



# “To Make a Fire Somewhere Out There in All That Dark”: The Mystery of Evil and Grace in Cormac McCarthy’s Later Works

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“To Make a Fire Somewhere Out There In All That Dark”:  
The Mystery of Evil and Grace in Cormac McCarthy’s Later Works

Aaron Christopher Ziegler

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the seemingly paradoxical and mysterious relationship of evil and grace in Cormac McCarthy's later works: *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road*, and *The Sunset Limited*. While McCarthy's literary worlds articulate a metaphysical collapse and are consequentially replete with such cruelty as to appear entirely absurd and devoid of beauty, the later works actually reveal a robust set of grace moments. A scholarly conversation attempting to ascribe McCarthy's fiction as gratuitously cruel, on one extreme, and explicitly moralistic, on the other extreme, often denies the interdependence of terrifying, unintelligible evil and unexplainable goodness and beauty in McCarthy's fiction. In fact, evil and grace, as much as they represent vastly different forces, share a strange, inextricable relationship. In considering the pairing of evil and grace, McCarthy raises profound questions about the notion of living in a world of such polarizing forces. Through a study of the later works, in accepting the terror of the metaphysical collapse along with the moments of grace, McCarthy suggests that living in such a world requires turning toward the terror—not escaping from it—and persisting in whatever moment, on whatever road, and through whatever journey.

## Dedication

for Christina, Sophia, and Isabella

## Acknowledgments

As I finish this thesis, I have found myself, near the end, frequently imagining that I am not writing about Cormac McCarthy but living in one of his novels, like a version of *The Road* that keeps going with no end in sight. Getting to the end, therefore, has come at the expense of other people, because I could not have completed the journey on my own.

Thank you Professor Matthew L. Potts, my thesis director, for your tremendous insights and encouragement that I was not, in fact, living in a McCarthy novel, just writing about them. Your thoughts were often uncanny, and I owe much of the intellectual muscle of this thesis to your guidance. Also, thank you for enriching my understanding of grace. Additionally Talaya Delaney, my research adviser, helped launch this project in its infancy with exceptional guidance and enthusiasm—thank you.

On the home front, as I was writing about the mystery of grace I got to experience it too. To my mom, who knows something of loss, thank you for all your support, and the memory of my dad who, like Sheriff Bell's dad in *No Country for Old Men*, passed too soon but was always going on ahead to fix a fire for his children. To my other parents, Rick and Kathy, who have given so much support to Christina and I, including use of the cabin where this project initially developed and where John McKinney sat with me around the fire talking McCarthy, pushing me in his own way to go through with this thesis. Thanks John. Finally, thank you to my wife, Christina, who is grace in my life, as are my two children, Sophia and Isabella, who may be too young to read McCarthy but have taught me how to understand McCarthy's notion of beauty and love.

## Table of Contents

Dedication . . . . .	iv
Acknowledgments . . . . .	v
I. An Introduction to McCarthy's Mysterious Worlds . . . . .	1
II. Landscaping the Fractured Metaphysics of McCarthy's Worlds . . . . .	14
Geography and Man-Made Structures . . . . .	15
The West as a Place of Death . . . . .	16
McCarthy's Hell . . . . .	19
Fractured Milieus and Collapsed Metaphysics . . . . .	22
Putting the Soul at Hazard . . . . .	24
No Country for Mankind . . . . .	27
Metaphysical Collapse, a Howling Void . . . . .	30
III. The Bad, the Good, and the Futility . . . . .	33
The Uncoupling of Ontological Sense . . . . .	36
Psychic Denial of the Metaphysical Collapse. . . . .	38
Cruel Indifference of the World . . . . .	42
The Ineffectuality of the Good Guys . . . . .	45
The Meaningless Narrative of Good . . . . .	49
Futility at the End of the Road . . . . .	55
IV. The Uncanny, Mysterious Persistence of Grace . . . . .	57
Concluding <i>No Country for Old Men</i> . . . . .	59

At the End of <i>The Road</i> , Breath and Mystery . . . . .	62
Redemption, Happiness, and Hope in <i>The Road</i> ? . . . . .	68
Grace in the Later Works . . . . .	71
Grace and Luck . . . . .	72
Grace as a Gift . . . . .	75
Grace as Beauty . . . . .	77
Grace as Deliverance . . . . .	82
Grace, Miraculous and Mundane, a Mystery . . . . .	86
V. The Paradoxical Mystery of Evil and Grace . . . . .	88
Two Faiths, Two Responses . . . . .	91
Thematic and Lyrical Bleakness . . . . .	95
Yet, the Hum of Mystery . . . . .	100
Questions Not Answers . . . . .	103
VI. Facing the Void—Concluding McCarthy’s Later Works . . . . .	109
Bibliography . . . . .	116



## Chapter I

### An Introduction to McCarthy's Mysterious Worlds

“all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery”

From the earliest words of Cormac McCarthy's first novel *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), as if committing himself to a canonical trajectory of the “grotesque” (7), Cormac McCarthy has grappled with deeply human questions, but none so essential and so unsettling as: how does one reconcile the overwhelming capacity for human cruelty, perversion, and evil without, first, conceding any coherent notion of beauty in the world and without, more broadly, yielding to a total state of despair?

In his 1992 interview with Richard Woodward, in saying “[t]here is no such thing as life without bloodshed,” Cormac McCarthy offered something of a response to such a question. Anyone who has read Cormac McCarthy—his ten novels spanning from 1965 to 2006—is, to be certain, psychically appalled, to say nothing of the visceral experience of confronting, in many cases, horrific accounts of human malevolence and perversion, gratuitous cruelty and violence, human suffering and pain. Cormac McCarthy's literary visions carry the distinctive quality of a particularly brutal and morally chaotic world. Grotesque characters and milieus are the norm, not exception, as his earliest canonical works attest—whether it is, in *Outer Dark* (1968), the climatic cannibalization of the child from the incestuous relationship or, in *Child of God* (1973), Lester Ballard's subterranean repository of sexually defiled corpses. Harold Bloom, who has called

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) "the greatest single book since Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*," also admitted that upon his initial reading, "I was so appalled that . . . I gave up after about 60 pages," suggesting the intensity "was more than I could take" (*AV Club*). And that critique holds for much of McCarthy's fiction, whose clinical treatment of cruelty shocks, confounds, and unnerves the capacity for faith in human progress. McCarthy's canon does evolve from the early cases of disturbed humanity, but, arguably, McCarthy's later canon is not less but more terrifying—whether it is, in *No Country for Old Men* (2005), the spectral psychopath, Anton Chigurh, who kills almost every character in the novel with impunity, or, in *The Road* (2006), which features a charred world devastated by some nameless apocalyptic event where rogue cannibalistic gangs roam and accumulate people, naked and emaciated, in basements for consumption. The senseless violence is often so intense as to be palpable, so unintelligible as to be disorienting that, however categorically loaded, the most compelling language to describe the wanton cruelty of McCarthy's fiction is within the context of evil<sup>1</sup>.

McCarthy's canonical preoccupation with mankind's penchant for evil acts—unaccompanied by a clear authorial renunciation of the acts—has encouraged some scholars to interpret McCarthy's fiction as nihilistic. In a now seminal essay in early McCarthy scholarship, "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy," Vereen Bell argues, "Cormac McCarthy's novels are as innocent of theme and of ethical references as they are of plot" (31), later suggesting that McCarthy is "oblivious to teleological

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize the word evil is philosophically and religiously complicated and, potentially, even a reductive category for McCarthy. However, if one were to just take Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative as one point of reference, many of McCarthy's characters patently reject any coherent sense of moral or legal rights in the Kantian tradition. What I consider evil are acts: sinister and senseless, which evoke revulsion, at best, and horror, at worst; which create unjustified pain and, in many instances, death; and which indicate a profound depravity. Evil, in McCarthy's fiction, is particularly sinister and seemingly evocative of nihilism.

fashions, indifferent if not hostile to the social order, wholly absorbed in the strange heterocosm of his own making” (31-32). With the absence of intelligible plot structures set against the backdrop “of grotesque cruelty” (35) and with characters who “exist in isolated pockets of experience” (35) without cathartic opportunities in their respective endings, Bell contends that the “logos has been borne away” (40). In more recent scholarship, Lydia Cooper connects McCarthy’s fiction, which is “bleak . . . scarred by grotesque images of human squalor and depravity” (1), with Bell’s longstanding sense of the ““nihilistic mood”” (1). The grotesque images are impossible to ignore, and so the “heterocosm” of McCarthy’s fictional worlds seem to lack coherence—of plot, of morality, of authorial persuasion—such that the “nihilistic mood” is so accessible as to be seemingly incontrovertible. Of course, it is worth noting, even Bell, the purveyor of the nihilistic critique, would later revise his critical stance, suggesting that, “McCarthy is a genuine—if somehow secular—mystic” (“Between the Wish”). The original nihilistic critique<sup>2</sup>, however reductive, is not without merit.

After all, very little of McCarthy’s fiction ever attempts any kind of conventional resolution in plot or character arc, functioning seemingly, instead, to deny characters ontological restitution. One might reasonably wonder, as Vereen Bell’s original critique suggests, if McCarthy’s intention is to approximate the incoherence of a meaningless world, especially in the absence of “teleological fashions.” This incoherence is particularly exacting in McCarthy’s early canonical works. *Outer Dark*, McCarthy’s

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<sup>2</sup> Bell’s revised view of McCarthy’s nihilistic intentions is largely reflective of the scholarly community. Almost no scholar suggests McCarthy’s work is exclusively nihilistic. Although I will not argue this point in this essay, it seems worth noting that if McCarthy were nihilistic, his own literary craftsmanship would seem to counter the argument. In other words, one could argue that there would be no compelling reason to create a fictional world purposed as nihilistic. The very nature of nihilism would undercut the nature of creating anything intended to make meaning, especially a created thing that would argue for no meaning.

second novel, concerns the quest to find the missing child of an incestuous relationship; the child, as mentioned, is eventually found, in the end, before being murdered in front of his rescuer and, therefore, devoid of cosmic justice. The novel's final image, however, is of a blind man walking down a road: "He wondered where the blind man was going and did he know how the road ended. Someone should tell a blind man before setting him out that way" (242). Like Macbeth's "idiot, full of sound and fury," McCarthy's concluding image is absurd. *Child of God*, McCarthy's third novel, Lester Ballard's perverse lusts lead to his eventual incarceration, but his victims lack restitution—"He was never indicted for any crime" (193); instead, after death, Lester's body is shipped to a medical school for scientific research:

He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated . . . At the end of the three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. (194)

McCarthy's precisely detailed, corporeal deconstruction of Ballard functions as a legitimized version of the sort of dehumanizing that occurs in the novel, especially at Ballard's own fetishized hands; so, in one sense, McCarthy allows for a version of universal recompense. However, Ballard's punishment for his crimes, "flayed, eviscerated, dissected," occurs posthumously. The overarching teleological sense here is not of congruity but rather ontological incoherence, a grotesque collection of unintelligible body parts, "head," "brains," "muscles," "heart," and "entrails" eventually "scraped" and stored in a "plastic bag." One perverse character undergoes a perverse ending—no more. *Child of God* offers no sense of coherence, no sense of meaning, and no sense of beauty. Although the complexity of characters and scope of plot in *Blood*

*Meridian*, McCarthy's fifth novel, far exceeds his previous novels *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, and although the ending is less explicitly grotesque than earlier novels, McCarthy's resolution is no less troubling. The kid, McCarthy's de facto, antiheroic protagonist, after years of savage escapades of scalp hunting and escaping violent skirmishes alive, unexpectedly encounters the judge, McCarthy's de facto, ambiguous antagonist, in the outhouse of a saloon: "The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered [the kid] in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him" (347). McCarthy never says precisely what occurs, but a conversation immediately following is suggestive:

In the muddled dogyard behind the premises two men went down the boards towards the jakes. A third man was standing there urinating into the mud.  
 Is someone in there? the first man said.  
 The man who was relieving himself did not look up. I wouldn't go in there if I was you, he said.  
 Is there somebody in there?  
 I wouldn't go in [...]  
 The first man . . . then opened the door of the jakes.  
 Good God almighty, he said.  
 What is it?  
 He didn't answer. (347-348)

The lack of an "answer" is, in some ways, the most troubling feature of McCarthy's conclusions. They are inconclusive, and disturbingly so. While very few, if any, of McCarthy's characters in *Blood Meridian* possess a Kantian moral compass, even this implicitly gruesome act is troubling. While the unknown men at the outhouse discover what remains of the kid, the judge returns to the saloon to dance. Life moves on. No answers are given. The mystery persists. McCarthy's world is Hobbesian, "nasty, brutish, and short," or so it appears. In many cases, nothing can account for characters'

teleological trajectories, only that, “There is no such thing as life without bloodshed,” as McCarthy reminds.

If McCarthy’s “life without bloodshed” comment serves as an overarching framework to his literary worlds—worlds that are grotesque, sordid, and ontologically incomprehensible, worlds that are identifiably evil—then, I would argue, the sentiment ought to be paired with an equally essential framework, that life, even so, is “[a] strange beauty” (*The Road* 102). While McCarthy’s canon has largely engaged with the perverse appetites and inner deformities of man, despite the overwhelming tenor of savage humanity in McCarthy’s fiction, beauty remains too. The beauty is fragile, fragmented, and infrequent—but beauty is there, in the fringes of McCarthy’s text, defiantly. As if anticipating McCarthy’s literary career and thematic concerns, Annie Dillard, nine years after McCarthy’s first published work *The Orchard Keeper*, offered a similar paradigmatic framework in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) that accords with the fabric in McCarthy’s fiction:

Cruelty is a mystery, and the waste of pain. But if we describe a world to compass these things, a world that is a long, brute game, then we bump against another mystery: the inrush of power and light, the canary that sings on the skull. Unless all ages and races of men have been deluded by the same mass hypnotist (who?), there seems to be such a thing as beauty, a grace wholly gratuitous. (6)

Like Dillard’s paradigmatic contention, McCarthy’s canonical exploration of cruelty eventually intersects with an often, mysterious sense of beauty, what might be called grace<sup>3</sup>. As my opening question articulated, McCarthy’s fiction produces an unavoidable, visceral abhorrence to the cruelty, where rejecting any coherent sense of the world seems

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<sup>3</sup> Like “evil,” grace is a complicated word. In this essay, I will think of grace to represent moments and acts, mysterious and unaccountable, in some cases, and intelligible and explicable in other cases, that constitute a good that is unmerited and unexpected, and delineates the possibility of beauty and hope in the world. Though its roots are in the Christian doctrine of salvation, the acts and the actors of grace, in themselves, are neither necessarily Christian or demonstrative of Christianity, nor are they necessarily secularized.

the logical conclusion; except, this would not be entirely honest. Edwin T. Arnold, Vereen Bell's critical counterpart, frames McCarthy this way: "Incest, infanticide, necrophilia; drunkenness, debauchery, sacrilege; physical deformity and spiritual morbidity; this is a bleak place McCarthy explores in his fiction. But it has been too easy . . . to categorize McCarthy as an unusually talented purveyor of nihilistic . . . horror . . . and to miss the essential religiosity at the core of his writing" ("Blood and Grace" 12). Although I will not argue Arnold's "religiosity" claim, there are, in many instances throughout McCarthy's canon, particular moments, acute and faint, that seem intentionally beautiful. McCarthy's development of this sense of grace is particularly evident in the latter part of his canon of the twenty-first century, and it is within the context of these works that I would like to explore the intersection of evil and grace.

