primitive. [...] Melville transforms the line into an emblem of our animal fate. It signifies that we are bound to the whale by the needs and limitations of all living things, as, for example, hunger and death' (296). In Ishmael's own words: 'All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life' (Melville 237). If we

apply Marx's reading of Melville's manila rope to this episode of *The Road*, the manila rope signifies the bond tying humanity to the less swift and sudden, but no less crucial, vegetative 'riprap', the ligneous breakwater which, until its devastation, silently keeps the apocalypse at bay.

Another flashback in the novel is an image of predation:

In that long ago somewhere very near this place he'd watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air. (20)

We are shown how death is necessary to provide sustenance to life, and this combination of color and dynamic violence is placed between a present-day description of a lake containing no fish and this subsequent passage, which follows directly after the flashback's evocation of 'still autumn air':

The grainy air. The taste of it never left your mouth. They stood in the rain like farm animals. Then they went on, holding the tarp over them in the dull drizzle. Their feet were wet and cold and their shoes were being ruined. On the hillsides old crops dead and flattened. The barren ridgeline trees raw and black in the rain. (20–21)

This bleakly anti-pastoral sequence, surrounding the vibrant description of the falcon, heightens the poignancy of the man's memory by unflinchingly portraying the misery and desolation of the novel's post-apocalyptic world. The man and boy are likened to farm animals, one example among many of McCarthy's conflation of the human and the non-human. Within the falcon image is the suggestion that the predatory nature of the novel's murderous bloodcults is no less natural than the predation displayed by the falcon, the only difference being the establishment of a moral code that prohibits

cannibalism and murder, a frail morality that the man and boy desperately try to maintain.

Three of the flashbacks in the novel describe trout. The first occurs when the man stands on a stone bridge, where ‘once he’d watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath’ (30). The ‘perfect shadows’ cast on stone by the trout swimming in sunlight invites a Platonic reading: in the contemporary world of the novel, virtually untouched by either literal sunlight or the Platonic ‘Good’, there are no more ‘perfect shadows’. Likewise, the illusory world of phenomena mistaken for reality by Plato’s shackled cave dwellers is stripped bare and cast into darkness in the absence of a source of light. There is an echo here, too, of the cryptic dream that opens the novel in which the boy leads the man through a cave until they see a sightless creature, ‘pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it’; the shadow cast on the wall is, crucially, cast by ‘their light’ (3). The man and boy must cast their own light in this benighted world, carrying their fire through the surrounding gloom.

McCarthy’s indebtedness to Plato has long been acknowledged in the literature. Biographical evidence of the novelist’s interest in Plato’s philosophy is provided by Garry Wallace in his account of a few days spent in McCarthy’s company in 1989, during which time an acquaintance of McCarthy’s, Professor Irving Brown, told Wallace that McCarthy ‘had over-read Plato’ (Wallace 139). Plato’s influence on McCarthy’s southern novels, and most specifically on *Child of God*, is most persuasively set forth by Dianne C. Luce (‘The Cave of Oblivion’; *Reading the World* 158–175). Dealing more specifically with *The Road*, Alex Hunt and Martin Jacobsen argue that the novel expresses the inverse of Plato’s allegory of the cave, with ‘the world becoming steadily colder and darker as human wisdom is lost’.<sup>35</sup> Carole Juge reads the same imagery somewhat differently by viewing the journey of the novel as one in which the

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<sup>35</sup> Hunt and Jacobsen further argue that the novel insists on an inverse of Platonic metaphysics in general in its claim that ‘the sacred idiom shorn of its referents’ is also shorn of ‘its reality’ (TR 89). Such a claim by the narrator, they argue, demonstrates that ‘in McCarthy’s account the loss of the physical form exposes the contingency of the idea—an inversion of Platonic thinking’ (157).

man guides his son ‘nearer to the exit of the cave’ and thus shows him that ‘he is philosophically able to search for the light and the Sun’ (Juge 26–27).

The second trout memory tells us that the man had ‘stood at such a river once and watched a flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the teal-colored water except as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave’ (41–42). The Platonic allusion is even more apparent here, and the source of light is now reflected back off the fish, granting a scintillating but fleeting glimpse of the sun even as the image is complicated by the threat of ‘knives’, whereby the man’s hindsight imprints an ominous metaphorical association onto the memory of something that he knows would soon cease to exist.<sup>36</sup>

The final trout image comes in the closing passage of the novel. Here, the trout are described in sensuous detail:

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 your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. (287)

This achingly mournful passage alone would justify the novel’s exaggerated representation of environmental collapse, as it closes the narrative with a poetic vision of vitality which is made all the more affecting through its analeptic framing within a desolated world. The trout are tangible, fragrant, and animated: ‘Polished and muscular and torsional’; they ‘smelled of moss’; ‘the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow.’ The destitution of the novel’s present-day world heightens the affective power of this simple image of

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<sup>36</sup> This ‘flash of knives’ simile is also a neat inversion of an image used in *The Crossing* when Billy, returning from Mexico with his brother’s remains, is attacked by robbers on the road: ‘The next flash was a knife that had come from somewhere in his clothing and caught the light in turning for just a moment like a fish deep in a river’ (*TCr* 395).



an organism swimming in fresh water, and encourages a sense of gratitude for what we currently have by demonstrating its contingency and vulnerability.

The centrality of natural forces in McCarthy's vision of the world is expressed in the novel's assertion that the maps and mazes on the trout's backs, cartographic puzzles through which life's mystery is both delineated and obscured, are visual schemata of natural processes that are beyond the power of humanity to restore to the world once they are lost. The mystery of life is finally figured in an auditory metaphor, expressing the ineffability and ultimate inscrutability of nature's hidden order: 'In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery' (287). Once again, *Moby Dick* is not too far from the surface of McCarthy's text. In this case, it is the celebrated passage from the 'A Bower in the Arsacides' chapter in which Ishmael enters a shrine made by island natives from a whale skeleton and is struck by a vision of God as a weaver: 'The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it' (Melville 358).

For some context, it should be noted that McCarthy's use of Melville's weaver god trope (which itself is predated by countless mythological examples of magical or divine weaving) goes back at least as far as *Suttree*, in whose richly heightened prefatory sequence the personified figure of death is first introduced, albeit elliptically and via a sequence of semi-rhetorical questions: '*Is he a weaver, bloody shuttle shot through a timewarp, a carder of souls from the world's nap?*' (5). *Blood Meridian* takes up the trope again: when a band of Apache attack the Glanton gang and a curious optical effect creates their elongated doubles hanging inverted in the sky, the cries of these 'howling antiwarriors' sound 'like the cries of souls broke through some misweave in the weft of things into the world below' (116); the cloud banks in the sky above the riders' heads are 'like the dark warp of the very firmament' (162); the judge, during a discourse in praise of naturalistic enquiry, lauds 'that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry' (209–210). *The Crossing* contains among its many stories the heretic who dreams of a God 'bent at his

work. [...] Weaving the world' (149); the allusion here to Melville's weaver god has been previously noted by both Steven Frye and Dianne C. Luce (Frye, 'Cormac McCarthy's "world in its making"' 54; Luce, 'The Road and the Matrix' 213, note 2). Again, in *The Crossing*, the gypsy encountered by Bily relates the tale, concerning identity and ontology, of the plane in the mountain and describes the misconstrual of sentimental artefacts such as the downed plane as being just 'one more twist in the warp of the world' (149, 405). Eduardo, during the fatal knife-fight with John Grady Cole in *Cities of the Plain*, taunts Cole's romanticism when he says that the young cowboy 'cannot bear that the world be ordinary', and as he says that Cole's world 'totters upon an unspoken labyrinth of questions' he passes 'the blade back and forth like a shuttle through a loom' (253). Finally, as Moss's return to the botched drug deal location in *No Country for Old Men* turns deadly and a truck starts hunting him down through the desert, the spotlight of the truck is described as 'rowing back and forth across the face of the ridge. Methodically. Bright shuttle, dark loom' (30). The idea of a weaver god or a woven world is thus long established in McCarthy's corpus and it is thus not without warrant that one can read the 'hum' of mystery emanating from all things, in the coda of *The Road*, as being the auditory corollary of that weaving as described by Melville.

The centrality of the novel's trout flashbacks not only contributes to the overall effect of allowing analeptic richness and vitality to contrast with the achromatic post-apocalyptic world. Its manifold allusiveness is worth addressing here briefly because of its significance with respect to the novel's thematic focus on religion, global contingent vulnerability, and the diminution of both signification and its attendant knowledge.