I would like to sketch, briefly, the working definitions of evil<sup>4</sup> and grace that I will apply to McCarthy's later works. I acknowledge, first, that I am not a philosopher or theologian, and I will not attempt to frame this essay as a philosophical or theological treatise, while I, admittedly, wade unavoidably into philosophical and theological waters. In the abstract, evil derives from the metaphysical collapse<sup>5</sup> of McCarthy's worlds, the dissolution—at the hands of man—of the intelligible structures that govern the seeming universal metaphysical order, through acts cruel, senseless, and grotesque. As evil threatens the intelligible capacity for ontological meaning in McCarthy's worlds, the effects of evil are a sense of despair, interior imbalance and spiritual disorder, a

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<sup>4</sup> My academic reference point for evil is largely informed by the introduction (1-13) of Susan Neiman's book *Evil in Modern Thought*.

<sup>5</sup> "Metaphysical collapse" is an essential term to my thesis. I use it as a kind of categorical phrase to denote total erosion in unseen "reality," creating "questions about being, substance, time and space, causation, change, and identity" (Oxford English Dictionary). It is the sense that the world is a void, an abyss, with no governing intelligibility, and therefore subsequent to a kind of chaos.

heightened attention to futility, and, ultimately, the uncertainty of mankind's livelihood. If evil is dissolution, grace, conversely, is the seeming reconstitution of the fissured and attenuated universal metaphysical order, a kind of unexpected and mysterious goodness countering the cruelty. Grace, for McCarthy, is at times moments of gifts, at times moments of beauty, and at times moments of deliverance. The effects of grace in McCarthy's worlds—apart from a mystical beauty, a thing good on its own merits—are that characters derive a sense of inner coherence in the metaphysical collapse and persist forward-facing in the teeth of despair. The grace moments are sometimes intelligible—they have logic, intuitive cohesion—and sometimes unintelligible—they defy reason, sense, and appear mysterious, even miraculous.

Cormac McCarthy has published three twenty-first century books in what scholars have called his later works<sup>6</sup>: *No Country for Old Men* (2005), *The Road* (2006), and *The Sunset Limited* (2006). Both *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* are novels, his ninth and tenth, and *The Sunset Limited*, self-described as a novel in dramatic form, is his third dramatic work, and all are currently the most recent of McCarthy's publications. Grouping these three works together to explore the relationship between evil and grace is compelling for several reasons. For instance, their publishing proximity, three literary works in a two-year span, represents, relative to McCarthy's career, a literary renaissance. These works, in this historical publishing sense, appear a unique moment in McCarthy's career, as if McCarthy was struck by some creative vision. The novels, in particular, also represent the logical extensions of McCarthy's own micro-literary

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<sup>6</sup> For an excellent chronology on McCarthy, see Steven Frye's *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. *No Country for Old Men* was "probably" first envisioned as a screenplay in 1986. It is unclear when McCarthy transitioned the initial text into a novel and when he began this project. Regarding *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*, McCarthy began both projects in 2004.



traditions, the Southern novels and the Western novels. McCarthy's canon contains two general categories beginning with the Southern novels—*The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979)—and continuing with the Western novels—*Blood Meridian* (1985), *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). *No Country for Old Men*, representing the Western novels, and *The Road*, representing the Southern novels, are conventionally McCarthian—in savage violence, in grotesque and abominable characters, in comprehensive tragedy—possessing all the “same issues [of previous fiction]” (“The Later Works” 151), contends Steven Frye. Yet, the temporal distinction between twentieth and twenty-first century novels is more than symbolic. *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* seem almost disconnected from McCarthy's previous canonical works in several ways. While patently McCarthian texts, as Lydia Cooper observes, “McCarthy's literary cosmos may be creeping closer and closer to apocalyptic damnation” (2), suggesting an intensification—which, by McCarthy's standards, is disturbing—of his canonical concerns. But, it is not merely the intensification of the old concerns that distinguishes these texts, for *No Country*<sup>7</sup>, Frye argues, is stylistically “a departure from anything McCarthy has written before, with a sentence-level style as spare and laconic as anything published in the contemporary period” (152), suggesting his “sentences are reminiscent of Hemingway's” (156), which is the precise language he uses to describe *The Road*, “minimalist and reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway” (171). Stylistically, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* possess an entirely different energy than previous works, as Frye also notes that McCarthy's later canonical style mirrors “his subject

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<sup>7</sup> I will often use the abbreviated form of *No Country* to refer to *No Country for Old Men*, and I will abbreviate the other texts as well.

matter [which] remains bleak and unremittingly harsh” (154). Petra Mundik connects *No Country* and *The Road* as stylistic texts, as she notes the imagery of “[t]he opening sentence of *The Road*” (*A Bloody and Barbarous God* 287) appropriates the imagery of the closing passage of *No Country*. For Mundik, “*The Road* is the logical extreme of the world view presented in his earlier works” (287), particularly *No Country*. For McCarthy, style is an articulation of theme. That *No Country* and *The Road* share “a sentence-level style . . . spare and laconic,” or that *No Country* ends with an image that begins *The Road*, the later works, including *The Sunset Limited*, share a more conscious attention to the treatment of evil: “Unlike previous McCarthy novels, which must be read slowly to be appreciated, *The Road* is imbued with a sense of urgency, as if essential truths that cannot be spoken clearly must nevertheless find imperfect expression in language” (“The Later Works” 168). What some scholars interpret in McCarthy’s stylistic shift within the later works, I see as an intensifying of McCarthy’s mysterious worlds, the mystery of the intersection between evil and grace.

Cormac McCarthy’s canon has always possessed an element of mystery—the nameless characters that people his novels, the peripatetic sojourns that these characters undertake, the inconclusive moments that have no “answer,” what Lydia Cooper calls the “complex dialectic between despair and idealism [that] runs through McCarthy’s corpus” (1). Therefore, it would be imprecise to suggest that McCarthy’s later works exclusively develop this tension between evil and grace. In his early canonical work, *Outer Dark*, McCarthy displays a particular adroit balancing act of intertwining cruelty and beauty. Near the conclusion, Rinthy, mother of the previously mentioned abducted child, discovers parts of the child’s body:

Late in the afternoon she entered the glade, coming down a footpath where narrow cart tracks had crushed the weeds and though the wood, half wild and haggard in her shapeless sundrained cerements, yet delicate as any fallow doe, and so into the clearing to stand in a grail of jade and windy light, slender and trembling and pale with wandlike hands to speak the boneless shapes attending her. And stepping softly with her air of blooded ruin about the glade in a frail agony of grace she trailed her rags through dust and ashes, circling the dead fire, the charred billets and chalk bones, the little calcined ribcage. (237)

The tragedy of “the little calcined ribcage” is profound. Yet, while a moment of horror, the ethereal beauty—the “afternoon” light and “sundrained cerements,” the “delicate . . . doe,” “windy light,” and the “slender and trembling” mother—seems, almost, the focus of the moment, not the grotesque murder. And, it is in this moment that McCarthy lays a key canonical phrase, “a frail agony of grace,” a phrase freighted with all the complexity worthy of McCarthy’s mysterious and paradoxical worlds.

However, I find the “frail agony of grace” in the later works as McCarthy’s most explicit mystery of his canon. Although I have enumerated the various iterations of evil in McCarthy’s canon, the later works display McCarthy’s most capacious exploration of inexplicable cruelty: characters murder without restraint—the guilty as well as the innocent; characters eat each other—eat children, eat adults; characters kill themselves—or attempt suicide; and, ultimately, characters may even destroy the world—through humanity induced error. Though the evil is stark, McCarthy paradoxically includes robust moments of grace: characters maintain meaningful relationships; characters attempt to restore order amidst chaos; characters undergo tremendous self-renewal; nature produces moments of beauty; characters save other characters from certain evil. McCarthy’s sense of grace seems particularly accessible in the conclusions of the later works.

Whereas the conclusions of earlier canonical works seem deliberately against the ontological restitution of characters, the conclusions of the later works appear almost

optimistic, almost conclusive—as if imagining a world that possessed a strange sense of beauty. McCarthy concludes *No Country* with a monologue by Sheriff Bell concerning a dream sequence and his deceased father: “*I knew that [my father] was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there*” (309). Here, McCarthy’s deliberate light imagery within “*all that dark*” invites the capacity for grace within the “*dark*” of the world. Similarly in *The Road*, McCarthy’s imagery is laden with ontological possibility: “[i]n the deep glens where [the brook trout] lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery” (287). Just as “*fixin to make a fire*” in *No Country* symbolically anticipates a response to evil, the “hummed of mystery,” likewise, suggests a penetrating vibrancy within the context of evil. McCarthy continues this notion of a hopeful possibility within a context of terrible uncertainty in the final scene of *The Sunset Limited*. Although the play concludes with White rejecting Black’s attempts to save his physical and spiritual selves, as White leaves Black’s apartment, Black yells down the hallway: “Professor? I’m goin to be there in the morning. I’ll be there. You hear? I’ll be there in the mornin” (141-142). Like the “fire” of *No Country* and the “mystery” of *The Road*, McCarthy includes Black’s unprompted promise to White, an arguable act of grace in spite of another certain suicide attempt. My argument will seek to position the “fire,” “mystery,” and “mornin” as components of a cohesive vision, albeit occasionally ambiguous, of McCarthy’s mysterious worlds.

In McCarthy’s later works, both evil and grace seem deliberately paired as a broader ontological exploration of the mystery of the universe—that human existence consists of “bloodshed” but also beauty, grace, survival, perseverance, grit. Never in

McCarthy's canon has ever been more problematic, more disturbing, more insurmountable, and, yet, in the end of all things, McCarthy still presents evil as a partner to another mystery, that of grace. How can these two diametrically opposed forces coexist? It would be easy to see McCarthy's later works as Macbethian: "full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing," as darker accounts of a canonical obsession with humanity's perverse appetites. McCarthy, predictably, does not ever tip his hand, but the exclusively nihilistic readings must deny the moments freighted with beauty. This essay will begin by exploring McCarthy's geographical spaces as physical representations of the fissured metaphysical milieus of the later works, and then explore the specific characters that perpetrate evil, including good characters who cannot always maintain their goodness. The essay will then pivot to consider the myriad expressions of grace in the later works and the mysterious relationship between grace and evil. Finally, the essay will turn toward the questions that the pairing of evil and grace raises, and, in particular, the mystery of McCarthy's later works; ultimately, the essay will consider McCarthy's seeming suggestion, that to make a living in a harsh world one must inevitably face the harshness with a sense of grace. For, in the end of McCarthy's canon, "all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery."

## Chapter II

### Landscaping the Fractured Metaphysics of McCarthy's Worlds

“a thing dangling . . . in a howling void”

While landscapes have always been critical to McCarthy, they are especially important in the later works. Curiously, the titles of all three of the later works—*No Country for Old Men*, *The Road*, and *The Sunset Limited*—explicitly or implicitly appropriate physical spaces as a strategy for locating the narrative. Both *Country* and *Road* are explicitly physical places, whereas *The Sunset Limited*, a reference to a particular train and train-service, implies a physical infrastructure dependent on a physical landscape. Where *No Country for Old Men*, alluding to the opening line of William Butler Yeats' poem “Sailing to Byzantium,” immediately offers a pointed commentary about the physical and social atmosphere of the *No Country* world, both *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* offer no thematic direction—they are simply reference points. Though, for McCarthy, titles seem far more significant than just strategies to locate a text. They feel freighted with ontological possibilities, symbolically flexible to suggest a multiplicity of interpretations. It is possible to imagine *No Country for Old Men*, then, as less a title of one book and more a comprehensive indictment of the social milieus of the three later works, for the later works are truly worlds hostile to mankind, worlds teetering on ontological despair. In the end of *The Sunset Limited*, White, the suicidal professor, explains to Black, the man who saved White from a suicide attempt on the New York subway, just what he

believes about his own milieu: “the forms I see have been slowly emptied out. They no longer have any content. They are shapes only. A train, a wall, a world. Or a man. A thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void” (139).

In the later works, physical spaces, primarily geographical spaces (natural) and manmade structures (non-natural)—deserts, forests, bodies of water, as well as motels, apartments, restaurants—function primarily as representations of the spiritual milieu of Cormac McCarthy’s worlds, milieus predominately concerned with the metaphysical collapse of society, what White describes as the “howling void.” While external spaces are important in their own right (one can imagine a robust eco-critical approach against man’s reckless relationship with nature using McCarthy’s works), external spaces also initiate access to the fractured metaphysics of McCarthy’s worlds. Representative of three distinct settings—the West, the South, and the East—the later works offer a well-balanced exploration of McCarthy’s various interests. External realities dramatize internal climates, and, in this sense, the later works depend on physical spaces as a means of addressing McCarthy’s metaphysical concerns with evil. In this chapter, I would like to explore the physical spaces of McCarthy’s later works and then explore, second, these spaces as physical expressions of the spiritual climates of the later works, spiritual climates fractured by hostile and painfully indifferent worlds.

### Geography and Man-Made Structures

*No Country for Old Men* represents McCarthy’s canonical micro-tradition of the Western novels, and, consistent with the iconic geography of the West, the novel is replete with desert wilderness, cold rivers, empty motels, and long highways. Chris

Dacus' analysis of the setting in another of McCarthy's Western novels, *Blood Meridian*, "the 'West' as a multivalent metaphor" (7), applies to *No Country* too. On the one hand, the capacious landscapes suggest unfettered independence and accessibility and, on the other hand, the sere, fissured topography is a reminder of the impossibly harsh world. *No Country* begins with just such a cruel paradox. Instead of a sweeping panoramic description of the topographically significant West, *No Country* begins with a man-made death-sphere: "*I sent one boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville*" (3). As if subverting cultural expectations about Manifest Destiny, Sheriff Bell's opening inner thought, telegraphic and stark, is a reminder that the West, instead of a location of life, of hope, of possibility, is a location of death. The "*gaschamber*" image focuses this lingering sense of death within McCarthy's manmade structures, but most of the manmade structures within the novel are not execution chambers but more mundane western iconography.

### The West as a Place of Death

In *No Country*, manmade structures match the itinerant world of the West: motels, diners, roads, courthouses, and jails; McCarthy details a world of restless movement and incessant travel, as if attempting to outpace the overwhelming sense of death. Moss, the semi-protagonist, travelling in a cab and entering Eagle Pass, a Texas town, late at night, asks the cabdriver, "Just take me downtown," by which the cabdriver replies, "You are downtown" (106), implying a physical loneliness. At the Hotel Eagle, after paying for his room, Moss "put the key in his pocket and climbed the stairs and walked down the old hotel corridor. Dead quiet. No lights" (107). Like the downtown, the hotel is "dead," "old," and devoid of "lights." It is not merely the motels; roads, and the spaces associated



with automobile movement, are dead. Sheriff Bell, the protagonist attempting to protect Moss, “Driving . . . came across a hawk dead in the road . . . Cold yellow eye dead to the blue vault above them” (44). When Chigurh, McCarthy’s terrifying, psychopathic antagonist who is hunting Moss, returns to his motel room, he “stood in the open door under the dead white light from the parking lot lamp” (103). At one point, as Chigurh is tracking Moss, he drives across “the Devil’s River Bridge . . . near midnight and no cars on the highway” (98). And when Sheriff Bell, en route to a Fort Stockton motel where the dead body of Moss lies, is “[a]bout ten miles west of Fort Stockton on the I-10 interstate he passed a car burning by the side of the highway” (236). McCarthy’s motels are places of death but so are his spaces accessible to vehicles. Parking lots are “dead,” and roads, connected to Hell, are both empty and “burning.”

And the geography, more or less, upholds this harsh connotation of death. Just a few pages into the novel, beyond the introductory “*gaschamber*” structure, Moss scans the southern Texas landscape as he hunts for antelope:

Moss sat with the heels of his boots dug into the volcanic gravel of the ridge and glassed the desert below him . . . and the shadow of the ridge and the datilla and the rocks fell far out across the floodplain below him. Somewhere out there was the shadow of Moss himself. He lowered the binoculars and sat studying the land. Far to the south the raw mountains of Mexico. The breaks of the river. To the west the baked terracotta terrain of the running borderlands. (8)

As McCarthy so often describes, the landscape is capacious, indifferent, and ancient. Moss delineates his context, “the ridge,” “the rocks . . . far out,” “[f]ar to the south . . . Mexico,” “the river,” “the running borderlands,” an enormous space, empty and void. Moss stands above the natural landscape, the repeated “below him” accentuating the seeming distance between himself and the world also intensifies the terrible isolation. And, in typical McCarthy narration, he embeds the symbolic within the physical,

“Somewhere out there was the shadow of Moss,” a microcosmic description of McCarthy’s larger ontological concerns of mankind’s spiritual occupation, an occupation longstanding. The “volcanic gravel” imagines historical millennia of ancient history, of violent natural history, and, coupled with the “floodplain,” McCarthy insists on the cycles of the natural world, the rugged truth of nature, exceed the insignificance of mankind. The land is not possessed of some ancient evil as the “Devil’s River” (98) suggests; the land is indifferent. The ancient, persistent sense continues as Moss wanders through the wilderness to find the antelope that he has shot: “[t]he rocks there 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). Moss appropriates the natural world as a mechanism for personal identification, “hunters like himself,” but he also makes the crucial albeit harsh realization, “[o]f them there was no trace.” Moss, in his pursuit of his wounded prey, ultimately discovers the aftermath of a grim drug deal:

In the first vehicle there was a man slumped dead over the wheel. Beyond were two more bodies lying in the gaunt yellow grass. Dried blood black on the ground. He stopped and listened. Nothing. The drone of flies . . . There was a large dead dog there of the kind he’d seen crossing the floodplain. The dog was gutshot . . . He looked through the window at the man in the truck. He was shot through the head. Blood everywhere . . . He walked out to where the third body lay. There was a shotgun in the grass . . . He nudged the man’s boot with his toe and studied the low surrounding hills. (12)

McCarthy seamlessly integrates the natural world and the violent conflict of man: “bodies lying in the grass,” “blood black on the ground,” “shotgun in the grass,” and all in the context of the “low surrounding hills.” In *No Country*, the landscapes are barren, befouled, and bloody, what just might be confounding Sheriff Bell:

He stood there looking out across the desert. So quiet. Low hum of wind in the wires. High bloodweeds along the road. Wiregrass and sacahuista. Beyond in the stone arroyos the tracks of dragons. The raw rock mountains shadowed in the late

sun and to the east the shimmering abscissa of the desert plains under a sky where raincurtains hung dark as soot all along the quadrant. That god lives in silence who has scoured the following land with salt and ash. (45)

Bell articulates what no other character does, either for lack of time or lacking the spiritual capacity, but Bell makes McCarthy's point—in *No Country*, the land is a crucial barometer for the spiritual fragmentation of the world.

### McCarthy's Hell

While the geographical spaces in *No Country* are, at least, metaphorically “scoured . . . with salt and ash,” in *The Road*, representing the micro-tradition of the South, McCarthy obliterates the known world, literally covering the land in ash and approximating McCarthy's best canonical version of Hell. The novel begins like Dante's *Inferno*: “When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night . . . Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some glaucoma dimming away the world” (3). Like Dante, who also begins in darkened woods, in *The Road*, a father and son, the novel's two protagonists, journey on a road through a devastated landscape toward a purportedly safe destination. McCarthy immediately introduces the land as troubled, as succumbing to a disease, “glaucoma,” connected to sight. What follows in the rest of the novel is a monotonous landscape, a long succession of charred geography, ashy skies, and deathly cold temperatures. The father has an introductory moment just as Moss, scanning the western landscape, does in *No Country for Old Men*:

When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace

of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. (4-5)

Like Moss from *No Country*, who “glassed the desert below him,” McCarthy uses the father to reflect on the devastation of the landscape: “Everything paling,” “murk,” “soft ash,” “blacktop,” “dead trees,” no “color,” no “movement,” and “ashen daylight.” Where the natural landscape in *No Country* backgrounds the sense of death—deserts are harsh, lonely, and violent, in *The Road* McCarthy foregrounds this sense of death to encompass everything natural, tangible, and visual. The world is dying. But, the world is not just dying but causing death, as surviving in this world requires a “cotton mask.” The father says it best: “This was not a safe place” (5). It is not safe for many reasons, but McCarthy’s geographical descriptions are instructive: “wasted country” (6), “[c]old and growing colder” (14), “[d]esolate country” (17), “everything dead to the root . . . barren” (21), “[n]o sign of life” (21), and “nothing living anywhere” (30). McCarthy’s insistence on death is expansive, the imagery extending in all directions: tactile, “colder,” or the loss of feeling; auditory, “nothing living,” or the absence of sound; kinesthetic, “[n]o sign of life” and “everything dead,” or the absence of movement; and visual, “wasted” and “[d]esolate,” or the absence of life. Instead of life, only the horrific memory remains: “Ash moving over the road . . . Nothing to see . . . Can I see? the boy said. Yes . . . What do you see? the man said. Nothing” (8). The repeated “nothing,” like the “stark” landscape, seems to suggest more than just an immediate description of the landscape; “nothing” defines the core of McCarthy’s worlds as places where nothing exists in its truest form.

Like the geographical wasteland, McCarthy's man-made structures in *The Road* are places where nothing exists, at best, wastelands in their own right and, at worst, horrific repositories of the dead. For the most part, the exterior of houses are "burned" (8) and the cities just a "shape . . . [which] stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste" (8). Early in the novel, the father and son enter such a place:

[T]hey were at the city. The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk . . . The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. . . The only thing that moved in the streets was the blowing ash. They crossed the high concrete bridge over the river. A dock below. Small pleasureboats half sunken in the gray water. (24)

Cities are nameless; they are just "the city." Dominated by "concrete," the city is in "ruins," full of the "dead," where the "pleasureboats half sunken," like the "funhouse" metaphor, mock the father and son. Later, in another town of "abandoned . . . littered streets," the father and son "passed a metal trashdump where someone had once tried to burn bodies," seeing only "the shapes of the skulls" (150). The father and son come upon "billboards . . . for goods which no longer existed" (127-128), signs which bore no purpose. Everything within McCarthy's man-made world is wasting away, whether the "train . . . slowly decomposing for all eternity" (180) or "truck . . . there for years, the tires flat and crumpled . . . hung several feet out over the river gorge" (44-45). In the truck, which is a semi-truck, the father and son take refuge only to discover, to their horror, "Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotted clothes" (47). On the city outskirts or in the rural places, the man-made structures are grim, maybe grimmer. Walking through a farm, they notice in "the barn three bodies hanging from the rafters" (17); McCarthy's man-made structures have become tombs for the dead and, in one particularly harrowing location (a basement), tombs for the living:

He started down the rough wooden steps. He ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering. Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. The boy clutched at his coat. He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous. (110)

Unlike the previous man-made structures that stored burnt and dried bodies, this terrifyingly ironic inversion of a cellar's purpose stores people "to eat them" (127). It is a horrifying location in a long series of man-made structures distorted from their original purposes. In *The Road* McCarthy's physical spaces are the extreme extensions of savagery.

#### Fractured Milieus and Collapsed Metaphysics

Unlike either *No Country* or *The Road*, *The Sunset Limited* occurs in a large urban environment and in only one location, lacking the myriad of geographical and man-made structures of the other later works. The opening of the dramatic work establishes the dominant structural framework:

*This is a room in a tenement building in a black ghetto in New York City. There is a kitchen with a stove and a large refrigerator. A door to the outer hallway and another presumably to a bedroom. The hallway door is fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars. There is a cheap formica table in the room and two chrome and plastic chairs. There is a drawer in the table. On the table is a bible and a newspaper. (3)*

The room is sparse as is the action of the plot—the work is one extended conversation. This opening passage anticipates the sorts of action that will take place. At one point, Black will cook in the kitchen (96-102). Regarding the Bible on the table, Black will tell White, "I think whatever truth is wrote in these pages is wrote in the human heart too and

it was wrote there a long time ago and will still be wrote there a long time hence” (68). The “hallway door . . . fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars” anticipates the prison experience of Black, who, at one point in his story, was “in leg irons . . . handcuffed to the bed” (49). White, who calls Blacks apartment “horrible” amongst “horrible people” (40), is at odds with Black’s opinion of his place: “This is all right. I got a bedroom where I can get away. Got a sofa yonder where people can crash. Junkies and crackheads, mostly. Of course they goin to carry off your portables so I don’t own nothin” (39). New York City is important for the subway system, the essential background location though in reference only. Undergirding the entire dramatic work, the train platform is, for White, his ultimate physical destination, and as Black articulates, while “people [are] standin around on a train platform . . . It’s just a train platform. Aint nothin else much you can say about it. But they might be one commuter waitin there on the edge of that platform that for him it’s somethin else. It might even be the edge of the world” (86-87). The train platform has a duality, part physical, part metaphysical.

It is this very duality that Black articulates, a train platform that is both “nothin else” and also “somethin else,” that expresses McCarthy’s pattern of physical spaces functioning as representations of spiritual milieus; in the later works, geographical spaces simultaneously manifest McCarthy’s fissured and fractured metaphysical worlds. If the landscapes of McCarthy’s later works are bleak, they metaphysics are bleaker. Though all three works demonstrate different geographical and temporal contexts—1980s Texas and Mexico (*No Country for Old Men*), near future Southeastern, America (*The Road*), and modern New York City (*The Sunset Limited*)—they all similarly explore various

iterations of spiritually collapsed milieus. One need only begin with the physical spaces to sense that McCarthy's worlds are in disorder.

#### Putting the Soul at Hazard

In *No Country for Old Men*, the iconographic manmade structures (itinerant, deathly, and penal) and physical landscapes (isolated, ancient, and harsh) express the novel's fractured social milieu; McCarthy's metaphysical world is marked by a seemingly ever-expanding spiritual deterioration. In *No Country*, news and newspapers frequently gauge the metaphysical collapse, as the various accounts are sordid, disturbing, and grotesque. In one particular moment, an innocent woman in a second floor apartment is killed by stray bullets from a street fight: "She'd been shot through the forehead and had tilted forward leaving part of the back of her skull and a good bit of dried brainmatter stuck to the slat of the rocker behind her. She had a newspaper in her lap" (147). The casual, leisure nature of reading a "newspaper" starkly juxtaposes the "dried brainmatter," a moment of unintelligible cruelty. In another newspaper moment, Chigurh, who is waiting to kill a rival, grabs his "shotgun wrapped loosely in the newspaper he'd been reading" (173), further integrating the milieu and evil. Sheriff Bell, who frequently likes to "read the news" (94), discovers some grim habits of humanity:

*I read the papers ever morning. Mostly I suppose just to try and figure out what might be headed this way. Not that I've done all that good a job at headin it off. It keeps getting harder. 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 somewhere or other in between. And then they set out together travelin around the country killin people. I forget how 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. Well, we dont know. Here the other day they was a woman put her baby in a trash compactor. Who would think of such a thing? My wife wont read the papers no more. (40)*



For Bell, the newspaper, like a weather forecast, is a strategy to predict the future, or “what might be headed this way,” and the future is terrifying. Both of the acts here, the “travelin around the country killin people” and the “baby in a trash compactor,” unequivocal acts of cruelty, shock and disturb Bell, who wonders “Who would think of such a thing,” and Bell’s wife, who “wont read the papers no more.” McCarthy’s world is not entirely devoid of goodness, as I will eventually argue, but the social fabric appears attenuated, as the newspapers suggest, and certain characters lament this reality. Sheriff Bell, in one of his café conversations with a waitress, intimates such:

he asked her what time they got the evening paper.  
 I dont know, she said. I quit readin it.  
 I dont blame you. I would if I could.  
 I quit readin it and I made my husband quit readin it.  
 Is that right?  
 I dont know why they call it a newspaper. I dont call that stuff news.  
 No.  
 When was the last time you read something about Jesus Christ in the newspaper?  
 Bell shook his head. I dont know, he said. I guess I’d have to say it would be a while. (246)

The conversation is amusing but effective; characters have “quit readin” newspapers or, as Ellis, Sheriff Bell’s uncle, “threwed . . . out” (272) his television, characters also “dont never watch the news” either—the world has grown increasingly unfamiliar and unfriendly. *No Country for Old Men* is, of course, a titular indictment on the social order of this world, a world of serial killers, of baby killers, of drug deals gone really badly, but, also, a growing sense that “*It keeps getting harder.*”

*No Country* begins with Sheriff Bell’s reminiscence of his lone professional experience with an execution, which serves as a barometer for the broader metaphysical health of the world. His initial interaction with the criminal, a nineteen-year-old man,

who “killed a fourteen year old girl,” is disorienting; the man tells Bell “*that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he’d do it again. Said he knew he was goin to hell*” (3). Bell’s response serves as a more systemic concern: “*I thought I’d never seen a person like that and it got me to wonderin if maybe he was some new kind*” (3). Bell philosophizes further about the state of the world:

*I really believe that he knew he was goin to be in hell in fifteen minutes . . . And I’ve thought about that a lot . . . What do you say to a man by his own admission has no soul? . . . They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. I dont know what them eyes was the windows to and I guess I’d as soon not know. But there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it and that’s where this is goin. It has done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I’d come to . . . It aint just bein older. I wish that it was. I cant say that it’s even what you are willin to do . . . I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. (3-4)*

Throughout *No Country*, Bell frequently laments the state of the world and, as this murderer “goin to hell” attests, for good reasons; yet, McCarthy also uses Bell’s own societal disillusionment, perhaps, ironically to suggest the fragile and attenuated metaphysical world has always been so, the foundations for order and meaning has always been precariously thin, as Matthew L. Potts suggests: “The real moral question is not: have ethics come bereft of ground? Many postmoderns would agree that they have. The real question is whether groundlessness itself, vulnerability to others and to the future, can stably support a generative ethics” (*Signs of Sacrament* 43). Nonetheless, ironically or not, if Bell can speak to the novel’s present milieu and, possibly, the future, Bell leaves little room for “where this is goin.” His resignation at the end of the novel, as I shall explore later, develops, “not due to a fear of death but to a fear of losing the sense of his own humanity” (*Signs of Sacrament* 76). The novel’s barren landscapes—“land

with salt and ash” (45), hellish allusions—“Devil’s River” (98), and instruments of death—“*gaschamber*” (3), all approximate the seeming metaphysical disaster of McCarthy’s *No Country* world. Ultimately, as McCarthy suggests, the “soul at hazard” image emerges as the distinctive dilemma of McCarthy’s later works.