Fish in general have been associated with Christianity since its dawn, the fish being the often-secret identifying token of a Christian long before the crucifix gained more prominence. The biblical grounding of such symbolism is substantial and widespread. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is associated with fish. This is literally the case when he feeds the multitudes with a handful of loaves and fish (described in all four Gospels, such as in Matthew 14:13–21), when his first meal after resurrection is described as being 'a piece of a broiled

fish, and of an honeycomb’ (Luke 24:42), or when his presence causes a miraculous catch of fish on the Sea of Galilee and prompts Simon, James and John to join him as his disciples (Luke 5:1–11). The recruitment of those disciples is also recounted in Mark, where Jesus metaphorically links fishing and evangelism by telling Simon and his brother Andrew: ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men’ (Matthew 4:19).

According to St. Augustine, the early Christian adoption of the simple fish symbol – two arcs intersecting and overlapping on the right-hand side to form the tail – resulted from an acrostic by which the Greek word for fish (ichthys) is made from the initial Greek letters of each word in ‘Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Saviour’ and, as he tells it, ‘in which word Christ is mystically understood, because He was able to live, that is, to exist, without sin in the abyss of this mortality as in the depth of waters’ (*The City of God*, XXIII).

The repeated emphasis on the fish in *The Road*, then, alludes in part to Jesus Christ and thus contributes to Christian readings of the novel. The text itself frequently reinforces the Christ-like nature of the boy, whose inherent goodness is opposed to the more Old-Testament vengeful father. The father expressly equates the boy with the Christian Logos at the very outset of the narrative when he says: ‘If he is not the word of God God never spoke’ (5). It should be noted, though, that this conditional sentence works both ways and can suggest the silence of God’s voice as much as it can the existence of the Logos in the form of the child. At another point, the child’s head, with its ‘pale and tangled hair,’ is a ‘Golden chalice, good to house a god’, and the blind man they encounter who calls himself Ely is told by the boy’s father: ‘What if I said that he’s a god?’ (75, 172). All such explicit suggestions as to the potential divinity of the boy are assisted by the Christian symbolic connotations of the three brook trout scenes in the novel, and Susan Tyburski is correct to note that the fire images (along with those of breath and light) suggest the Holy Spirit (Tyburski 126). Such a reading further prompts one to see something resembling the Christian Trinity in the man, boy and fire.

Indeed, the novel crackles with potentially supernaturalist interpretations such as this, but they are, as ever with McCarthy, set against a

countervailing naturalism that portrays the world as a barren, silent and godless place in which the frail flame struggles to withstand the extinguishing forces of the wind. The metaphysical tension is thus established and maintained in keeping with the tension of his earlier work, with the primary difference in this case being that the ontic contingency and godlessness of the world, suggested diegetically and variously allegorised in his earlier novels, is now rendered concrete through the world's almost absolute physical, aesthetic and moral destitution. The fish, then, may evoke the Christianity that provides something of the structural and thematic material of the narrative, but it swims, like Augustine's image of the Christ, 'in the abyss of this mortality'. Moreover, the fish only exists in the past tense, prior to the godlessness that has swept the world in the wake of the catastrophe.

The contingency of the ecosphere and our complacent reliance upon it becomes devastatingly apparent in the course of the novel as it depicts in terrifying detail the daily vicissitudes that result from the collapse of the environment upon which we depend. The brook trout functions as another reminder of this ecological vulnerability, as it is regarded by ecologists and conservationists as an indicator species whose health can reveal a lot about water quality in specific watercourses (see, for example, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service 20). Additionally, its importance in American recreational fishing is perhaps reflected in its being a state fish for no less than eight states – Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia, and its favouring of well-oxygenated, clear, cool water makes it a prime indicator of problems in a watercourse. It is therefore particularly fitting that *The Road* should depict it repeatedly in the context of glimpses of an ecologically rich and biodiverse world prior to the unspecified environmental catastrophe that has destroyed virtually all life.

Finally, the salmonid nature of the trout suggests the image of *an breadán feasa* – the salmon of knowledge of Irish folklore. The final invocation of the trout in the novel speaks of its vermiculate patterns as being 'maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again' (287). The loss of this trout from the world

suggests, through ‘maps and mazes’, the diminution of a potential knowledge whose absence cannot be made up for in any way. The natural world’s store of untapped pre-human knowledge, humming as it does of mystery, is represented on three occasions throughout the novel by this simple image of a fish swaying in the current, its natural wonders evoked as though they encapsulated all of the mysteries of the world now lost to the flames of destruction. Whereas the ruined library discovered at one point by the man contains ‘lies arranged in their thousands row on row’, this one creature holds in its living form a host of truths which resonate with mysterious power and potentiality (187). Its analeptic framing therefore presents its existence as nothing more than a memory now of an individual species whose physical presence hummed with non-anthropocentric knowledge but whose absence is one further indicator of the world’s ecological devastation and the impossibility of summoning back to life that which took aeons of evolution and struggle, ‘older than man’, to establish.

All of the examples of analepsis in *The Road* would lose much of their affective force if the present-day world of the novel was as lush and blue-skied as Doug Erwin described the landscape after the K-T extinction. There would also be a danger of sliding into the more familiar post-apocalyptic motif of the world’s return to wilderness following a global catastrophe, rendering the man’s struggle to keep his boy alive and hopeful much less moving. In such a green world, the savage beauty of the falcon’s diving attack on the crane would not strike the reader as being quite so extraordinary, and the hum of mystery from the ‘deep glens’ would be drowned out by the weaver-god’s loom. By situating the readers, for the majority of the text, in a world where that weaver’s loom has fallen almost entirely silent, we are allowed to hear the ‘thousand voices that speak through it’, the hum of mystery. This hum, the novel goes to great pains to illustrate, should not be taken for granted nor assumed to be guaranteed into the future. On the contrary, our complacency with respect to the continued habitability of the contingent world puts us in a similar situation to Russell’s chicken, waiting every day for its food to be

delivered until the one day that something much more dreadful arrives in place of dinner.

## Geophysiology and Complexity

While McCarthy exaggerates and alters the likely environmental conditions of *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic world for aesthetic and affective reasons, the novel repeatedly transposes descriptive terms and metaphors from physiology to the environment. There is also a strong suggestion that the man may have a background in medicine or some branch of physiology. Taken together, it is possible to see the significance of the novel's emphasis on physiology and its transposition of both physiological and environmental terms and descriptions.

The man's ability with first aid, at the very least, is apparent when he is described expertly and methodically disinfecting and stitching up a three-inch arrow wound in his leg. Through a series of polysyndetic sentences suggestive of adroit routine, he first washes the wound with water, and then:

He swabbed the wound with disinfectant and opened a plastic envelope with his teeth and took out a small hooked suture needle and a coil of silk thread and sat holding the silk to the light while he threaded it through the needle's eye. He took a clamp from the kit and caught the needle in the jaws and locked them and set about suturing the wound. He worked quickly and he took no great pains about it.  
(266)

He has some understanding of nutritional requirements too, as he is shown to be concerned with obtaining 'vitamin D for the boy or he was going to get rickets' (262). It is, of course, entirely possible that he is just handy at first aid because this dangerous world no doubt furnishes many opportunities to practice such things as suturing a wound or worrying about the acquisition of vitamin supplements. The occasional intrusion of somewhat arcane physiological terms into the otherwise spare prose, however, in conjunction

with the novel's regular use of free indirect style to inhabit the man's point of view, suggests that the man's knowledge exceeds those isolated areas of medical proficiency that would assist the desperate struggle for self-preservation.<sup>37</sup> For example, when he stands at night 'tottering in that cold autistic dark', his balance is maintained by the 'vestibular calculations in his skull' which 'cranked out their reckonings' (15). This is a reference to the contribution of sensory information from the inner ear's vestibular system to our sense of balance, or equilibrioception, particularly when standing in utter darkness and thus lacking that sense's visual component. An educated man *might* know such things and think in these terms, but a physician or physiologist almost certainly would.

The most clear indication that the man may have some medical background comes in the early encounter with a roadagent. The man, with his gun trained on the roadagent, tells him that although the others might hear the gunshot, he won't hear it himself:

How do you figure that?

Because the bullet travels faster than sound. It will be in your brain before you can hear it. To hear it you will need a frontal lobe and things with names like colliculus and temporal gyrus and you won't have them anymore. They'll just be soup.

Are you a doctor?

I'm not anything.

We got a man hurt. It'd be worth your while.

Do I look like an imbecile to you?

I don't know what you look like. (64)

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<sup>37</sup> The question of the difference between the narrator's voice and the man's is a tricky one, as the occasional narrative closeness to the man's point of view provides a number of occasions when we can say with certainty that we are hearing the man's thoughts, but it does not then necessarily follow that all of the examples of arcane physiological terms are representative of the man's point of view. Taken alongside the more explicit suggestion in his conversation with the roadagent, however, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that such physiological jargon emanates from the man's understanding of that field.

These hints at the man's medical background mirror the novel's repeated use of physiological metaphors and adjectives in its descriptions of the world. The increasing greyness of the environment is like 'the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world' (3). The burnt terrain is 'cauterized,' or an 'ashen scabland' (14, 16).<sup>38</sup> The world is again personified, as a corpse, when the mountains are described as being 'shrouded away' (51), and in the poignant phrase: 'By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp' (32).

Another example is the man's memory of standing as a boy among 'rough men' in winter as they opened up the ground in a hillside and 'brought to light a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number. Collected there for a common warmth. The dull tubes of them beginning to move sluggishly in the cold hard light. Like the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day' (188). The shift from the literal to the figurative transforms the snakes into viscera, by extension suggesting that the earth itself is 'some great beast' upon which the men are performing surgery, a suggestion reinforced by the word 'bolus' with its associations with medicine and veterinary practice. The image also calls to mind the dream that opens the novel, in which the man imagines himself being led by the boy through a cave: 'Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast' (3).

An example of a transposition in the other direction, applying biotic and geological associations to people, comes in the description of the man's dreams of his dead wife:

In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy.  
Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a  
dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory,  
combs of shell. (18)

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<sup>38</sup> McCarthy has used the word 'cauterized' to describe landscape in two of his previous novels: *Blood Meridian* describes the 'cauterized waste' of the Sonoran desert (216), while in *All the Pretty Horses*, Rawlins 'eyed balefully that cauterized terrain' shortly after the boys cross over into Mexico (59). In *The Road*, however, such metaphors gain prominence through the relative paucity of similar figurative touches (when compared to the baroque *Blood Meridian*, for sure, but even when compared to the more spare prose of *All the Pretty Horses*), and through their resonance with the suggested medical background of the man.



Through its repeated use of physiological terms for the landscape and its bedecking of the dream wife with shell, ivory, and clay, the novel seems to suggest a correspondence between the functioning of a biological organism and the global ecosystems whose collapse is so apparent. Indeed, the man could very well be talking about the world that has died, rather than his wife, in the following passage:

In his dream she was sick and he cared for her. The dream bore the look of sacrifice but he thought differently. He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell. (32)

People they meet on the road often resemble the very landscape through which they travel, such as the lightning-struck man ‘as burntlooking as the country,’ with ‘a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull’ and wearing shoes ‘coated with roadtar’ (49-50). They pass corpses that are fused with the road itself, ‘half mired in the blacktop’ after being caught in firestorms, ‘where they struggled forever in the road’s cold coagulate’ (190-191).

When considering this conflation of the physiological and the environmental, the appropriate term to consider is *geophysiology*. This term, popularised by James Lovelock, refers to the study of the health of the planet considered as one vast superorganism. Lovelock is best known for his Gaia theory, which claims that the presence of life on our planet has collectively kept certain key features of the planet’s environment in homeostasis in order to keep it favourable for the continuance of that life. One example would be thermostasis: since the emergence of life on the planet, Earth’s global average temperature has remained more or less constant despite a 30% increase in the sun’s luminosity (Lovelock 35). In the early days of life on earth, a thicker blanket of greenhouse gases kept the planet warmer, and as the sun’s energy output increased so the atmosphere changed through the gradual evolution of underlying biological processes, preventing the planet from overheating and

maintaining relatively stable conditions in which life could thrive. In the absence of life, the environment would eventually revert to a state of chemical equilibrium in which highly reactive gases such as oxygen would disappear from the atmosphere. The very presence of life, Gaia theory claims, manages to forestall the environment's drift into chemical equilibrium and instead maintain a state conducive to the proliferation of life.

Despite attracting the initial ridicule of the scientific community, exacerbated by his use of a mythological deity in the name of his hypothesis, Lovelock's Gaia theory has gradually gained more acceptance in scientific circles, helped in no small part by his adoption of the more scientific term, geophysiology, to refer to the study of the planet's health. Another important conceptual tool was the development of the thought experiment (and later various computer models) of Daisyworld, presented by Lovelock 'as a defense against criticism that his Gaia theory of the Earth as a self-regulating homeostatic system requires teleological control rather than being an emergent property' (Wood et al. 1). In its initial conception, Daisyworld is an imaginary world orbiting a sun that gets increasingly brighter over time, like our own sun over the course of the earth's history. It is populated just by black and white daisies, which are imagined to have sufficient water and nutrients, relying only on solar energy to thrive, and which are sensitive to the surface temperature affected by the planetary albedo, which is in turn determined by the relative coverage of black or white daisies. Such an imaginary world exhibits interesting emergent self-regulatory mechanisms by which the albedo of the planet is controlled to optimise the global temperature necessary for life. The Daisyworld model and its descendants may not have proven anything concrete, but they have at least demonstrated that one need not assume that Gaia theory involves any unscientific teleology. Rather, through the aggregation of the ways in which individual organisms evolve and respond to their environments, the self-regulatory mechanisms proposed by Lovelock could conceivably emerge and thus shape the environment, without any foresight or intention with regard to those organisms themselves.

In *The Road*, there appears to be at least one direct reference to a particular emergent natural cycle that is now broken down: the sulphur cycle. After journeying for so long to reach the coast, the disappointment of the man and boy upon finding the sea as dead and grey as the land is registered in terse prose which collapses occasionally into ostensive one-word sentences: ‘Cold. Desolate. Birdless’ (215); ‘Senseless. Senseless’ (222). We are told that the ‘wind coming off the water smelled faintly of iodine. That was all. There was no sea smell to it’ (221). This lack of a sea smell indicates the absence of that smell’s primary component: a biogenic compound called dimethyl sulfide. This compound is produced by bacteria that feed on damaged phytoplankton in the ocean, and its absence is another marker that even the oceans in the world of *The Road* are dead.

Lovelock, in *The Ages of Gaia*, says that the ‘elusive smell of the sea is much like that of dilute dimethyl sulfide’ (134), and empirical evidence gathered by both him and M.O. Andreae contribute to his claim that ‘the output of dimethyl sulfide from the oceans was indeed sufficient to justify its role as the major carrier of the element sulfur from the sea to the land’ (Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia* 135–6; Andreae ‘Ocean-atmosphere interactions’). He suggests that this transport of sulphur from the sea to land plants that require the element helps those land plants to thrive, and that the ‘increased growth would increase rock weathering and so increase the flow of nutrients to the ocean. [...] By this, or some similar series of small steps, the intricate geophysiological regulation systems evolve. They do so without foresight or planning, and without breaking the rules of Darwinian natural selection’ (138). The absence of the ‘sea smell’ of dimethyl sulfide from the breeze in *The Road* suggests the collapse of this sulphur cycle and, by extension, the collapse of similar such ‘intricate geophysiological regulation systems.’

The tendency for self-regulatory mechanisms to emerge from complex systems in general is a central concern of complexity scientists, and McCarthy’s time in the SFI must have brought him in close contact with such ideas. In *The Road*, we are shown a world in which those self-regulatory mechanisms are

more or less a thing of the past.<sup>39</sup> Severe disruptions in a number of the components of such systems have brought the systems themselves crashing down, and the gradual slide into chemical equilibrium is figured in the novel through the post-apocalyptic world's chromatic uniformity, the diminution of language, and the image of the man and boy 'carrying the fire.'

Throughout the narrative, the man and boy refer to 'carrying the fire,' which seems on the surface to function as a synonym for 'being the good guys.' For example, shortly after discovering the cellar full of imprisoned amputees whose limbs have been cannibalized, the boy seeks reassurance that they themselves would never eat anybody, even if they were starving:

But we wouldnt.  
No. We wouldnt.  
No matter what.  
No. No matter what.  
Because we're the good guys.  
Yes.  
And we're carrying the fire.  
And we're carrying the fire. Yes.  
Okay. (128-129)

Later, when they finally reach the ocean and the boy asks his father what might be on the other side, the man suggests that 'Maybe there's a father and his little boy and they're sitting on the beach,' to which the boy responds that 'they could be carrying the fire too?':

They could be. Yes.  
But we dont know.