### No Country for Mankind

If *No Country for Old Men* is truly hostile, as its name implies, to old men, *The Road* is no country for mankind; certainly, if *No Country* imagines a fractured social milieu, *The Road* has eviscerated, burned, and buried any semblance of social fabric. In the most Darwinian of contexts, humans survive, maybe, but survive to persist in as hostile a world as McCarthy’s canon offers, as James Woods says, “a world in which nothing is left standing” (“Getting to the End”). Complicating this hostile world is the sense that humans with moral and ethical frameworks do not survive. Consequently, there is no apparent overarching moral framework, no active attempt to organize and systematize ethical institutions; it is a world forsaken, “largely unpeopled. Animals have disappeared, there are no birds, no cities—just burned-out buildings—no cars, no power, nothing. Corpses everywhere. Black ash covers everything” (“Getting to the End”). Where, in *No Country*, people put babies in trash compactors, in *The Road*, they are “skewered,” as the boy sees “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (198). Can we gauge the impending sense of an apocalypse by the way children are treated? Throughout *The Road*, McCarthy imagines marauding gangs of cannibals, savage and terrifying, in search of flesh: “hooded heads . . . wearing canister masks. One in a biohazard suit. Stained and filthy. Slouching along with clubs in their

hands, lengths of pipes” (60). As if approximating the world’s toxicity, ironically, these brutal gangs dress in “canister masks” and “biohazard suit[s],” dress for protection from hazards, from the total collapse of any moral order. In one reflective moment, the father thinks about the escalation from the beginning of the nameless apocalyptic event; initially it was just “looted and exhausted cities” (180), but the disorder eventually intensifies:

By then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell . . . 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 physical landscape, “tunneled,” “ruin[ed],” “bleak and shrouded earth,” “the ancient dark,” is germane to the indecent, grotesque, behavior of “murder . . . everywhere,” the consumption of “children in front of your eyes.” It is not so much the land as the moral chaos that is “hell.” People are no longer human but food and decorative art left “in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away . . . a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes” (90). For if *No Country* concerns an ever-expanding spiritual deterioration, where Sheriff Bell wonders about “*his soul at hazard*,” Ely, the frail old man that the father and boy meet on the road, no longer worries about the soul: “Where men cant live gods fare no better” (172).

McCarthy never explicitly articulates what event, or series of events, lead to this utter state of horror; the mysterious event preceding the destruction of the known world, its anonymity, reveals the meaninglessness of historical knowledge, as well the

impotence of moral and ethical frameworks in this later work. McCarthy's only hint to the genesis of this event is brief:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didnt answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. He dropped to one knee and raised the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go . . . What is it? she said. What is happening?

I dont know.

Why are you taking a bath?

I'm not. (52-53)

McCarthy sketches the occasion with the cessation of action, the emersion of intellectual confusion: "clocks stopped," "What is it? she said. He didnt answer," "the power was already gone," "What is happening," and "Why are you taking a bath? I'm not." The characters behave, as they must, with incredulity and, simultaneously, as survivors.

Maybe the most damning indictment of the metaphysical world is the novel's most mysterious. What precipitated this apocalyptic-like event? Of course, critics speculate differently. Petra Mundik, in her book *A Bloody and Barbarous God: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy*, notes, "that the disaster in *The Road* remains unspecified leaves open the very likely possibility that it was the result of natural rather than moral evil, that is, a meteorite strike rather than a nuclear war" (299). Allen Josephs, in his essay "The Quest for God in *The Road*," considers another interpretation:

Most readers tend to think that the unspecified catastrophe in the novel is man-made, but if so, why does McCarthy deliberately fail to say so, either in the novel or in subsequent interviews? What if it is God-made or, perhaps worse, a catastrophic accident? McCarthy remarked somewhat facetiously in a recent interview in the *Wall Street Journal*: 'I don't have an opinion. At the Santa Fe Institute I'm with scientists of all disciplines, and some of them in geology said it looked like a meteor to them . . . But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be a nuclear war. It's not really important.'" (135)

The “series of low concussions” and the “dull rose glow” carry the sense of a nuclear holocaust, but, of course, the event is permanently ambiguous, which allows for McCarthy, instead, to ponder the post-apocalypse, how society behaves in the aftermath of the world’s end. Unlike *No Country*, *The Road* is post-modern, post-society; whole institutions, historical accounts, structures for understanding the world have disappeared. The effect is almost more than despair: “There were times when [the father] sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn’t about death. He wasn’t sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he’d no longer any way to think about at all” (129-130). Sheriff Bell’s anxiety about a world where old men no longer belong seems provincial in the context of the father’s inability to “think about” the notions of “beauty or . . . goodness.” The father’s milieu privileges survival over ethical constitutions; aesthetics have no place there. Rather, the physical landscapes, charred and perpetually covered in ash, remnants of the obsolete world burned and destroyed, are the physical manifestations of the dead metaphysics.

### Metaphysical Collapse, a Howling Void

In the last of McCarthy’s three later works, *The Sunset Limited*, McCarthy reduces the metaphysical concerns of *No Country* and *The Road*—the modern nihilistic dilemma of despair, estrangement, and utter indifference—to imagine one long dialogue chiefly concerned with metaphysical meaning. Though *Sunset* is far narrower a scope in its commentary on the metaphysics of the fictional universe, McCarthy still offers a world, like the other later works, seemingly attached to the physical and man-made

structures. White, the suicidal professor, is fascinated by Black's prison experience, a man-made structure that illumines the various ways that characters, especially White, experience metaphysical imprisonment. White, who almost characterizes Black's living situation—the "*door is fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars*" (*Sunset* 3)—as another version of prison, he calls it a "terrible place . . . It's horrible. It's a horrible life . . . This place. It's a horrible place. Full of horrible people" (40). White, imprisoned by internal despair, ultimately articulates the metaphysical collapse of McCarthy's later works: "the forms I see have been slowly emptied out. They no longer have any content. They are shapes only. A train, a wall, a world. Or a man. A thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void" (139). White becomes one prophetic voice of the social milieu of the later works, a "howling void," a void that shakes White's intelligible, meaning-making capacities. White is left, finally, to wonder, "If people saw the world for what it truly is" (136), maybe they too would find suicide the only option. In the end, though *Sunset* does not explicitly engage much with the social milieu, the impending suicide of White suggests something of "the world for what it truly is."

In the later works, the gas-chambers, the "dead" highways, the sere topography of Texas, the ashy and charred landscapes of the South, the cellars imprisoning emaciated people, the prisons and New York apartments that approximate prisons are, for McCarthy, strategies to express the dissolution of the metaphysical structures of the universe. McCarthy's worlds, in the later works, are in bad shape. Lydia Cooper confirms this but also raises an important question: "McCarthy's literary universe is a blighted one . . . and such a damaged cosmos may cause readers to pause and consider whether such a world is, after all, 'deforming' and 'pernicious'" (*No More Heroes* 3). I do not wish to

deny that, for White, his world is a “howling void,” as is the larger experience of many of McCarthy’s characters. In fact, what troubles and disillusions Sheriff Bell, “*there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it,*” is, perhaps, White’s contention of the “howling void,” not just a metaphysical collapse but spectral metaphysics, the appearance of meaning when it does not exist. In spite of White’s contention, however, McCarthy seems to have more to say about the fractured physical and metaphysical worlds of the later works than just the “void.” As bad as McCarthy’s worlds persist, perhaps “closer and closer to apocalyptic damnation” (*No More Heroes* 2), the “void” is, perhaps, not the final word.



### Chapter III

#### The Bad, the Good, and the Futility

“Are we still the good guys? . . . Yes. We’re still the good guys”

If physical spaces and man-made structures express the fractured and fissured milieus of McCarthy’s later works, the fractured and fissured milieus are macrocosmic developments of the interior natures of McCarthy’s central characters. In the later works, it is not merely that characters’ conceptualize their metaphysical worlds—ontologically, morally, ethically, legally, spiritually, for instance—as collapsed, but, in the particular, the essential characters of these worlds, both the good and the bad, participate in the unraveling of the fabric binding the universal metaphysical order. The dissolution of the intelligible structures that govern the universal metaphysical order, through acts cruel, senseless, and grotesque come at the hands of mankind. Bad characters are really bad. But, complicating McCarthy’s worlds, good characters are not always good, occasionally ineffectually heroic, and rarely at peace, as the metaphysical collapse has damaged their interiority, creating skeptical, disillusioned, and haunted characters. Though it seems reductive to categorize characters as good and bad, especially McCarthy’s characters, the facile distinction serves a convenient purpose; thinking about neat categories like good and bad reveals the inadequacy of those terms in McCarthy’s worlds, archetypal ideals wholly damaged, wholly of another time. Also, it is worth using McCarthy’s own language, for, in *The Road*, the father and the son adopt the same neat dichotomy of good

guys and bad guys. After one particular gruesome interaction in *The Road*, the father delineates the moral order of the world to the son:

You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know . . . Do you understand?  
 Yes [...]  
 Are we still the good guys? [the son] said.  
 Yes. We're still the good guys.  
 And we always will be.  
 Yes. We always will be.  
 Okay. (77)

This negotiation of what constitutes “good” and “bad,” however simplistic and reductive, is central to McCarthy’s stories, and the central issue concerns ontological identity. The boy is concerned with his allegiance—“we still the good guys?”—as well as permanently existing in the face of metaphysical rubble—“we always will be.” In the later works, McCarthy’s essential characters must exist, coexist, or counter-exist within harsh and metaphysically-collapsed worlds; through this struggle of existence, McCarthy explores the extent that bad characters unilaterally invoke evil and good characters, inversely, ineffectually forestall evil.

Compounding the ironic thriving of evil and the inverse impotency of goodness is the sense of ontological futility enveloping McCarthy’s later works. In *No Country for Old Men*, a plot that concerns a hyper-violent drug feud in 1980’s Texas, survival seemingly depends on a whimsical fate—right place, right time or wrong place, wrong time. Llewellyn Moss discovers a briefcase containing millions of dollars at the scene of a drug-deal turned deadly. Moss takes the briefcase and becomes the hunted target of Anton Chigurh, a mercenary who is searching for the money. Sheriff Bell, who is tasked with maintaining the law as well as protecting the citizens of his large county, attempts to protect Llewellyn Moss from Anton Chigurh, who kills many characters in the novel.

McCarthy uses Moss, Chigurh, and Bell to comment on the various approaches to existence: Moss attempts to thwart the metaphysical collapse by forging his own will to live; Chigurh, a physical embodiment of an abstracted evil—indifferent, cruel, terrifying—adheres to his own illusive, ethical code reflecting the collapse; and Bell, while a moral compass of the novel, struggles with ironic illusions of a metaphysical cohesion that never really existed. In the end, Moss dies, Chigurh escapes, and Bell retires with personal reservations. In *The Road*, to exist is to survive harsh, inhumane conditions without any sense of hope. In a post-apocalyptic land, an anonymous father and son travel through the Southeastern part of America in an attempt to find safety in a world that has no safe place. The father and son self-identify as “good guys” against the backdrop of “bad guys”; however, often, the father’s capacity for goodness is fraught with complications. Ultimately, the father dies leaving the son to continue the journey without the father. Unlike *No Country*, McCarthy does not have a central antagonistic character; instead, roaming cannibalistic gangs and occasional loner characters serve as the moral chaos. In *The Sunset Limited*, survival is a choice, which is similar to *The Road*, but, in *Sunset*, the harsh conditions are not external but internal. Black, a black ex-felon and a Christian, saves White, a white university professor and an atheist, from an attempted suicide at a New York City train station. Black invites White back to his urban apartment, and they engage in a long conversation about the meaning of life; White leaves Black’s apartment in the end, ultimately rejecting Black’s attempts to save his soul. Unlike *No Country* and *The Road*, neither Black nor White is in the same predicament as McCarthy’s other characters; their crises are entirely internal. All the later works, though, offer various characters in external and internal conflicts, characters that

intensify the chaos of the universe—Anton Chigurh of *No Country* and various characters from *The Road*—and characters incapable of preventing chaos in the universe—Sheriff Bell of *No Country* and the father and son from *The Road*. Black and White, from *Sunset*, depart from the archetypal characters of *No Country* and *The Road*, but Black and White are essential to McCarthy's larger pattern of pairing these disparate ideas of evil and grace together.

### The Uncoupling of Ontological Sense

Anton Chigurh, the psychopathic character—part assassin, part mercenary, and part nightmare scourge of *No Country for Old Men*, is, for Cormac McCarthy's later works, the definitive antagonist, and a character that unilaterally upsets the seeming order of McCarthy's world. While McCarthy's *The Road* reveals a whole host of bad guys, who are clear articulations of the scope of McCarthy's concern with evil, they are essentially a collection of abstracted evil in a post-collapsed society, almost not really individual characters. Chigurh's existence is far more problematic, though not necessarily as grotesque, as the bad guys in *The Road*. Lydia Cooper suggests, "in [Sheriff Bell's] mind there is at least a niggling fear that Chigurh just might be a walking, breathing personification of the Prince of Darkness . . . Chigurh is not 'like' Satan; at some level of the story, he just might be Satan" (*No More Heroes* 120). Chigurh's essential act is murder. He deprives life. And although the geographical scope of *No Country* is relatively limited, lacking the epic grandeur of McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, the mysterious qualities of Chigurh, his mythical sense of invulnerability, his terrifying indifference to humanity, his spectral ability to disappear, and his godlike quality to kill

with seeming impunity elevate Chigurh's status from a mere antagonist to a transcendent expression of evil. Chigurh's first scene in the novel captures his terrifying ability to destabilize communities. Chigurh has been arrested, and he is handcuffed and waiting inside the police station, when suddenly, "He dropped his cuffed hands over the deputy's head and leaped into the air and slammed both knees against the back of the deputy's neck and hauled back on the chain" (5). After the deputy has died, Chigurh remains, "studying the dead man gaping up from the floor" (6), as if in no particular hurry to leave, before he "walked out the door and got into the deputy's car and started the engine and backed around and pulled out and headed up the road" (6). His movements are so precise, as McCarthy's syntactical efficiency masks the horror of the scene. Chigurh kills the deputy with as much effort as it takes to get dressed in the morning, and with about as much thought. What is most disturbing about this moment is not the murder, which is, naturally, disturbing on its own terms, but the disregard for the legal institutions in place; the deputy's position as a legal custodian bears no significance to Chigurh. Chigurh's murder of the deputy signifies a disregard not just of moral standards but also of the presupposed standards that govern order in the universe. McCarthy understands society accept bad guys killing bad guys, but people do not accept bad guys killing good guys, and not so effortlessly. That Chigurh also takes the deputy's car, masking as an agent of order, a wolf in sheep's clothing, further complicates the disorder. Immediately after the killing of the deputy, as Chigurh is driving the deputy's car, he "turned on the lights and hit the siren briefly" (7). The brief siren works as signal for the metaphysical collapse; the siren is certainly ironic as Chigurh, as a faux-officer, converses with the innocent man that he pulls over:

What's the problem, officer? he said.

Sir would you mind stepping out of the vehicle?

The man opened the door and stepped out. What's this about? he said.

Would you step away from the vehicle please.