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<sup>39</sup> Markus Wierschem argues that despite such overt signifiers that the world of the novel has lost its ability to reproduce life, self-organizational mechanisms such as Lovelock's Gaia somehow maintain temporary islands of decreasing entropy in a universe which, on the whole, drifts toward equilibrium in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics. According to Wierschem, the family unit into which the boy is accepted at the end of the novel represents one such impermanent island (12, 17–18).

We dont know.

So we have to be vigilant.

We have to be vigilant. Yes. (216-217)

The scholarly literature on *The Road* has teased out many of the allusions at play in the novel's fire motif, alongside its signification of being 'the good guys': Jay Ellis suggests that it promises 'hope beyond reason' in the beginning of a new world, represented by the boy ('Another Sense of Ending' 38); Phillip Snyder sees the fire-carrying as 'emblematic of home and hospitality' ('Hospitality' 84); for Susan Tyburski, the 'recurring images of breath, light and fire suggest the Holy Spirit' (Tyburski 126); and the Promethean resonance of the fire imagery is explored by Daniel Luttrull.

One angle that hasn't been considered yet, however, is the nature of fire as a chemical reaction within a chemically non-equilibrium environment. In the absence of photosynthetic flora, the atmosphere of the planet would gradually slide into chemical equilibrium, all of its oxygen being locked away through oxidation (the rusting of iron, for example). In such an environment, fires would be increasingly difficult to ignite, relying as they do upon the presence of sufficient quantities of oxygen. Human existence would have become impossible long before such an occurrence, however, given our dependence upon oxygen. The ability to light a controlled fire, one of the activities repeated by the man and boy throughout the novel, is thus a feature of an environment that has a very specific chemical make-up, one that is conducive to life. Considered from this angle, to 'carry the fire' is thus to carry the relatively modest hope that life could possibly return to the planet again, in the understanding that at least one necessary condition is still being met by the environment.

While fire is closely associated with death and destruction in the novel, it also stands for life itself. Heat and illumination are precious commodities in a world that is 'Cold to crack the stones. To take your life,' and black 'to hurt your ears with listening' (14-5). The novel lingers on descriptions of campfires, on which the snow falls like death, 'soft flakes drifting down out of the

blackness,' while 'sparks rushed upward and died in the starless dark' like the ephemeral and fragile nature of life itself (31).

What unites these two aspects of the fire motif, the combusive chemical reaction and the metaphor for life itself, is the processual nature of fire. Fire, while being a paradoxical Promethean symbol of both destruction and creation, is also a potent symbol of process, of change, of Heraclitean flux. As both an agent of, and a dramatic output from, chemical reactions, fire figures the reactivity and potential for flux necessary for a system to develop and maintain the complex processes necessary to support life. Fire therefore acts as a metaphor for the possibility of life itself, and for its continuance. If stasis and chemical equilibrium are death, then the roiling flames of a campfire indicate that the potential for flux remains and therefore the potential for life's continuation and renewal in the figure of the boy.

Echoes of Heraclitus come not only from the many references to fire. In the novel's coda, we are told that the 'vermiculate patterns' on the trout's backs were 'maps of the world in its becoming' (287). The gerund 'becoming' stresses again the processual nature of life, the constant flux that contains the Heraclitean unity of opposites in that its essence is change, and yet it is only through this change that its identity as life is kept stable.<sup>40</sup> A living organism incessantly fluctuates, maintaining its stability only through the perpetual flow of energy and matter through its form. The novel continually reminds us that such ordered flux is essential to the proper functioning of the biosphere, even as it depicts a world that is drifting dangerously close to equilibrium and stasis, and thus planetary death.

Structures that improbably weave complex yet fleeting intricacies of order amid the irreversible flow of thermodynamic entropy, of which living organisms are but one example, were described by Nobel laureate chemist Ilya Prigogine as *dissipative structures*. Prigogine's work laid some of the groundwork for contemporary complexity science, in his demonstrations that the flow of

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<sup>40</sup> The critical recognition of Heraclitean flux in McCarthy's *Weltanschauung* has been present since one of the earliest significant analyses of the author's work, in which Vereen M. Bell establishes a nihilistic strand of interpretation when he argues that McCarthy's metaphysics is 'none, in effect; no first principles, no foundational truth; Heraclitus without Logos' ('Ambiguous Nihilism' 32).

energy from ordered to disordered states can give rise to self-organizing structures that thrive on the edge of chaos. Such structures tap into the thermodynamic traffic in their spontaneous emergence and self-organization, utilising the flux of energy passing through them to form islands of complex order that temporarily and locally stand against the universal drift to entropy inscribed in the second law of thermodynamics.

In *The Road*, this flux is figured most prominently in the fire motif but it is also evident in the way the novel celebrates process itself, humming with its vital mysteries and resonant dynamism, above the inertness of equilibrium. The novel, despite its bleakness, is a panegyric to the intricate and mysterious complexities of life which are made all the more apparent when depicted against the almost total absence of those complexities, and which are shown by just such a setting to be as contingent and vulnerable as a brook trout standing in a current oblivious to what may be upstream and heading its way.

## Contingency and Emergent Divinity

In *The Road*, the contingency of a callously indifferent world reaches its extreme as the world is stripped bare of all comforts and the very continuance of the global biosphere itself upon which we depend utterly is revealed to be just as provisional as the dreams someone might have for their future. The novel is strewn with direct references to the fundamental meaninglessness of the physical world, particularly at moments such as the following, when the man and boy are struggling through a particularly barren patch in their scavenging for food and supplies:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their

cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (130)

The use of the word ‘intestate’ is worth noting here: its literal meaning evokes one who has not made a will before dying, so there is a sense that an expected inheritance has failed to materialise, that the global legacy has been squandered, leaving the next generation, represented by the boy, with absolutely nothing on which to survive. Etymologically, ‘intestate’ is rooted in the Latin for ‘witnessed’, so the word additionally alludes to the blind indifference of the universe toward an earth that it cannot witness while simultaneously touching on the grand McCarthy theme of the centrality of the act of witnessing, of the encounter of consciousness with the world and the consequent proliferation of interpretation and knowledge, comprised of all the manifold variants of story. Blindness is again evoked by referring to the planets as ‘blind dogs of the sun’ which circle in the ‘crushing black vacuum’. The staggering cosmic scale of the universe’s inhospitality is juxtaposed abruptly with the human scale of the vulnerable protagonists, likening them to trembling animals which are utterly insignificant in the vast emptiness of the universe regardless of how much they are ‘each the other’s world entire’ (6). The contingency of the world is then stated baldly by the use of the adjective ‘borrowed’: the time that comprises their lives, the world itself in which they struggle, and their capacity to witness that world are all qualified thus, which stresses the provisional and ephemeral nature of all things, the only certainty being that all things temporal, spatial, and perceptual will eventually pass away into oblivion.

Further suggestions of the world’s godless contingency recur with dreadful frequency throughout the novel. A recollection of the scavengers and ‘blackened looters’ who gradually came to populate and hold the wasted cities as the world collapsed further into the abyss is capped by one of the more bleak invocations of the universe’s indifferent physicality:

Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned



again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond. (181)

The fact that the earth is shrouded suggests the global cloud or ash cover which has precipitated and/or been a consequence of the catastrophe that has befallen the planet, even while it indicates through its personification the moribund devastation of the geophysiological biosphere. The passage also manages to evoke the man and boy themselves and their journey through this 'bleak and shrouded earth' because the planet's course is figuratively described as 'trundling', suggesting the laden shopping cart that carries the protagonists' belongings throughout the novel, and its association with other 'nameless' worlds in the dark of space evokes the namelessness of the man and boy. Elsewhere, similarly bleak language represents the same solar-system scale, with the 'alien sun commencing its cold transit' or the 'track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk' (178, 14). The cold indifference of mechanistic cosmic forces dwarfs the human scale, as the universe's 'crushing black vacuum' figures the spiritual vacuum at the heart of the world that is necrotising under the thick shroud of sun-blotting ash.

The contingency evident in the world of *The Road* is presented as the literal provisionality and vulnerability of the nurturing biosphere and all other matrices of interdependence in which we are enmeshed: political, linguistic, moral, spiritual. The diminution of the world's remaining physical and conceptual objects drags the linguistic sphere into a consequent contraction:

He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (88–89)

This passage suggests a causal relationship in its progression from the conceptual and physical objects to the ‘things one believed to be true’. Such beliefs may be epistemological, moral, or aesthetic in nature (or something else entirely), but the claim becomes significantly metaphysical when it overtly establishes a direct relation between the obliteration of an idiom’s ‘referents’ and the reality of that ‘sacred idiom’. The sacred idiom is thus presented as being grounded in and emergent from the contingent physical reality which is its substrate.

McCarthy’s paratactic style is at its most pronounced in this novel, as language itself fragments along with the disappearing biotic world. The paratactic regime extends even to a broader structural level, with the entire novel being composed of brief passages, often in the form of lone sentences, separated by lacunae and thus lending each passage some of the gravity of a dictum or the concision of an aphorism. The heightened register of McCarthy’s prose is much more muted and constrained by the privation that has limited both the narrator’s range and the protagonists’ perceptual and conceptual vista. In *The Road*, McCarthy’s later, flatter style and the thematic content of the novel find almost perfect harmony and contribute significantly to its overall affective force.

McCarthy’s suspicion of anthropocentric conceptions of the world manifests itself in numerous ways in *The Road*. Firstly, the novel’s style encapsulates and allegorises the non-anthropocentric *Weltanschauung* that frames the events of the novel. Secondly, the judicious deployment of sensuously vivid analeptic scenes throughout the novel lends further emphasis to its celebration of non-human life’s wondrous profusion. Thirdly, the use of physiological terms and metaphors to describe landscape, geology, and the global environment, and the converse association of non-human objects and materials with human bodies, prompts an apprehension of the world in geophysiological terms that render the human as but one part within a greater whole, the health and continuation of which are by no means guaranteed. Finally, the narrator, who drifts in and out of the man’s point of view in a free

indirect style, regularly asserts the godlessness and emptiness of the physical world and thus expresses the ‘being’ half of McCarthy’s ‘being and witness’ dichotomy.

The witnessing of the world, however, is once more asserted to be the generator of meaning, value, and all of the other anthropogenic conceptual categories that overlay the world’s underlying ontic physicality. Despite the novel taking place in an environment with almost nothing left to sustain its occupants, there are enough glimpses of the potential for meaning and the emergence of the good within social intercourse to grant *The Road* a rare paradoxical optimism, notwithstanding the novel’s inherently bleak premise and its starkly naturalistic execution. The fragile ‘fire’ that is maintained by the man and boy in the novel figures a number of different things, one of which is meaning itself.

The ability to weave stories out of the inert raw materials of the world is once more celebrated in this novel, but in this instance its world-making capacities are radically constrained by the absence of ‘referents’ on which to ground the narratives and made all the more poignant by the fact that the world falls so far short of any story one might tell about it. The boy craves stories from his father, as they give life to a world that no longer exists and allow him to develop his moral awareness. The gathering of ‘oil for the little slutlamp to light the long gray dusks, the long gray dawns’ excites the boy because of what the simple illumination will allow: ‘You can read me a story, the boy said. Cant you, Papa? Yes, he said. I can’ (7).

After finding morels in the woods and experiencing one of their few fleeting moments of something resembling happiness (‘This is a good place Papa’), the man sets up a fire in their refuge for the night and tells the boy stories:

They ate the little mushrooms together with the beans and drank tea and had tinned pears for their dessert. He banked the fire against the seam of rock where he’d built it and he strung the tarp behind them to reflect the heat and they sat warm in their refuge while he told the boy

stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them until the boy was asleep in his blankets and then he stoked the fire and lay down warm and full and listened to the low thunder of the falls beyond them in that dark and threadbare wood. (41)

Through juxtaposition, this passage associates the act of storytelling with the positive and restorative powers of food, drink, shelter and the warmth and light of a fire. By doing so, and by linking the illumination of the ‘slutlamp’ with the capacity to tell stories, it contributes to the novel’s association of ‘carrying the fire’ with an understanding of morality and the inculcation of goodness in the boy. The telling of old ‘stories of courage and justice’ is part of the man’s continuing project to pass on some semblance of morality to his child, although it is more often the case that the man needs to be reminded by the boy of their self-professed moral rectitude amidst the barbarities of the benighted bloodcults and cannibals roaming the land. Notwithstanding the boy’s apparently inherent goodness and the man’s own struggles with living up to his own moral code, it is suggested that the telling of stories is one of the principal means by which morality is inculcated. Moreover, it is clear that it is through story that the world is granted the meaning for which it is worth continuing the struggle to stay alive. The very categories into which the man and boy divide the people of the world – the ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ – are themselves developed from the most basic of narrative tropes, and the central symbol of fire-carrying around which the ‘good guys’ shape their actions is pure metaphor.

Towards the end of the narrative, after the man has lost some of his son’s favour owing to his cruel retributive exposure of a man who tried to steal their possessions, the boy’s taste for his father’s stories wanes as he comes to realise the failures of his father in being one of the ‘good guys’:

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why not?

[...]

Those stories are not true.

They don't have to be true. They're stories.

Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people. (268–269)

He has come to some understanding of the disjunction between, on the one hand, the world as it is, and on the other its narrative interpretation – between the being of the world and its witnessing.

*The Road* hints at one possible resolution of McCarthy's career-long metaphysical tension between naturalism and supernaturalism, a resolution suggested by the kind of 'complexity thinking' inculcated among those working at the Santa Fe Institute or studying complex systems elsewhere. Various theological and metaphysical problems have vexed McCarthy's novels and their characters throughout his career, such as the theodicean problem of evil, the existence and nature of God, the metaphysical structure of reality (for example, the substance dualism of Catholicism or the reductive physicalism of a scientific worldview), or the ontological status of morality and justice. The tension between the conflicting poles around which those problems and ideas constellate, poles that can partly (and very broadly) be construed as being either naturalistic or supernaturalistic (notwithstanding the impossibility of truly sorting such a multifarious group of concepts into discrete polar camps) is one of the more defining features of McCarthy's worlds. While the earlier novels lean a little more heavily towards the supernaturalistic side of the dialectic, positing, among other things, Gnostic understandings of the world's inherent fallenness or hinting at the arcane truths of esoteric bodies of knowledge such as tarot or numerology, from *All the Pretty Horses* onward there is a distinct shift towards somewhat more naturalistic interpretations of the worlds that are constructed within those novels.

Despite this naturalistic shift, there remains in his SFI-period novels much of the same fraught metaphysical architecture that marks his earlier work. The question of whether or not God exists looms over the events of *The*

*Road*. The narrator and the man frequently indicate that the world is a ‘Barren, silent, godless’ one (4). Despite the man telling the boy that he was ‘appointed to [take care of you] by God’ (77), his faith is shown to be a flimsy or aggrieved one at best, as when he removes himself from the boy’s company to have a violent coughing fit and whispers execrations to the grey sky:

Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (11–12)

The man’s curses are directed in such a way that he may be read as cursing his wife whose suicide left him alone to try and look after the boy, but it seems more appropriate to read these execrations as being directed towards a maker who is either absent or inexplicably malicious toward his creation.

The man’s grievance against God manifests itself again as he quotes the Book of Job during an internal monologue about whether or not he has the wherewithal to kill his own child should the need arise: ‘Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. *Curse God and die*. What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? [emphasis added]’ (114). Erik J. Wielenberg argues that such moments in the novel contribute to its portrayal of how and why one can be moral in a godless universe, with one of the novel’s lessons being that ‘the answer to the question of whether God exists [...] is far less relevant to morality and meaning than many believe’. Wielenberg maintains that the consequences of moral and immoral behaviour, in the novel at least, are love and loneliness, respectively (18). Such a reading of the novel’s moral and metaphysical questions is illuminating, but by suggesting that the bands of cannibals and roadagents in *The Road* are ‘alone in a much deeper sense’ than being physically alone, Wielenberg ignores the very real and disturbing possibility that those marauding bands of ‘bad guys’ constitute some of the very few glimpses of any sort of community in the novel, however

debased such community might be. Moreover, despite the love displayed towards one another by the man and the boy, they are nevertheless entirely alone for the majority of the narrative, their encounters with other humans being almost entirely hostile or at the very least highly suspicious ones until the final sequence after the band of ‘good guys’ reveal themselves to the boy when his father has died. It is, nevertheless, a very fruitful way to read the moral code of the man and boy in the novel, and Wielenberg’s thesis might be expanded upon if one considers some of the broader implications of the novel’s morality and its corresponding spiritual dimension in the context of complexity and emergence.