The man stepped away from the vehicle. Chigurh could see the doubt come into his eyes at this bloodstained figure before him but it came too late. He placed 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)

Chigurh is no "officer" and he is no "faith healer"—perverse obscurations of Chigurh,

but rather a "bloodstained figure" whose existence creates terrible "doubt" in the world.

The anonymous victim's "slowly uncoupling world visible to see" is precisely Chigurh's

effect, the usurpation of intelligible structures, the ordered universe upended, the

"uncoupling" of ontological sense; Chigurh is McCarthy's definitive embodiment of evil

in the later works precisely because he destabilizes and uncouples intelligible

expectations of how the world should work. Officers should maintain the law. Faith

healers should heal with faith. Instead, Chigurh unseats the "world."

### Psychic Denial of the Metaphysical Collapse

In addition to this anonymous victim, Chigurh murders other innocent bystanders

as further "uncoupling" occurs throughout the novel; but, it is not merely the senseless

death but Chigurh's terrifying indifference and his strange obsession with his victims'

ontological acceptance of life's unintelligibility. As Chigurh is pursuing Moss and the

stolen briefcase of money, Chigurh tracks Moss to the Hotel Eagle, where Moss first

confronts Chigurh:

[Chigurh] was no more than ten feet away. The whole room was pulsing slowly. There was an odd smell in the air. Like some foreign cologne. A medicinal edge to it. Everything humming . . . There was nothing that could happen that would

have surprised [Moss]. He felt as if he weighed nothing. He felt as if he were floating. The man didn't even look at him. He seemed oddly untroubled. As if this were all part of his day.

. . . Look over here, [Moss] said.

The man turned his head and gazed at Moss. Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly exotic. Beyond Moss's experience. (111-112)

As in the experience of the innocent carjacking victim whose "uncoupling world" disappears, Chigurh unsettles Moss with merely his presence. For Moss, the "pulsing," the "odd smell . . . foreign . . . medicinal," the feeling that "nothing . . . would have surprised him," the sensation that he "weighed nothing" and "floating," all arise from Chigurh's presence, who, in contrast to Moss, is "oddly untroubled . . . all part of his day." Chigurh, at ease with deconstructed systems, is "Beyond Moss's experience." As Moss manages to escape, he exits through the hotel lobby, where "the nightclerk's feet were sticking out from behind the desk" (113); McCarthy's descriptions of Chigurh's inexplicable murder of the clerk expands Chigurh's mystique, the "medicinal edge," as if Chigurh's sense of evil is palliative, his victims receiving salvation through death. The ensuing scene generates more death, a dramatic gunfight with three separate parties: Chigurh, Moss, and a group of drug traffickers also in search of Moss' stolen money. It would be too easy to understand this scene merely as drug violence, a natural, Darwinian effect of competing for illegal capital, but, as McCarty suggests, Chigurh makes drug-gangs appear like juvenile children. As he walks across the midnight street, Chigurh comes across one of the wounded drug-gang members "crawling" in the street, "watched him" before "he shot him in the back" (121). Chigurh's spectator cruelty terrifies because his process extends from passivity to agency, agency of abject senselessness. The anonymous wounded gang member has no issue with Chigurh, but Chigurh possesses a wholly different agenda:

He looked at the man. The man was lying in a spreading pool of blood. Help me, he said. Chigurh took the pistol from his waist. He looked into the man's eyes. The man looked away.

Look at me, Chigurh said.

The man looked and looked away again.

Do you speak english?

Yes.

Dont look away. I want you to look at me.

He looked at Chigurh. He looked at the new day paling all about. Chigurh shot him through the forehead and then stood watching. Watching the capillaries break up in his eyes . . . Watching his own image degrade in that squandered world.

(122)

Like Moss' impressions of Chigurh, that Chigurh inspires uneasiness, the wounded man cannot maintain his gaze at Chigurh, which is precisely what Chigurh wants, a blind devotion, "I want you to look at me." Chigurh's cruelty has two levels. The immediate sense, that Chigurh wants the hapless victim to see his own impending death, is obvious, but what is not as obvious, perhaps, is the second level, Chigurh's strange fascination with deconstructing not just the victim's "image . . . in that squandered world," but his own too. Chigurh wants the victim's last thoughts to concern the futility, the utter stupid and blind meaninglessness of the "squandered world." It is this second level concern that makes Chigurh transcendent; he destroys the physical as well as the psychic.

And, aside from Chigurh's "oddly untroubled" penchant for death, Chigurh's concern with his victim's psychic acceptance of the world's brutal indifference to humanity, the utter savage nature of fate, emerges as Chigurh's most chilling characteristic; McCarthy uses Chigurh's gospel of amorality to unsettle the structures of the world. When Chigurh intercepts Carson Wells, a mercenary hired, ironically, to kill Anton Chigurh, he predictably offers no mercy to Wells, but he is merciless for unpredictable purposes. Chigurh demands his victims' accept their ontological foolishness:



Do you [Wells] understand?  
 Do I [Wells] Understand?  
 Yes.  
 Do you [Chigurh] have any notion of how . . . crazy you are?  
 The nature of this conversation?  
 The nature of you [Chigurh].  
 Chigurh leaned back. He studied Wells. Tell me something, he said.  
 What.  
 If the rule you [Wells] followed led you to this of what use was the rule?  
 I dont know what you're talking about.  
 I'm talking about your life. In which now everything can be seen at once [ . . . ]  
 I thought you [Wells] might want to explain yourself.  
 I [Wells] dont have to explain myself to you.  
 Not to me. To yourself. I thought you might have something to say. (175)

Chigurh, minutes away from killing Wells, has the capacity for a philosophical conversation. Wells offers to "Take [Chigurh] to an ATM," and give him "about fourteen grand" (173), but Chigurh rejects the financial temptation for an ultimately meaningless conversation about the nature of Wells' ontology. He is interested in Wells' own personal psychic confrontation, "Not to me. To yourself." This is McCarthy's manifestation of an almost Nietzschean disillusionment, a Nietzschean capacity to deconstruct perceptions of reality; unlike Nietzsche, however, Chigurh is also interested in brutally murdering Wells. Later on in the conversation, as Wells encourages Chigurh simply to kill him, Chigurh continues to strip away Wells' ontological confidence:

You [Wells] think you wont close your eyes. But you will.  
 Wells didnt answer. Chigurh watched him. I [Chigurh] know what else you think.  
 You dont know what I [Wells] think.  
 You think I'm like you. That its just greed. But I'm not like you. I live a simple life.  
 Just do it.  
 Yes, Chigurh said. They always say that. But they dont mean it, do they?  
 [...] You think you're outside of everything, Wells said. But you're not.  
 Not everything. No.  
 You're not outside of death.  
 It doesn't mean to me what it does to you.  
 You think I'm afraid to die?  
 Yes [...]

He looked at Chigurh. I'm not interested in your opinions, he said. Just do it [...] He [Wells] did close his eyes. He closed his eyes and he turned his head and he raised one hand to fend away what could not be fended away. Chigurh shot him in the face . . . He lay half headless on the bed with his arms outflung. (177-178)

In the Darwinian sense, Wells is tasked with killing Chigurh, so it seems understandable why Chigurh would kill Wells; they are not moral agents interested in a unified world.

However, Chigurh is not apparently just interested in killing Wells. Chigurh's fascination with Wells' ontological views, especially Chigurh's belief that Wells' psychic orientation is dishonest, makes Chigurh not merely a cruel killer but a killer with a cruel logic and a cruel indifference.

#### Cruel Indifference of the World

Chigurh's most cruel moment—where his logic and indifference appear most unintelligible, and the moment where Chigurh ascends as a symbolic figure of the terrifying cruelty of the world—is his murder of Llewellyn Moss' wife, Carla Jean. Near the end of the novel, after Llewellyn Moss dies and Chigurh recovers the stolen money, even after Chigurh orchestrates a new business partnership with a drug-lord in what should be the end for Chigurh, Chigurh appears in Carla Jean's house as she returns from her grandmother's funeral. By the very nature of its seeming impossibility, Chigurh's hunting down Carla Jean is a nightmare scenario, a manifestation of the essence of human cruelty. By most plot conventions, after Llewellyn's death, Carla Jean should not even return into the narrative. She is a minor character. She contributes very little, not to say nothing, to the plot, but when Carla Jean sees Chigurh in her room, she “knowed this wasnt done with” (254). It is a terrifying thought, a thought that exists only in the most unlikely of hypothetical possibilities made possible by a senseless evil that persists. As

with Carson Wells, Chigurh acknowledges that he is there to kill Carla Jean, but, instead of merely killing her, he engages in one of the novel's longest conversations. Naturally, Carla Jean thinks that Chigurh wants any of the stolen money that Moss might have given her:

I dont have none of it. I had about seven thousand dollars all told and I can tell you it's been long gone and they's bills aplenty left to pay yet. I buried my mother today. I aint paid for the neither.  
 I wouldnt worry about it [...]  
 You've got no cause to hurt me, she said.  
 I know. But I gave my word.  
 Your word?  
 Yes. We're at the mercy of the dead here. In this case your husband.  
 That dont make no sense. (255)

Carla Jean's incredulity, "That dont make no sense," expresses precisely the effect of Chigurh—he does not make sense, and his senselessness seems to hint at McCarthy's broader commentary on the seeming incoherence of the universe. Carla Jean should be allowed to suffer in her own way, trying to pay the "bills" of her contextually miserable life, but, instead, she struggles to comprehend the presence of one of McCarthy's most cruel characters, because Chigurh "gave [his] word." Chigurh feels compelled to talk with his victims, when possible, to destroy their ontological illusions of the world: "even though I [Chigurh] could have told you how all of this would end I thought it not too much to ask that you have a final glimpse of hope in the world to lift your heart before the shroud drops, the darkness. Do you see?" (259). Hope is only a "glimpse," a fleeting, flicker in the face of "the shroud . . . the darkness." Chigurh exists in this darkness, and his clear sense of self and self-philosophizing makes his philosophy even crueler:

Most people dont believe that there can be such a person. You can see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of. Do you understand? When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You

can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world. Do you see?

Yes, she said, sobbing. I do. I truly do.

Good, he said. That's good. Then he shot her. (260)

Here, with an ironic version of last rites performed for Carla Jean, Chigurh articulates his perverse, twisted perspective on a metaphysical order that appears wholly absent.

Chigurh confronts the illusions of this order that “Most people . . . believe,” and when these people confront the truth, “that there can be such a person” as Chigurh, a corporeal embodiment of evil, the truth creates such ontological despair that people “refuse to acknowledge the existence of” such an evil. Chigurh’s murder of Carla Jean, despite Chigurh’s strange logic, is yet incomprehensible and precisely what Chigurh imagines as humanity’s “problem.” Chigurh must have Carla Jean’s acknowledgement of her ignorance—“Do you see”—and Carla Jean, like someone accepting her folly, feels obliged to confess, “I do. I truly do.” Then McCarthy’s syntactical juxtaposition captures the cruel irony of Chigurh: “That’s good. Then he shot her.” Chigurh is not good, nor is Carla Jean’s psychic acceptance of her fated death; this ironic juxtaposition illuminates the broken, fissured metaphysical order of McCarthy’s later works. Bad guys, in the later works, are agents of destruction, destroying not just the physical but also the psychic, and Chigurh is the apotheosis of this force. McCarthy seems to be saying that, in the later works, bad guys are not merely bad—they are so bad that “people don’t believe” and even “refuse to acknowledge the existence of” such people.

### The Ineffectuality of the Good Guys

However, in McCarthy's later works, while the bad guys clarify the metaphysical collapse of the universe with senseless, cruel, and grotesque acts, the good guys—Sheriff Bell from *No Country*, the father from *The Road*, and Black from *Sunset*—ironically, are ineffectual in preventing the collapse. Conventional cultural narratives about the world suggest that punitive action will eventually come against perpetrators of injustice and restitution eventually come for those affected by evil, as Sheriff articulates, "*I believe that whatever you do in your life it will get back to you*" (281). However, Chigurh upsets such a narrative by killing with impunity and escaping, in the end, without consequence<sup>8</sup>; instead of a punishment, in the end Chigurh boasts that "people dont believe that there can be such a person." Sheriff Bell is, in a sense, responsible for capturing Chigurh and restoring the moral order of the county, but, ultimately, the people that he was supposed to protect, like Llewellyn Moss, die and the people he did not know he needed to protect, like Carla Jean Moss, also die. Regarding Carla Jean's death, Bell muses, "*I can think of no reason in the world for that no-good to of killed that girl. What did she ever do to him?*" (281). Bell is a good guy and Chigurh is a "*no-good*"; no-goods are not supposed to get away with murder. But, in McCarthy's world, no-goods get away with murder—they enact the metaphysical void.

As a heroic figure of the old world, Sheriff Bell represents a forgotten ideal; he is an old man dwelling in a milieu hostile to old men. Bell, in one sense, fails at bringing justice to his county, fails at protecting the legal order of the world, and, ultimately, fails to prevent the chaos. As already mentioned, the novel begins with Bell witnessing the

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<sup>8</sup> In Chigurh's last scene he is driving through a neighborhood and his car is hit by another car that has run a stop-sign (260). Chigurh survives with significant wounds but escapes legal consequences.

only execution of a criminal that he “sent . . . to the gaschamber” (3). The experience anticipates Chigurh:

*It has done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd of come to. Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once. I wont do it again. I wont push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him. It aint just bein older. I wish that it was.* (4)

From the onset of the novel, Bell has reservations about the world—“a place . . . I would not of thought I'd of come to,” and, particularly, reservations about a metaphysical terror that exists in that world, Chigurh, “a true and living prophet of destruction.” Whether self doubt or spiritual weariness, McCarthy frames Sheriff Bell, despite being a public servant, as suspicious of his own heroic capacity; Bell simply will not face Chigurh. Whether that is why he ultimately does not face Chigurh or whether McCarthy chooses to not have the two characters meet, Sheriff Bell never does confront Chigurh.

Throughout the novel, Bell's many soliloquy-like, interior narrations serve to reveal the accumulated weariness of the heroic figure. Bell has many concerns about the moral order:

*I read in the papers here a while back some teachers come across a survey that was sent out back in the thirties to a number of schools across the country. Had this questionnaire about what was the problems with teachin in the schools. And they come across these forms, they'd been filled out and sent in from around the country answerin these questions. And the biggest problems they could name was things like talkin in class and runnin in the hallways. Chewin gum. Copyin homework. Things of that nature. So they got one of them forms that was blank and printed up a bunch of em and sent em back out to the same schools. Forty years later. Well, here come the answers back. Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide. So I think about that. Because a lot of the time ever when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I'm gettin old. That it's one of the symptoms. But my feelin about that is that anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot bigger of a problem than what I've got. (195-96)*

It may be true that McCarthy uses Bell's moral concerns ironically, that Bell's "hell in a handbasket" interpretations belie a metaphysical collapse that has always existed; however, Bell's observation, "that anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum," is reasonable. Bell knows the world is changing but he does not know how to stop it, or, rather, he does not know how to stop it himself: "*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). Bell's monologues are more about resignation than about restitution. If only "*Christ . . . can slow this train,*" then, Bell suggests, there is not much that he can do. And, it is true, Bell cannot stop Chigurh—he never even has the opportunity.

Instead of a narrative climax with Sheriff Bell confronting Chigurh, Chigurh kills people that Bell tries to protect before disappearing without punishment, and, instead of a glorious ride-off-into-the-sunset for Bell, Bell confesses his own personal moral failure to his uncle before retiring anticlimactically; this antiheroic, anticlimactic conclusion more broadly expresses the world's utter indifference to injustice and understates the unfettered expansion of evil in the world. Somehow Chigurh's escape, a physical manifestation of the world's unintelligible cruelty, dislodges psychic pain in Sheriff Bell, and, even though Bell and Chigurh never meet, McCarthy frames Bell's final experiences as mostly a failure. Near the novel's conclusion, Bell visits his uncle Ellis, a retired former lawman, who wonders if Bell is there "to make some terrible confession" (273). Sheriff Bell recounts to Ellis what amounts to Bell's singular great regret in his life, a World War II memory. Bell and some other American troops were ambushed, and, when the day turned night, Bell "cut and run" (276). Ellis responds by asking, " You left your buddies

behind,” and he follows by saying, “You didnt have no choice [...] You couldnt of helped them” (277). But, Bell sees it differently:

Maybe. But you go into battle it’s a blood oath to look after the men with you and I dont know why I didnt. I wanted to. When you’re called on like that you have to make up your mind what 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 on. If I was supposed to die over there doin what I’d give my word to do then that’s what I should of done. You can tell it any way you want but that’s the way it is. I should of done it and I didnt. And some part of me has never quit wishin I could go back. And I cant. (278)

Compounding this historical regret, Sheriff Bell lives with the shame of the hypothetical belief that his own father would have acted differently in his situation; unlike Bell’s abandonment, Sheriff Bell believes his father would have “set there till hell froze over and then stayed a while on the ice” (279). Ellis asks whether “that makes him a better man than [Bell]”; Bell, thirty-odd years after his great shame, is still wounded in his core interiority. Chigurh, in a sense, dislodges all of this psychic unrest, so it seems Bell’s retirement implicitly arises from his inability to exercise the ghosts of his past. Bell’s retirement is the novel’s penultimate moment, and McCarthy frames the moment as antiheroic—unfinished, incomplete, defeated:

It was a cold blustery day when he walked out of the courthouse for the last time. Some men could put their arms around a crying woman but it never felt natural to him. He walked down the steps and out the back door and got in his truck and sat there. He couldnt name the feeling. It was sadness but it was something else besides. And the something else besides was what had him sitting there instead of starting the truck. He’d felt like this before but not in a long time and when he said that, then he knew what it was. It was defeat. It was being beaten. More bitter to him than death. You need to get over that, he said. Then he started the truck. (306)

Inaction characterizes the retirement. Bell would never “put . . . arms around a crying woman,” he got in his truck and “sat there,” he thought and “couldnt name the feeling,” and finally Bell contemplates the extent that the experience is a “defeat.” Bell’s moment



of inaction expresses a more expansive sense that McCarthy's good guys are not always successful. Bell's own self-perceived failures, then, are not merely a commentary on the ways that bad guys act with impunity, but they express McCarthy's broader commentary on the way evil persists in the world in spite of good, that, in fact, the good guys are ineffectual at preventing evil. The good guys may even—such as the case of Bell's psychic shame—contribute to the problem.

### The Meaningless Narrative of Good

In *The Road*, while the father and son envision themselves as “the good guys,” unlike Sheriff Bell's world in *No Country for Old Men*, the father and son live in a post-apocalyptic, essentially post-moral world where the notion of goodness and badness are archaic, obsolete. In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy's has written no other book in his canon where existence is so terribly immediate and, simultaneously, so immediately terrible. For the father and son, the entire purpose of their existence is to exist against an exaggerated sense of futility, a futility that inspired the mother of the son to commit suicide. In the final conversation between the father and the mother, the mother delineates a world where goodness no longer matters:

We're survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.

Survivors? she said.

Yes.

What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film

I'm begging you.

I dont care. I dont care if you cry. It doesnt mean anything to me [...]

Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me.

They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it . . . We used to talk about death, she said. We dont anymore. Why is that?

I dont know.

It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about.

I wouldnt leave you.  
I dont care. It's meaningless. (55-56)

In the final harrowing conversation between the father and the mother, the father is incapable of preventing the mother's suicide, the suicide on account of their "meaningless" existence. While the mother has agency, the father lacks agency. In McCarthy's later works, suicide is not evidence of mental illness; suicide is McCarthy's ultimate act of despair on account of evil in the world. The mother's repudiation of the father's "survivors" narrative—"We're the walking dead"—forecasts the extent that the future holds any modicum of hope. One belongs either to the "survivors" or "the walking dead." Despite the mother's suicide, the father and son persist forward on their journey, as "survivors," through the devastated landscape in devastating circumstances. The father and son choose a different dichotomy than the mother's distinction between "survivors" and "the walking dead":

You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know . . . Do you understand?  
Yes [...]  
Are we still the good guys? [the son] said.  
Yes. We're still the good guys.  
And we always will be.  
Yes. We always will be.  
Okay. (77)

McCarthy offers a strange hypothetical situation in *The Road*, as Paul D. Knox wonders, "What sort of ideology survives an apocalypse" ("Okay Means Okay" 96)? While Sheriff Bell in *No Country* laments the rampant lawlessness of his county, the father in *The Road* lives in a world without laws. At the end of all things, McCarthy seems to wonder, is there such a thing as good and bad? The father establishes the dichotomy of "good" and "bad," but can there be such a dichotomy when the world is, more or less, destroyed?

Certainly the distinction between nobly surviving and ignobly surviving exists, but is it possible, McCarthy suggests, to maintain the same moral standards when survival is so complicated? The mother fears what the father calls “the bad guys,” those who “are going to rape . . . and kill . . . and eat,” and, by any standards, those characteristics are identifiably evil. However, the father does not exclude the possibility of the alternative; the father confirms the son’s query, “Yes. We’re still the good guys.” But, in spite of this declaration, the goodness of the father as a heroic ideal in the post-moral world is freighted with ineffectuality, inconsistency, and impotency.

In *The Road*, the father exists in a post-heroic age, attempting to live by heroic codes that no longer seem to matter; the inability to forestall evil compounded by the inability to adhere consistently to a set of self-defined moral standards complicates the father’s goodness. Ever haunting the father is his inability to prevent his wife’s suicide, his impotence in the face of her resolve: he “beg[s]” (55), says “Please” (55), says “I dont know” (56), pleads that “[he] cant do it alone” (57), and finally “didnt answer” (57). It is a terrible moment made more terrible by the mother’s ironic choice of death: “with a flake of obsidian. He’d taught her himself” (58). While blaming the father for the mother’s suicide would be unfair, the father’s ability to prevent her suicide—he cannot prevent her terrible despair—resembles defeat. The father spends most of the novel in this posture of preventing despair in his son, perhaps ameliorating his own compunction over his wife’s death. Chief among the father’s strategies to reverse the ever-present sense of despair on account of the ever-expansive collapse of the moral order is the dichotomy of good guys and bad guys—“Yes. We’re still the good guys.” Negotiating the moral universe in abstracts, the father and son share a more specific code for their

behavior, “carrying the fire” (83). The Promethean imagery of “fire” and Abrahamic archetype of “carrying” suggest that the good guys are heroic rebels but also sacrificial. The son, in particular, reuses the refrain as a way of negotiating the world. However, the father, apart from his inability to forestall the mother’s death, is inconsistent in his application of his own moral standards. In two separate instances, the father and son come across other travellers eking out an existence, and, in both cases, the father’s interactions are less about reconstituting the pervasive sense of despair in the world than about merely surviving, a post-heroic strategy. The father and son meet Ely, the wizened old man, who “even by their new world standards . . . smelled terrible” (161). No one can be trusted in this world, but the boy wants to help him against his father’s strong objections:

What about a spoon?  
 He’s not getting a spoon.  
 The boy took the tin and handed it to the old man. Take it, he whispered. Here.  
 The old man raised his eyes and looked at the boy. The boy gestured at him with the tin . . . It’s okay, he said [...]  
 In the morning they stood in the road and [the father] and the boy argued about what to give the old man. In the end he didnt get much . . . Finally the boy just went over to the edge of the road and sat in the ashes . . . You should thank him you know, the man said. I wouldnt have given you anything. (163, 173)

McCarthy’s *The Road* is such a place that even the heroic figures resist gifting even “a spoon” to someone in need. Of course, the argument would be that the father’s goodness is first about protecting his son—that is his ultimate purpose—and, in this sense, he is good, but it is the son here, not the father, who is Promethean and Abrahamic, one of the good guys, as opposed to the father who “wouldnt have given [the old man] anything.” It may be unfair to judge the situation in terms of good and bad, as McCarthy’s beyond harsh world is primarily about survival, but the anecdote certainly tests the father’s notion

of the “good guys.” In the other interaction, a thief takes the possessions of the father and son who have left their cart on a beach so as to explore an abandoned boat. When the father and son return to their cart to discover that their possessions are missing, the father follows the tracks and overtakes the thief with his gun:

The cart was piled high. He'd taken everything. [...]  
 If you dont put down the knife and get away from the cart, the man said, I'm going to blow your brains out. [...]  
 Papa? the boy said.  
 Be quiet.  
 He kept his eyes on the thief. Goddamn you, he said.  
 Papa please dont kill the man.  
 The thief's eyes swung wildly. The boy was crying.  
 Come on, man. I done what you said. Listen to the boy.  
 Take your clothes off.  
 What?  
 Come on. Dont do this.  
 I'll kill you where you stand.  
 Dont do this, man.  
 I wont tell you again. [...]  
 The boy had turned away and put his hands over his ears. [...]  
 Dont do this, man.  
 You didnt mind doing it to us.  
 I'm begging you.  
 Papa, the boy said.  
 Come on. Listen to the kid.  
 You tried to kill us.  
 I'm starving, man. You'd have done the same.  
 You took everything. (255-257)

The scene is uncomfortable on two levels. First, there is no doubt that the father will kill the thief if necessary, as the boy's begging and tears corroborate the threat's sincerity. In fact, the scene compares well with Chigurh's execution of Wells and Carla Jean Moss in *No Country*. Like Wells and Carla Jean, the thief begs the father, “Dont do this.” Second, and in a more metaphysical sense, the scene is uncomfortable because the thief is merely engaging in the same survival-behavior as the father and son employ throughout the novel; the thief notes to the father that “You'd have done the same.” The father, quite

literally, strips the man “naked,” a punitive measure to mete out justice for the thief’s crimes. And, while the father’s harsh demands may carry legitimacy, as a self-identified “good guy,” the father has double standards about survival-behavior; suddenly, this scene, retroactively casts doubt on all of the previous moments that the father took from other people. Again, McCarthy juxtaposes the father and son’s attitudes toward sacrifice, which, in turn, undermines the father’s dichotomized philosophy of good guys and bad guys, even raising doubts as to the authenticity of the father’s sense of goodness. Ultimately, the son grasps the father’s inconsistency as he questions the very essence of the father’s story making:

Do you want me to tell you [the son] a story?  
 No.  
 Why not?  
 The boy looked at him and looked away.  
 Why not?  
 Those stories are not true.  
 They dont have to be true. They’re stories.  
 Yes. But in the stories we’re always helping people and we dont help people.  
 (267-268)

In the end, McCarthy allows the son to question the very essence of the father’s philosophy, the “stories are not true.” The son’s observations about “helping people” challenge the father’s narrative of “good guys,” but the son’s deconstruction of the father’s good-guys-narrative represents a far broader trend within McCarthy’s worlds of the later works. The good guys—Sheriff Bell, the father in *The Road*, Black from *The Sunset Limited*—question whether any of their essential heroic stories are true. Lydia Cooper makes this point with *The Road*:

Through hero stories, the father attempts to rekindle a prophetic vision of goodness and beauty in a devastated world. However, the father’s quest is of dubious consequence . . . the father is caught in an agnostic crisis. He doubts that his stories have any capacity to “mean” in such a morally bankrupt universe, and

so his attempts to describe goodness to his son may, in the final analysis, make him nothing more than the prophet of a nonexistent god. (*No More Heroes* 133)

Not only are McCarthy's self-identified good guys, largely, impotent to prevent the various universal collapses of their respective worlds, but also the good guys struggle to maintain their own personal narratives of right and wrong.

### Futility at the End of the Road

In *The Sunset Limited*, which ultimately feels like a philosophical treatise to *No Country* and *The Road*, McCarthy frames his canonical interest with the dichotomy of good and bad in the starkest terms. *Sunset* is an important complement to *No Country* and *The Road* as McCarthy engages with the very essence of what the other later works indirectly discuss, existence. White, a university professor, has decided to kill himself. Like the mother in *The Road*, White is portrayed neither as good nor bad, just someone who can no longer exist in the universe. Black, the ex-con, in contrast, attempts to prove that existence in this harsh world still matters. But, White's experience in the world, his ontological grasp of existence, is inflexible: "I don't 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 thing is futility" (136). In the face of this despair, Black, framed as a good guy, is ultimately incapable of reorienting White's ontological persuasion; instead, in the end, White leaves somewhat triumphantly in contrast to Black's confusion: "Professor? I know you don't mean them words. Professor?" (141). If, however, we are permitted to consider Black, like Sheriff Bell and the father of *The Road*, as post-heroic figures, then Black continues McCarthy's tradition of well-meaning but ineffectual good guys. Black cannot amass a

compelling argument for White to reconsider his suicide. McCarthy ends *Sunset Limited* with a single question uttered by Black: “Is that okay?” (143). The singular uncertainty of Black’s question expresses the communal uncertainty shared amongst all of McCarthy’s good guys in the later works; like Black, Bell and the father too wonder if “that,” their very ontological identity, is “okay?”

Existence is ugly in the later works, and McCarthy’s worlds are impossibly harsh. Evil, embodied in the likes of Chigurh or the roving cannibals of *The Road*, envelops the worlds, worlds in metaphysical disrepair, or, in the case of *The Road*, physical disrepair too. Compounding the fractured sense of the worlds, McCarthy’s good guys, at best, are incapable of preventing the collapse and, at worst, even contribute to the very unraveling of the worlds. Allen Josephs wonders about *The Road*, which is the logical extension of McCarthy’s canon, “What is at the end” of this world, by which he considers John Clute’s contention, that “‘It is a story about the end of the world in which the world ends.’ In other words . . . nothing, there’s nothing at the end of the road” (“The Quest” 133). So, in addition to McCarthy peopling his worlds with characters who perpetuate cruelty or who are incapable of preventing the cruelty of others, the ultimate ontological trajectory of McCarthy’s worlds inch ever closer to oblivion. White of *Sunset*, then, speaks what is so plain to the characters of the later works regarding “the world itself . . . and that thing is futility.”