McCarthy’s long immersion in the conceptual vocabulary of his friends and acquaintances at the Santa Fe Institute will doubtless have inculcated within him an understanding of the concept of emergence which is so centrally important to the scientific study of complexity. Emergence, as a philosophical concept, has been around for over a century, but with the development throughout the late-twentieth century of the study of complexity, spearheaded by the interdisciplinary Santa Fe Institute, emergence found new life because the concept fit perfectly the kinds of properties and behaviours of interest to complex systems researchers.<sup>41</sup>

The renewed interest in emergence as an object of scientific study saw a flourishing of the use of its conceptual apparatus within all manner of diverse fields, and not all such uses are entirely warranted or in any way rigorous. The metaphorical borrowing of concepts from the sciences can be very fruitful but it is also a fraught endeavour as it risks the charge of frivolously clothing non-scientific arguments in a terminological and conceptual vocabulary that grants the argument a veneer of scientific rigour without any of the substance. Sokal and Bricmont skewered many cultural theorists by demonstrating how vacuous was some of their use of scientific concepts, but as Merja Polvinen has written, it is ‘important to acknowledge the heuristic benefits of cross-disciplinary metaphors, as long as their ends, both in the sense of underlying goals and of

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<sup>41</sup> According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry for ‘Emergent Properties’, the term was first given philosophical sense by George Henry Lewes in his 1875 *Problems of Life and Mind* (‘Emergent Properties’).

limitations, are kept in sight' ('Reading the Texture of Reality' 81). Paul Cilliers has argued for the existence of a 'complexity thinking,' which 'comprises the *acknowledgement* of complexity as a first step,' and once 'we realize that we are dealing with complex things, and we accept the consequences of this, our approach to what we are doing, irrespective to how we are actually doing it, will change fundamentally' (emphasis in original; 'Philosophical Importance' 3-4).

Keeping this in mind, it is possible to see in *The Road* some glimmers of 'complexity thinking' that may or may not have been conscious on the part of the author but that nevertheless give rise to a fruitful reading of some of the novel's thematic content. Most notably, the novel's conception of spirituality and of the existence of God, when viewed in light of the novel's celebration of process and emergence, can very readily be interpreted as suggesting a naturalistic process theology whereby God (along with goodness, love, compassion, etc.) is no more than an emergent property of the social interactions between humans in the world. To read the novel thus is to read God as being the active goodness operative in the relationships between those, such as the man and boy and the family of 'good guys' who adopt the boy at the end of the novel, who attempt to maintain a moral code based on compassion and love rather than acting on their baser instincts like the animalistic cannibals whose 'reptilian calculations' are visible in their 'cold and shifting eyes' (75).

Considered thus, the 'fire' that the man and boy 'carry' throughout their journey on the road is a divine spark which is, nevertheless, a naturalistic emergent property whose continuance depends entirely on the existence of its carriers to sustain it. Anthony Freeman, whose naturalistic views about the nature of God resulted in his being dismissed as a heretic from the Anglican Church in 1994, points out the attraction of emergence to those naturalists for whom both substance dualism and reductive physicalism are problematic or insufficient metaphysical accounts of the world: 'Emergence is a form of materialism, because it denies that a complex system or organism has any extra added ingredient over and above its physical parts; but it appeals to those who



are uneasy with reductive physicalism, because [it] also denies the claim that such a system is ‘nothing but’ the sum of its parts’ (Freeman, ‘God as an Emergent Property’ 147–148). He goes on to describe his understanding of the nature of God:

[...] the conscious mind has its origins in the physical brain, but is not simply the same thing as the brain. Having emerged from the physical body, but without any added ingredients such as Descartes’ ‘mind stuff’, it exhibits new features over and above the sum of its parts. It takes on an existence of its own [...] But it cannot be altogether divorced from its physical substrate. [...] human consciousness is a higher-level property caused by and realized in the physical structure of the brain and nervous system. By extension I am saying that ‘God-consciousness’ – or simply ‘God’ – is a higher-level property still, caused by and realized in the physical-and-mental-totality of human beings. (153)

Given the overarching celebration of the ‘becoming’ of life in *The Road*, figured most memorably in the triad of brook trout recollections, in the central Heraclitean motif of the fire, and in the sense throughout that the opposite of life is the static mere ‘being’ of inert, unanimated matter, it is reasonable to read in the novel’s metaphysic a suggestion that one might naturalistically account for the divine as an emergent property of the social and natural world’s commerce with itself.

One former researcher at the SFI has published similar claims for the nature of the divine. Theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman, who thanks Cormac McCarthy among his acknowledgements in *Reinventing the Sacred* (2008), spent much of his time at SFI investigating the potential origins of life in his quest to understand the self-organization of molecular materials in certain conditions of system complexity. *The Origins of Order* (1993) and *At Home in the Universe* (1995) are his accounts of much of that work, where he clearly describes, with experimental evidence, how *autocatalysis* can emerge in a

sufficiently well-interconnected array of materials with simple rules for interaction, interestingly using a fire metaphor to describe the emergence of autocatalytic order and life: ‘the possibility that sufficiently diverse mixtures of chemicals reacting with one another can “catch fire,” achieve catalytic closure, and suddenly emerge as living, self-reproducing, evolving metabolisms’ (*At Home in the Universe* 114). He proposes that such a tendency for self-organization is more widespread than previously imagined by molecular biologists and that it may constitute a kind of teleological creative principle that is nonetheless entirely naturalistic and unguided. This potentially explains the origins of life on our planet, suggesting that life’s emergence is much more likely (and potentially more widespread) than the astronomically improbable chain of contingent events which, for Jacques Monod, meant that ‘the universe was not pregnant with life nor the biosphere with man. Our number came up in the Monte Carlo game. Is it surprising that, like the person who has just made a million in the casino, we should feel strange and a little unreal?’ (qtd. in Midgley 34).

Contrary to Monod, Kauffman sees the creative power of the universe’s complex processes everywhere, and not only in the potential emergence of life from molecular autocatalytic sets: ‘We have only begun to understand the awesome creative powers of non equilibrium processes in the unfolding universe. We are all – complex atoms, Jupiter, spiral galaxies, warthog, and frog – the logical progeny of that creative power’ (*At Home in the Universe* 50–51).

Kauffman later builds on his experimental discoveries to speculate that the divine as traditionally understood might be reimagined as that very creative power he sees in the universe. He says in *Reinventing the Sacred* that his research didn’t unearth any specific *lams* governing the unfolding of creative emergence; by ‘laws’ he means, paraphrasing Murray Gell-Mann, ‘compressed description, available beforehand, of the regularities of a phenomenon’ (xi). Self-organized emergent wholes, such as the biosphere and the global economy, are ‘partially lawless’ in Kauffman’s terms in that there is no central direction and no prior description would ever suffice to predict their unfolding (despite that unfolding

not breaking any natural laws, and thus being only *partially* lawless) as the biosphere, for example, ‘literally constructs itself and evolves, using sunlight and other sources of free energy, and remains a coherent whole even as it diversifies, and even as extinction events occur’ (6).

Taken together, *The Road*’s creation of an unremittingly monochromatic and lifeless post-apocalyptic world within which vivid flashbacks thus become far more pronounced, and its conflation of the physiological and the geophysiological, all couched within a starkly paratactic structural scheme, combine to encourage a stance of appreciation toward the world as it currently exists. The parataxis both reflects the texture of the disjunctive and depleted post-apocalyptic world and diminishes conceptual categories with which the human mind customarily shapes its encounter with reality. As a result, spaces are opened up between the epistemological and the ontological which cumulatively resonate and are finally figured as the auditory metaphor of the coda: the hum of mystery which is made by all things ‘in the deep glens where they lived’ (287). The mystery may in part be an aspect of that ‘fire’ which is carried by the novel’s ‘good guys’ and which can be interpreted as figuring Stuart Kauffman’s entirely naturalistic, yet non-reductive, conception of creativity, and potentially of the divine, which exists within and among people and things as an emergent property of the broader social and natural complexities of the world.

The novel’s creation of a greyscale post-apocalyptic world almost entirely devoid of life intensifies the colour and vividness of its flashbacks to the rich world prior to the catastrophic event. In doing so, it amplifies the hum of mystery further and associates it primarily (but not exclusively) with the biologically thriving world before its collapse. By transposing physiological and geophysiological terms and suggesting that the man may have been a physician in his past the novel yokes together ideas of health and dysfunction in both fields, abolishing any illusion of the biosphere’s immunity to radical disruption (whether such disruption is anthropogenic or non-anthropogenic) while

underlining the contingency of its continued functioning as a bountiful home for humanity.

The ways in which McCarthy deploys paratactic style, generates analeptic contrast, and blurs the distinction between physiological and geophysiological health together grant the novel an affective power which fosters a response of gratitude and appreciation in the reader for the world as it currently stands, imperfect though it may be. As the hum of mystery intensifies, so does the novel's insistence upon our recognition of the mysterious nature of the life that surrounds us in such abundance. If, as the novel suggests, our knowledge of the intricate complexities of the biosphere is not sufficient to ever 'make things right again' should those complexities collapse, we would do well to recognise the limits of our abilities and treat with suspicion those who insist that there are technological solutions to any problems the global environment can throw at us. When *The Road* turns from its bleak anti-pastoral wasteland and gives us glimpses of the world as the man remembers it, the novel is doing more than merely providing a poignant back-story: it is gesturing toward the world outside our windows, a world of bustling complexity and intricate ecological interdependencies whose radical contingency entangles us all together in the swift, sudden turn of whale-lines.

## Conclusion

This thesis began life as an attempt to explore the possible influence of complexity science on the work of Cormac McCarthy. The earliest incarnation of its structure was shaped around a number of topics central to the study of complexity, with a chapter focusing on emergence, for example, with pertinent excerpts from the novels that suggest emergent phenomena, another chapter on determinism, another on evolution – and so on. As I researched the texts, I began to notice that all of the novels written since McCarthy started spending time with the scientists of SFI spend a great deal of time focusing on issues that fall under the broader concept of contingency: the uncertainty of our historical paths through life, the prevalence of luck in the world, and the radical uncertainty of that world’s continued habitability. My readings of the five novels in question then began to move away from a direct address of complexity and instead started to coalesce around the topic of contingency, and alongside the investigation of that theme’s presence in the novels’ narrative content I found it necessary to include an analysis of McCarthy’s style with respect to the vision of the universe that emerges from the texts.

The central research questions thus became: Can sufficient evidence of an overarching theme of contingency be gleaned from closely reading the five SFI-period novels? Given the metaphysical tension present in all of McCarthy’s work between two different modes of viewing the universe, does that tension manifest itself any differently in the SFI-period novels? Can it be argued that his literary style works in concert with the narrative content to inscribe a particular vision of the universe, and if so how does it do so? What, if any, has been the influence on that vision of the universe of McCarthy’s immersion in a complexity science milieu?

McCarthy scholarship has thus far lacked such an analysis of the author’s fictive *Weltanschauung* in relation to complexity science and with respect to both the themes and the style of his novels. As such, this thesis has

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attempted to fill that gap and lay some of the groundwork for similar studies in future.

I have attempted to answer all of these research questions through a structure based on the publication chronology of the novels. This structural scheme seemed the most apposite, not only for purposes of clarity but also because it followed a natural progression in terms of the thesis's development of its core argument: while the Border Trilogy introduces a particular phase in McCarthy's novelistic metaphysics, whereby the capacity to tell stories is celebrated in a mind's narratogenic encounter with an otherwise meaningless contingent world, and *No Country for Old Men* reframes that contingent world once again as hinging to a troubling degree on the arbitrary workings of contingent chance, *The Road* then uses the ultimate exposure of the world's contingency to emphasise the processual, generative importance of a complexity which is fast disappearing in the ashy wasteland. Thus the central thread of the thesis developed organically from the close readings, and while I had initially turned away from directly addressing complexity science in McCarthy I found the research gradually pulling me back in that direction again, via a broadly formalist exploration of the novels in question.

I have argued that a few of the principal features of McCarthy's style allegorically represent certain aspects of the *Weltanschauung* of his novels. The paratactic syntax of his prose makes hierarchical order and causal connections obscure. This obscurity makes the nature of causality and ontological distinction mysterious and leaves them open to a wider range of interpretation. Within this paratactic syntactical frame, McCarthy's prose runs the spectrum between two registers: one flat and declarative, the other heightened and exceedingly figurative. The fluctuation between these two registers in his novels corresponds with the tension between two metaphysical frameworks which his novels have always grappled with: the flat prose in many ways isomorphically reflects a reductive physicalist view of the universe's fundamental being, often mistaken for nihilism in McCarthy, whereas the heightened figuration reflects a more spiritual view of reality whereby things are related to one another metaphorically or metonymically through the act of

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witnessing and meaning is attached to both physical objects and reified abstractions, and even the most horrific and brutal of vistas is rendered strangely beautiful through the transformative power of figuration.

Ample textual evidence has been unearthed for the Border Trilogy's insistence upon the contingency of the world, particularly with respect to the problems such contingency raises for questions of personal moral responsibility and the administration of justice. The world that lies between 'the wish and the thing' causes John Grady Cole great pain as the life he discovers fails to meet his romantic expectations of it, and the nature of that contingent world becomes a vexed problem for the protagonists of all three novels of the trilogy. Whereas *All the Pretty Horses* circles around the problems of determinism, freedom and responsibility, figured in the central puppetry image of Dueña Alfonsa, the parallel journeys of Billy Parham in *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* stress the creative and generative power of narrative in all its many manifestations. The sequence of quasi-mystical interlocutors who relate their tales and meta-tales to Parham reaches its apotheosis with the stranger at the end of the trilogy, in the convolutions of whose tale can be discerned a celebration of the power of narrative to frame and structure lives and introduce meaning to the world where there was none before. Such narratives are often no less true for having been entirely invented or reshaped to suit the teller's tale, and the underlying openness of the physical world to such creative reinterpretations is figured by the paratactic syntax of the novels.

McCarthy's career-long tension, then, between seeing the world as nothing but the underlying value-free physical materials of which it is composed, and on the other hand of seeing meaning and/or purpose in the fabric of the universe (whether that be from the hand of a deity or not), is manifest in the trilogy and lends it much of its power. Unlike McCarthy's earlier work, however, the trilogy suggests that the creative impulse embodied in the narrative capacity is perhaps sufficient to introduce meaning into the world; or, at the very least, the creation of narrative is presented as a means of enduring the contingency of an otherwise indifferent and callous universe.

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The McCarthy universe is callous in more ways than just a disregard for the plans of its human inhabitants. The centrality of sheer chance in the temporal unfolding of people's lives renders absurd the systems of justice, both secular and metaphysical, in which many people have the utmost faith. We are witness to a collapse of that faith in the person of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in *No Country for Old Men* as his inherited worldview, saturated in the mythology of frontier justice and heroism, balks at the apprehension of forces and people whose destructive power he cannot account for. Thanks largely to the events of the novel and the shocking brutality of Anton Chigurh, Sheriff Bell loses faith in a world whose contingent uncertainty inspires a despair and trepidation he suspects he would not have felt in earlier times, failing as he does to realise that the Southwest border region reached even more vicious heights in the past, as reimagined earlier by McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*.

*No Country for Old Men* presents accounts of two other encounters with the world's contingency, however, in the persons of Llewelyn Moss and Anton Chigurh. Both Moss and Chigurh are much more comfortable with an absence of certainty or stability in the world; this is perhaps reflective of their respective roles as killers of men (Chigurh as a contemporary hitman, Moss as a sniper during the Vietnam War), but whereas Moss displays a pragmatic opportunism and tries to stoically ride out the journey on which his fortune takes him, Chigurh lives by a code that incorporates and sanctifies contingent chance at the very heart of his murderous endeavours, in the shape of the coin flip he sometimes offers his victims. The novel's emphasis on the role of luck in the world includes the observance of superstitious taboos and the keeping of talismanic objects by its characters, but there is a suggestion that such superstitions, and even the reification of luck itself, have their origins in perfectly explainable and naturalistic phenomena such as normal statistical distribution. This suggestion, alongside the very deliberate touches of human vulnerability that are granted to Chigurh and the overarching insistence on the utter contingency of the world, contributes to a much more naturalistic reading of the novel than would be warranted by many of McCarthy's earlier works. It also prefigures the naturalistic interpretation of God in *The Road* that suggests



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itself if the novel is read through the lens of certain concepts in the study of complexity.