## Chapter IV

### The Uncanny, Mysterious Persistence of Grace

“Goodness will . . . It always has. It will again”

At one point in *The Road*, the father relives the psychic pain of the mother’s resolve to suicide, her insistence that life in the bleakest of landscapes is exactly what it appears to be, “meaningless” (56). The mother rebuffs the father’s entreaties, his insistence to “wait till morning. Please . . . Where are going to go? You cant even see” (58). With cold, steely resignation, “She was gone” (58). While Cormac McCarthy conjures many harrowing moments in *The Road*—torched corpses, infanticide, a basement of naked people for food, even the death of the father—the mother’s suicide is among the most terrible, most cruel, and most painful. However, as Matthew L. Potts notices, “the narrator immediately follows her suicidal resolve” with another powerful psychic memory, “a recollection of the boy’s birth” (*Signs of Sacrament* 171). McCarthy details, on one page, a last breath and, on the very next page, a first breath: “Gloves meant for dishwashing. The improbable appearance of the small crown of the head. Streaked with blood and lank black hair . . . He held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and cut the cord with kitchen shears and wrapped his son in a towel” (59). Prefacing the birth, the phrase, “hardly surprised by the most outlandish advents” (59), accurately describes this juxtaposition of life and death, “outlandish.” Although the birth scene precedes the death scene in the space-time continuum, it is the birth scene, as a psychic memory and

symbolic act, which occurs after the death, as if to suggest in death birth comes. In reflecting on this pairing, Matthew L. Potts writes:

The preciousness of this scene is offset internally against the commonplace . . . But the birth is also set in a larger context against the case for murder-suicide the mother has just given. Why then this jarring juxtaposition of birth and death . . . Why does McCarthy so routinely insist upon marrying his moments of grace to moments of gruesome violence, and surrounding it all with such grief? Why must the signs of life be so closely bound with death? (*Signs of Sacrament* 171-172)

The questions Potts raises—the “Why”—are critical, questions that I will eventually answer in the next chapter, but, for the present time, I want to consider McCarthy’s “moments of grace.” For all the ways the mother’s suicide tragically represents the death of the past and cruelly reminds of future futility, the birth of the son, persisting in the face of apocalyptic devastation, powerfully symbolizes the existence of grace.

In the later works, evil as both a physical manifestation and a psychic expression envelops McCarthy’s worlds. Anton Chigurh singlehandedly dissolves the intelligible structures upholding moral order, and the anonymous “bad guys” of the post-apocalyptic world terrify with their rapacious, inhuman appetites, and White imagines existence as “a howling void” (*Sunset* 139) and suicide as sanity. McCarthy’s worlds appear either on the verge of total chaos, *No Country for Old Men*, or to have succumbed to chaos, *The Road*; this uncoupling of intelligibility challenges characters’ ontological orientation, “ultimately to an awareness of one thing above all else and that thing is futility” (*Sunset* 136). However, while the absence of a metaphysical governing structure preoccupies the later works, another powerful narrative, the presence of an inexplicable goodness, exists. In fact, McCarthy’s later works, while delineating in precision the myriad iterations of evil, deny the possibility of unilaterally ignoring the strange, mysterious presence and persistence of grace. If McCarthy chiefly expresses evil as a dissolution of the intelligible

structures governing the universal metaphysical order—an uncoupling of sense, sanity, and goodness from the ontological human narrative such that despair and futility mark existence—then grace, conversely, is the inexplicable beauty yet transcending this collapse. Grace, for McCarthy, constitutes at times moments of good gifts, at times moments of beauty, and at times moments of deliverance. Though McCarthy's canon so often confronts what amounts to absurdity, it feels tempting to discount the moments of grace as wish fulfillment, naïve moralizing, but the persistence of these moments, to say nothing that *The Road* and *No Country* both conclude with powerfully articulated grace moments, remain. Though a seeming paradox, the converse, however uncanny and impossible, is true; far from naïve, for McCarthy evil and grace are coexistent and codependent.

### Concluding *No Country for Old Men*

In McCarthy's two novels, *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men*, works overwhelmingly concerned with the brutality of existence, their respective conclusions demonstrate a profound departure from ugliness and cruelty, instead, for a mystical beauty. In *No Country*, the novel finally ends with a Sheriff Bell interior monologue about his father:

*I had two dreams about him after he died. I dont remember the first one all that well . . . But the second one it was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothing. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all*

*that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.* (308-309)

Although it appears tempting, in considering Bell's anecdote, to emphasize the final sentence of the novel, "*And then I woke up*," as if McCarthy, underscoring the cruel difference between dreams and reality, undermines Bell's capacity for ontological peace by waking him from his dream the way one wakes up from some foolish belief of something that could never happen. This interpretation would accord with the "futility" argument of White, from *Sunset*, and the nihilism scholarship on McCarthy, originated by Vereen Bell; the argument has some merit, the argument is possible. However, I consider the final sentence, "*And then I woke up*," as linguistic closure to the dream not as a deconstruction of the possibility of the dream.

Instead, I would suggest, Bell's concluding monologue functions more like a microcosmic retrospective, illuminating the various ways that McCarthy, rather, interweaves grace into the narrative. The juxtaposed imagery of "*night*," "*cold*," and "*dark*"—signals for evil—with "*fire*" and "*light*"—signals for grace<sup>9</sup>—symbolically recreates the mysterious yet central dichotomy of evil and grace in *No Country*. Much of Bell's interior conflict throughout the narrative is premised on his ever-clarifying acceptance that, as W.B. Yeats says, his milieu, his existence is increasingly "no country for old men" (1). The "*night*," "*cold*," and "*dark*" are, in a sense, visual and tactile manifestations of McCarthy's metaphysically collapsed worlds. His dream, "*I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night*," is almost allegorically dramatizing Bell's interior confusion; throughout the novel, it is as if Bell—frustrated by senseless

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<sup>9</sup> The "carryin fire" phrase imposes an Abrahamic narrative far more complex and nuanced than what I am suggesting, so I recognize that interpretation. More generally, I would argue that the "fire" contrasted against the "dark" conjures a sense of goodness in a more general sense.

cruelty—travels alone in the dark. In particular, Bell’s vision of “*out there in all that dark and all that cold*” captures the expansive scope, assaulting both the visual and tactile senses, of Bell’s interaction with a world terrorized by evil. It is possible to understand this anecdote as a retrospective narrative of Bell’s entire experience in the novel. While oppressed by his concerns with the ever-chaotic milieu, Bell is ineffectual in preventing the deaths of Moss and Carla Jean, is ineffectual in capturing Chigurh, and is ineffectual, ultimately, with his own personal ontological crisis for forgiveness. Matthew L. Potts rightly contends that the dream “do[es] not suddenly create a happy ending” (*Signs of Sacrament* 78), yet, in the end, McCarthy grants Bell the possibility to dream, or more precisely to remember a dream, but Bell’s psychic retrieval of a past dream, nonetheless, is a kind of grace. Bell is not alone in this dark, for his father “*was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there.*” Matthew L. Potts notes the dream’s biblical archetypal connections to Abraham and Isaac, “when Abraham carries fire in a horn as he leads his son up into the mountains to slay him. But the promise of God results in miracle and life here, too, despite the seeming inevitability of death” (*Signs of Sacrament* 78). The archetypal imagery of fire carrying anticipating *The Road*, an Abrahamic journey of sacrifice, intertextually connects these two later works, but, unlike Abraham, Bell’s dream is “decidedly incomplete” (*Signs of Sacrament* 78). While a dream, the possibility for goodness, for a reconstituted relationship with his father as well as a promise of safety, the novel’s penultimate sentence champions a force that seems, on retrospect, far more present in *No Country*: grace. In this end, in spite of the cruel circumstances of the novel, McCarthy focuses Bell’s experience on a dream freighted,

albeit symbolically and mythically, with goodness, hope, and redemption—even if “Hope and redemption remain only murmured hints” (*Signs of Sacrament* 79). McCarthy allows Bell’s dream, like God’s miraculous providence for Abraham, to constitute the possibility that everything, even so, will be okay.

#### At the End of *The Road*, Breath and Mystery

However, it is not just *No Country for Old Men* that offers a tonal shift in the conclusion. McCarthy concludes *The Road*, possibly his most intense canonical foray into mankind’s wanton cruelty, with possibly his most beautiful ending. Like *No Country*, for the majority of *The Road*, McCarthy engages with an ever-increasing sense of futility and despair as the father and son’s Abrahamic quest to the coast yields, ironically, not the death of the son but of the father—there is no providential intervention, so it seems. In ending *The Road*, McCarthy concludes two separate narratives, the conclusion of the father and son’s story and a conclusion to the larger milieu, something akin to a macroscopic epilogue. After the father’s death, the son must immediately test the father’s metanarrative of “the good guys” (129) as, no less than the first moment the son leaves the deceased father, now totally alone, a man, “one of the good guys” (282), discovers him. As it turns out, the man is the father of a family that includes a mother and two children. Nothing closely approximates a family in this novel, apart from the father and son. The family, at the end of this novel, is a remarkable moment, what the father hopes for when, before he dies, he tells the son, “You’re going to be lucky” (279). This extraordinary moment leads to the conclusion of the son’s narrative:

The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to

God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (286)

So much about this moment counters the overwhelming tenor of the novel's despair, serving, instead, to reconstitute the attenuated metaphysical order, even momentarily. Where the son's biological mother is dead, the son receives a new mother who, unlike his biological mother's "meaningless" (56) and faithless" (57) philosophy, offers to "talk to him sometimes about God." In addition to spiritual guidance, the mother offers the son physical tenderness, "she . . . put her arms around him and held him," and psychic reassurance, "I am so glad to see you," acts that only the father previously could offer. In the teeth of the greatest suffering the son has ever endured, the new mother offers the son a profound vision for the future: "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time." The mom, in a sense, reconstitutes the father's death by citing some higher law of the world; the breath of man simply "pass[es] from man to man through all of time." McCarthy's image of "breath"—visual, auditory, kinesthetic—delineates the most organic and essential of human activity; "breath" renders the delicate and beautiful simplicity of life back to the boy, resuscitates, in a way, his breathing apparatus. This perspective, for one, challenges the "futility" of White from *Sunset*, but the view also challenges the overwhelming, seemingly futile journey of the father and son. Is it possible that, in spite of "the world's destruction" (274), something could be remade, could be reformed? Earlier in the novel, the father had pondered the possibility "that something was gone that could not be put right again" (136).

The negotiation of what is "gone" and what can "be put right again" is, at its essence, a core question of *The Road*, a question interwoven throughout the ultimate passage of

the novel. After the boy's interaction with the new mother completes the narrative of the father and son, McCarthy moves to the final paragraph, an epilogue-like, poetic retrospective:

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. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286-287)

Formalistically, McCarthy's prose departs from the novel's dominant register of bleakness for a rare lyrical aesthetic of effulgence—McCarthy's world is once again imbued with life. Just the formalistic departure alone marks the shift as enlivening. This paragraph, possessing a pulsing energy, constitutes a different force than most every other paragraph in the book. It is not here that McCarthy somehow discovers how to write the best sentences, for one of McCarthy stylistic achievements demonstrated throughout *The Road* is his grasp of an aestheticism layered with a minimalist construction of syntax and diction; this paragraph matches the formalistic style of the novel. Yet this paragraph marks a shift, in fact, a conclusion freighted with lyrical grace: "brook trout in the streams," "amber current," "white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow," "smelled of moss," "Polished and muscular and torsional," "vermiculate patterns," "maps of the world in its becoming," and, the majestic final sentence, "In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery." The lyricism, a wholly unanticipated moment of intense beauty, is a kind of grace, but is the grace, simultaneously, more than mere surface?



McCarthy's positioning of this paragraph as the ultimate paragraph of *The Road* seriously challenges the otherwise profound despair of the novel—regardless of its seeming capacity for ironic cruelty. *The Road* is a harrowing account of the dissolution of physical and metaphysical worlds, but, McCarthy suggests, maybe it is not comprehensively bleak, totally futile, or wholly evil. Like *No Country for Old Men*, the final paragraph offers a noticeably different tone, though McCarthy leaves room for speculation. McCarthy frames the conclusion in the past tense: “Once there were,” “You could see,” “They smelled,” “On their backs were,” and “where they lived.” Furthermore, the phrases, “Of a thing which could not be put back” and “Not be made right again,” patently introduce a sense of unmitigated loss. Where as in *No Country* one has to reconcile “*And then I woke up*” with the nature of the dream, in *The Road* one has to address “Once there were” and “Not be made right again.” Naturally and legitimately, “Some critics . . . find it the most damning passage in the book, rendered all the more cruel” (*Signs of Sacrament* 182) for an illusive hope, a hope that “could not be put back . . . made right again.” Shelly Rambo, thinking of both the “breath” and “mystery” paragraphs, frames the critical discussion well:

Does McCarthy provide, in the end, a picture of redemption? Does the boy's survival—a survival beyond the death of the father—constitute a redemptive ending? Some find the notion of a redemptive ending sentimental, unrealistic, and inconsistent with the rest of the book and its unrelenting picture of doom. For them, McCarthy resorts to a picture of redemption, redeeming a world that can no longer be redeemed. Others interpret the boy's survival as a testimony to the persistence of hope and regeneration, a necessary ending to the tender father-son relationship that McCarthy presents. For them, McCarthy is depicting the substance of hope and the triumph of parental love in the face of terror. (100)

Rambo raises important questions about the notion of redemption, the notion of surviving a devastated world, and the notion of hope without seeming legitimacy, all within literary conventions of genre; can what Rambo suggests simultaneously exist with grace?

If, for the moment, I can ignore these ultimate questions<sup>10</sup> about *The Road*, the conclusion, in spite of the moments of ambiguously charged details—the sense of loss, the sense of death—seismically reorients the novel’s tenor of futility toward this mysterious sense of beauty, grace. After the father and son trudge through a world of deterioration, of dreariness, and of death, McCarthy’s final imagery imagines a robust, natural ecosystem of, among other things, beautiful “brook trout in the streams” engaged in kinesthetic dynamism—“standing in the . . . current,” “Polished and muscular and torsional”—or imbued with color—“amber,” “white edges of their fins”—and, countering the obliteration, endowed with animation—“they lived.” This moment recalls an earlier moment in the novel, when the son asks, “Do you think there could be fish in the lake?” to which the father replies, “No. There’s nothing in the lake” (20). In the same way that the son, after his father’s death, improbably discovers the family in the end, the ultimate conclusion in context of the novel seems so unlikely, that at the end of this terrible road a transcendent vision exists. The end of the road should have been more “wilderness . . . travelers abandoned in the road years ago. Boxes and bags. Everything melted and black . . . Here and there the imprint of things wrested out of the tar by scavengers. A mile on . . . the dead. Figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching

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<sup>10</sup> Since this chapter concerns the grace moments in McCarthy’s later works, I want to first delineate the foundations of grace here. I will give a fuller analysis of this paragraph, its complicated and nuanced possibilities, addressing the critical responses that question the “upside here” (Phillips 186), in the next chapter. However, I will offer this crucial distinction, which emerges as my central contention in Chapter 5: grace exists in death, in loss, and in suffering, and, though evil may exist in its myriad iterations, grace still does too.

themselves, mouths howling” (190). Instead, McCarthy’s lasting moment is of a wholly different world, a former world, a “world in its becoming,” but an imagined world that wrests the totality of evil from having the final word. This is the grace of Cormac McCarthy. In a metanarrative-experience, McCarthy cleanses the novel with a vision so different than the rest of the novel it almost does not belong, as if in an extraordinary, impossible to anticipate moment, the mystery of grace occurs in this aesthetic expression.