*The Road* contains perhaps the most explicit pleas and execrations delivered to an absent, uncaring, or malevolent deity in all of McCarthy. The man frequently cries out against whatever god might preside over the ruination of the world, and his encounters with others such as the blind man Ely occasionally allude to concerns about the existence or otherwise of a God and the possible messianic nature of the boy in such a metaphysical scheme. The novel's affecting evocation of the mystery of the living world owes much of its power to the vitality of the scenes depicted in flashback. Once again the parataxis is instrumental in helping create a fictional world in which the physical desolation of the complex systems of life drags the whole conceptual edifice of the prelapsarian civilization with it into the void, with only its barest flickering sparks remaining in a darkening world.

This last point is crucial to an understanding of how McCarthy's SFI-period novels have addressed McCarthy's metaphysical tension, and how they relate to his immersion in the culture of SFI. Erstwhile SFI resident Stuart Kauffman lists Cormac McCarthy in the acknowledgements of his *Reinventing the Sacred*, and Kauffman's vision of the universe is a fascinating, if speculative and not uncontroversial, attempt to present a naturalised vision of the deity in terms of the principles of self-organization and emergence that Kauffman spent much of his career studying. Kauffman argues for a redefinition of God as being nothing more than the creative principle that is at work throughout all of nature. The evolutionary processes of self-organization and selection are the means by which the biosphere, the economy, and all similar complex systems are 'self-consistently co-constructing,' to use the term he uses. He claims that such co-construction is 'partially lawless' in that there is no 'compressed description, available beforehand, of the regularities of a phenomenon' that would enable one, even in principle, to predict the unfolding of such things as biological evolution (*Reinventing the Sacred* xi). This unpredictable, 'partially lawless', and ceaselessly creative jostling and co-constructing is what gives rise, for Kauffman, to the richness of the world and is what he argues we should

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adopt as our understanding of a God who bridges the gap between an entirely naturalist view of the universe and a view that yearns for something beyond a reductive meaningless void and instead seeks something that can rightly be an object of devotion.

This thesis is not claiming that McCarthy necessarily shares the pantheistic worldview espoused by Kauffman; but Kauffman's vision offers one way of understanding how McCarthy's metaphysical tension has progressed and taken new shape throughout his later career. His earlier novels gain much of their metaphysical charge from the interplay and tension between his evident interest in and regard for the physical forces of the natural world on the one hand, and on the other a sense of reaching for an understanding of the universe that accords it some sort of meaning beyond the value-free physical world of reductive scientism. As he moves into the SFI period, it is possible to discern something of a drawing back from the suggestion of supernaturalist metaphysical frameworks (such as Gnosticism) undergirding the physical world, and instead a greater emphasis is placed on contingency, the 'central principle of all history' (Gould, *Wonderful Life* 283).

That contingency is very much of a piece with the understanding of the world shared by many complexity scientists, because unpredictable novelty is at the heart of what constitutes the emergence of phenomena from the nonetheless determined and naturalistic unfolding of a system's physical history. If it can be argued that McCarthy's fictive metaphysics is in large part characterised by a strained dialectic between the reductive physicalism demanded by his naturalistic interest in the sciences (and particularly fundamental physics) and a restless metaphysical curiosity about potential alternatives to that reductionism, then in the SFI-period novels it is possible to see the gradual development of a potential compromise between those worldviews.

Naturalism need not be a reductive and nihilistic physicalism such as that expressed by White in *The Sunset Limited*. Likewise, a stance of appreciation and devotion towards a meaningful world need not depend upon supernaturalistic interpretations of the world's wonders, such as the born-again

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Christianity of that play's ex-convict, Black, in order to justify the attribution of value and meaning. McCarthy in his later novels suggests that a third way, beyond reduction and beyond supernaturalism, may be the more rewarding way of viewing the world. The narrative impulse that is so celebrated in the SFI-period novels can then be seen as one aspect of the broader creativity inherent in the fabric of reality and encapsulated in the concept of self-organization. The ceaseless creativity of the universe stands against its 'crushing black vacuum' as a fire staves off the surrounding cold. As genetic inheritors of perhaps the most complex objects yet known to humanity, in the form of our brains, we appear to have the capacity to use those organs to participate in the creativity that Kauffman identifies with the divine.

Reading SFI-period McCarthy through the lens of contingency has offered one possible way to approach the tension in his metaphysics. Perhaps more importantly, this study has led me to a fresh appraisal of McCarthy's style with respect to that metaphysical tension. There have been many scholarly attempts to address McCarthy's stylistic traits, and a considerable number of studies have explored aspects of his fictive *Weltanschauung*. But in bringing together both of these foci and attempting to sketch a potential interpretation of both in light of his familiarity with the sciences of complexity, I have hopefully pointed towards further avenues of research within McCarthy studies.

It would be interesting and highly informative, for example, to conduct a thorough computational stylistic examination of McCarthy's work in order to more objectively ascertain whether the more subjective claims I make for his style can be justified with hard evidence. Such a project would require extensive corpus preparation work, and prior to any such preparation it would be necessary to explore the digital scholarship tools and their functions in order to appropriately calibrate the study (to decide on how one might tag stylistic traits, for example, or how borderline elements might be decided upon). It would be of little use to try and enumerate all instances of the conjunction 'for', for example, without having some way of automatically distinguishing between the word's appearance as a preposition and its role as a

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conjunction. John Sepich has already produced excellent concordances of all of McCarthy's novels, and they are an indispensable tool for McCarthy scholarship, but there is room for some more targeted digital studies of his novels. An objective computational analysis of his style would provide more substantial evidence that would either support or undermine some of the more synoptic critical evaluations of that style's function, such as that contained in this thesis. Such a study would be most welcome.

This thesis is primarily concerned with closely reading the texts in question with respect to contingency, so the topic of complexity science only emerges as the study progresses. There remains much more to be said about McCarthy and complexity. Budgetary factors for this thesis precluded a research trip to the Cormac McCarthy Papers, housed in Texas State University, San Marcos, an extensive collection of material comprised mostly of drafts of his work from 1964 to 2007. A thorough and in-depth exploration of the papers, with an eye to unearthing scientific and metaphysical notes, marginalia, and content in unpublished drafts, could be most fruitful in providing glimpses of some of the ideas percolating around the composition of his novels.

There also remains to be written an extended biographical account of McCarthy's time at SFI and his friendship with the scientists working there. McCarthy has been famously protective of his privacy, and my desire to respect that privacy prohibited my prying into his life through requests for interviews with some of the SFI scientists. But a biographical account will become necessary as time goes on, particularly after McCarthy completes his voyage on the road and the urgency of recording first-hand accounts of his life among the complexity scientists will outweigh the need for sensitivity and discretion.

Further study also remains to be conducted on the relationship of style and metaphysics in McCarthy's earlier, pre-SFI novels. Such an analysis was beyond the scope of this thesis, for two reasons: firstly, a study of his entire oeuvre with respect to style and the metaphysical tension in his work would have necessitated a severe restriction of the space afforded each novel; and

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secondly, the overarching prominence of contingency as a specific thematic concern in the SFI-period novels offered me a natural way of focusing only on those novels and devoting sufficient attention to each of them in turn. Much scholarship has already been published on the various metaphysical concepts that feed into the more thematically dense earlier novels, but an attempt to tie together an explication of those novels' themes with their stylistic traits would complement this thesis and expand our appreciation of McCarthy's stylistic legacy.

It is increasingly common now to find a comparatively complimentary reference to Cormac McCarthy on the jacket of a contemporary novel or in its reviews, with recent examples being Philipp Meyer's *The Son* (2013) or Patrick deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers* (2013). Rarely do such novels live up to the comparison, however, as they lack McCarthy's commingling of style and thematic content into a singular fraught vision of the nature of the universe and humanity's place within it. If the as-yet-unpublished manuscript of *The Passenger*, a longer novel that McCarthy has purportedly been working on for many years, ever sees the light of day, it will be interesting to see if it continues the thematic focus on contingency of his other SFI-period novels or if it constitutes another shift in his career-long exploration of the tense ground between the being of the world and its witnessing.

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