But, more than the aesthetic experience, McCarthy revises the world—revision, as in to re-see—and, in this sense, offers a symbolic reconstitution. Granted, the end is retrospective not prospective, memory not prophecy, so the reconstitution is psychic not physical. Nonetheless, the revision yet restores the “nothing living anywhere” (30) with “brook trout in the streams . . . the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow,” recovers the “smell . . . only a rumor, faint, and stale” (6) to the original state which “smelled of moss,” and reanimates the “cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3) for “the deep glens where . . . all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.” In the same way that the mother’s suicide moment narratively precedes the birth of the son—an anachronism, the end of the world precedes the psychic memory of nature’s beauty and “mystery.” In fact, this passage—lyrically and thematically—offers what Sheriff Bell’s concluding dream offers, a beautiful albeit illusive idea that, simultaneously, still matters, even if the vision acknowledges its limitations, “Not be made right again.” To be clear, McCarthy is not saying, at the end of the terrible road, happiness, bliss, and beauty await. The finality of “Once” starkly opposes the future. Matthew L. Potts’ earlier point, that Sheriff Bell’s dream “do[es] not suddenly create a happy ending” (*Signs of Sacrament* 78), resonates here. But, latching onto the “mystery,”

it is possible to frame this narrative moment, like *No Country*, as a kind of psychic miracle; though incomplete and ultimately shrouded in “mystery,” the revision substantively introduces the possibility of beauty among the “ashes of the late world” (11).

### Redemption, Happiness, and Hope in *The Road*?

Some of the McCarthy scholarship goes even further than merely identifying the ending as a moment of beauty. For Ashley Kunsu, in fact, “it is the end of the old world that signals the possibility of a new one, and the novel’s own ending so clearly harkens back to a beginning, the beginning of time” (“Maps of the Word” 67). In other words, “in the world’s destruction” (*The Road* 274), something new exists, something beautiful but also, more than aesthetics, revisionary. Kunsu contends that “some critics will charge that in *The Road* McCarthy is not ‘McCarthy’ enough: that, by alluding to some possibility beyond our present (and the novel’s future) world, he sentimentalizes the horrible facts of our collective situation” (“Maps of the World” 68). Kunsu raises canonical expectations by some of the scholarly camps regarding McCarthy’s fiction, that McCarthy “sentimentalizes” by including this possibility of hope, as in a truer McCarthy would opt for, what White from *The Sunset Limited* accepts, “futility.” According to Kunsu, some critics might prefer an authorial McCarthy who dwells exclusively in, what she calls, the “dreadful world” (68), a horrible, anguish-filled world of cruelty; Kunsu continues that “it is another thing altogether—and this, the far more difficult—to render a dreadful world while simultaneously conjuring an alternative with such clearness of vision that its truth is likewise unquestionable. This McCarthy does in *The Road* without flinching” (“Maps

of the World” 68). I agree with Kunsä’s “clearness of vision” to the extent that the conclusion is so clearly unlike the register of the novel, but what about “the possibility of a new” world?

As previously mentioned, with the phrases “Once there were” and “Not be made right again,” terrifying ambiguity remains as to what the future holds—if ambiguous at all, as some critics would argue the ending lucidly forecasts the end of the world and not something new. Certainly, these phrases clearly indicate former states, “Once” and “Not . . . again,” but, while Kunsä recognizes the “horror” of *The Road*, Kunsä argues that McCarthy does not remain there but offers “the possibility of redemption,” a clear pivot “away from the void, signaling a radically optimistic shift” (68). Shelly Rambo would likely categorize Kunsä, and similar critics, as subscribing to a “distinctively American, post-apocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility” (101). Though to Rambo’s well-conceived point, other critics might suggest that McCarthy’s canonical fascination with the grotesque often has unlikely moments of life. In “Blood and Grace,” an essay much earlier in the McCarthy scholarship by Edwin T. Arnold, Arnold argues that, regarding McCarthy, “it should not be surprising that a man so taken with death should prove equally passionate about life, for each, he argues, makes the other possible” (11). Although this comment speaks generally about McCarthy’s earlier canonical works, the sentiment applies to McCarthy’s later works. It is too easy to see the horror of evil in the later works and, as Arnold argues, “it has been too easy . . . to categorize McCarthy as an unusually talented purveyor of nihilistic Southern Gothic horror shows and to miss the essential religiosity at the core of his writing” (12). About a decade after “Blood and

Grace” but still prior to McCarthy’s later works, Arnold intensified his stance, “that Cormac McCarthy is a writer of the sacred should be beyond dispute” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 215). In terms of reconciling the space between McCarthy’s “dreadful world” (Kunsa 68) and “the sacred,” Arnold argues McCarthy “venerates life in all its forms, who believes in . . . order deeper than that manifested in outward show and pretense of human individuality, and who acknowledges the inevitability of death not as absurdity or tragedy but as meaningful transition from one plane of existence to another” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 216). Of course, *The Road* is unlike any “nihilistic southern Gothic horror” previously conceived in McCarthy’s canon, as Rambo argues, “temporal markers of past, present, and future no longer hold . . . there is nothing to anticipate” (101).

McCarthy’s mysterious ending of “breath” and “brook trout” intensifies the beauty of the world, especially the grief for the irreparable, irretrievable world. Though redemption, happiness, and hope naturally emerge at the conclusions of many narratives, perhaps Shelly Rambo’s contention can satisfy these inherent questions: “this haunted, post-world territory cannot simply be interpreted within a redemptive framework . . . [because] the question of a redemptive ending is not *the* question that McCarthy presents to us in *The Road*. Instead, he confronts us with the question of the aftermath: what does it mean to witness to what remains?” (101). This is to say, the notions of redemption, happiness, and hope—general narrative conventions all the more intensified in their patented absence in *The Road*—may not be McCarthy’s point. The longstanding scholarly debate regarding McCarthy’s capacity for nihilist worlds, in one extreme, and sacred worlds, in the other extreme, may both be true. *The Road* is about existing in

“what remains,” a blighted nothingness, and I would simply argue, whether redemptive or not, happy or not, hopeful or not, grace yet is.

### Grace in the Later Works

Is the conclusion to *The Road* merely beautiful, an aesthetic apotheosis but not “redemptive” as Rambo contends, or does the conclusion mark “a radically optimistic shift” as Ashley Kunsu suggests, or possess the “sacred” as Edwin T. Arnold argues? Allen Josephs contends that, “No matter how you read it, *The Road* . . . lies beyond the constraints of any particular category, imbued with its own inextinguishable sense of mystery. In the face of the unbearable bleakness and despair of the novel, that very mystery . . . gives us an exemplar and it shines a ray of hope in all that cold and all that dark” (“The Quest” 143). Here, Josephs not only addresses *The Road* but, when Josephs writes “a ray of hope in all that cold and all that dark,” he also appropriates the imagery of Sheriff Bell’s closing monologue from *No Country for Old Men*, “a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold” (309). The connection between *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006) is more than just publishing date proximity, as Josephs writes, “Father and son, carrying the fire, in all that dark and all that cold: Which novel are we in” (“The Quest” 133). *The Road*, for Josephs, “is both a logical continuation” of McCarthy’s canon, but particularly *No Country*, “and a kind of termination” (“The Quest” 134). *The Sunset Limited*, also published in 2006, serves as the philosophical dialogue behind these novels and should, ultimately, be grouped together in their treatment of evil and grace; for, while the conclusions of *No Country* and *The Road* offer patent moments of grace, the novels comprise a constellation of similar mysterious

and good moments. To revisit this essay's position on grace, grace for McCarthy, constitutes at times moments of good gifts, at times moments of beauty, and at times moments of deliverance; characters persist in the teeth of despair, rehabilitating the exterior and interior worlds to the extent that rehabilitation is possible, and provide McCarthy's response to evil, facing it. The grace moments are sometimes intelligible—they have logic, intuitive cohesion—and sometimes unintelligible—they defy reason, sense, and appear mysterious, even supernatural. I will not argue Arnold's contention for the "essential religiosity at the core" ("Blood and Grace" 12) of McCarthy; I think that case can be made, but my sense of grace for this essay is not about divine intervention or redemption, as Christian salvation works, but a mysterious fabric interwoven within McCarthy's world<sup>11</sup>. McCarthy, in fact, interweaves or marries, to use Matthew L. Potts metaphor, grace with acts of disturbing cruelty and disquieting inhumanity, such that the terror of evil finds a worthy adversary in the goodness of grace.

### Grace and Luck

Before considering the various categories of grace in the later works, Cormac McCarthy frequently speaks of luck<sup>12</sup>; although it is not always the case, luck, as a motif in the later works, introduces this larger mysterious manifestation of goodness in the world while, occasionally, exacerbating the seeming indifference of the world. In *The Sunset Limited*, as the conversation between Black, the Christian ex-felon, and White, the

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<sup>11</sup> For this distinction of grace between intervening and interweaving, I am indebted to Rowan Williams' ideas from his essay "Master of His Universe: the Warnings in JRR Tolkien's Novel" published in the *New Statesman*, August 8, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> I will not argue that grace and luck are the same, as they constitute different forces. Luck has nothing to say about gifts, or beauty, or life, as luck is random, depending on chance. However, I think grace and luck share important features in McCarthy's later works meriting discussion. My inclusion of luck in the context of grace hardly scratches the surface of an important phenomenon in McCarthy's canon, and I am necessarily simplifying the concept.



atheist university professor, meanders through philosophy, Black asks White, “You ever had one them days when things was just sort of weird all the way around? When things just kindly fell into place . . . Just one of them days. Just kind of magic. One of them days when everything turns out right” (42). Black characterizes the sense of grace as “weird,” “things . . . into place,” “magic,” and “everything turns out right,” or the mysterious sense of goodness that sometimes defies neat explanations. White, in response to Black’s question about “days when everything turns out right,” says, “I dont know. Maybe” (42). However, almost all the characters of the later works think about “days when everything turns out right” or, often the converse, days when everything turns out wrong. The characters of the later works frequently use the word “luck” to refer to the inexplicable, fortuitous events, which are not always happy occurrences; in ill-fated moments, luck is often construed as blind and random, almost an expression of futility. When Llewellyn Moss discovers the money in *No Country* he rationalizes to himself, “You have to take this seriously . . . You cant treat it like luck” (23). Later, as Moss flees Chigurh, “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). Carson Wells, the bounty hunter hired to take out Chigurh, confirms Moss’ fear: “This isnt going to go away. Even if you got lucky and took out one of two people . . . they’d just send someone else” (156). For Moss, luck is finite, even random. This sense of randomness Sheriff Bell confirms, when he discovers an innocent civilian and casualty of Chigurh: “This here was just dumb luck” (42). This is the same luck that Bell describes when discovering the motel night clerk has been killed, “as bad a piece of luck as you could have” (136). Moss tells the hitchhiker that he has picked up, “there’s a lot of bad luck out there” (234), which, in the

case of Carla Jean Moss, is Chigurh, who tells Carla Jean before he kills her, “You didnt do anything. It was bad luck” (257). Of course, Ellis tells Bell at the end of the novel, “you never know what worse luck your bad luck has saved you from” (267). For Sheriff Bell, like Ellis, luck can be good and bad, but his view is less cynical:

*People think they know what they want but they generally dont. Sometimes if they're lucky they'll get it anyways. Me I was always lucky. My whole life. I wouldnt be here otherwise. Scrapes I been in. But the day I seen her come out of Kerr's Mercantile and cross the street and she passed my and I tipped my hat to her and got just almost a smile back, that was the luckiest. 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)*

In *The Road*, where all things have been destroyed or are in the process of destruction, luck has a less charitable existence. When the father asks Ely, the prophet-like old man, whether “You wont wish us luck,” to which Ely replies, “I dont know what that would mean. What luck would look like. Who would know such a thing?” (174). Later, as if influenced by Ely’s futility, the father wonders whether “good luck might be no such thing” (230). However, by the end of the father’s life, some of his last words to the son are “you’ll be okay. You’re going to be lucky” (279).

Luck, in the later works, lacks a cohesive identity. Luck appears good or bad, just or unjust, and logical or senseless. The extent to which luck, as a linguistic category, approximates Black’s observation of “days when everything turns out right,” or Bell’s belief of “the good,” or the father’s benediction to the son, “You’re going to be lucky,” luck is a version of grace. In John Jurgensen’s interview of McCarthy for *The Wall Street Journal*, Jurgensen asks McCarthy about “the role luck plays in life. Where has luck intervened for you” (“Hollywood’s Favorite Cowboy”)? The question is premised on

earlier comments that McCarthy offered in the interview and McCarthy's response mimics Black's of *The Sunset Limited*:

There was never a person born since Adam who's been luckier than me. Nothing has happened to me that hasn't been perfect. And I'm not being facetious. There's never been a time when I was penniless and down, when something wouldn't arrive. Over and over and over again. Enough to make your superstitious. ("Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy")

Toward the end of *The Sunset Limited*, almost mimicking the interview style question, White asks Black, "Is your life the one you'd planned?" (124). Black's response affirms the gradations of luck: "No, it aint. I got what I needed instead of what I wanted and that's just about the best kind of luck you can have" (124). This is to say, not all luck is a version of the kind of mysterious grace in McCarthy's world. However, the capacity that luck appears, as Bell suggests, like "*the good*" things that happen to people "*that they dont deserve,*" in the appearance of unmerited gifts, whether insignificant, like Bell's "*almost*" requited smile, or like the father's belief that his son will "be okay," in this capacity, luck is a version of the mysterious McCarthian grace, "the best kind of luck you can have."

#### Grace as a Gift

Grace, beyond the linguistic framework of luck, appears often gift-like, unmerited and unanticipated, although, like luck, not all gifts are moments of grace. In *No Country*, one particular gift that appears like grace is Llewellyn Moss' two million dollar discovery, which ought to function as some version of financial salvation but actually rends his life as wells as Carla Jean's life. However, McCarthy includes distinct moments of unmerited and unanticipated gifts, and, in *The Road*, two particular moments express

McCarthy's fascination with grace moments, as gifts, within a metaphysically collapsed world. In the first instance, in a particularly heightened state of desperation—the father and son have just escaped the house with the basement full of naked people—as the father “looked like something out of a deathcamp” (117), they come across “a house and a barn . . . dead grass. Dead ivy along a stone wall . . . and the dead trees beyond. Cold and silent” (117). The stark imagery delineates the contours of the father and son's physical and emotional states against death. In this moment of despair, the father risks everything to explore the house, and he discovers a “trap door” (122), which may just be another portal to a hellish basement. Tormented by fear, the father yet opens the door to discover that, “Down there in the darkness was a cistern filled with water so sweet that he could smell it. He lay in the floor . . . and laved up a handful of it and smelled and tasted it and then drank. He lay there a long time . . . Nothing in his memory anywhere of anything so good” (122-123). Discovering “in the darkness . . . water” is an entirely probable outcome; otherwise, the father and son would not sacrifice their safety for such ventures. However, considering the context of the father and son's most recent basement experience, discovering “water so sweet” that “Nothing in his memory anywhere of anything so good,” expresses the sweetness of grace. The juxtaposition between the previous basement-experience in “darkness”—the “damp,” “ungodly stench,” and “naked people” (110)—and this basement-experience in “darkness”—“water so sweet,” “smelled and tasted it,” and “so good”—intensifies the unmerited, unanticipated goodness of the gift. If this gift is good beyond “memory,” a short time later, the father and son discover another gift that actually seems impossible considering the context, a basement full of what the father calls a “tiny paradise” (150). As in the previous basement experience, the

father and son descend into the darkness ignorant of what awaits; they discover, to their astonishment, “Everything . . . The richness of a vanished world” (139). The basement is stocked with: “Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water . . . Paper towels, toilet paper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets” (138). Naturally the boy, given his terrible existence, wonders, “Why is this here . . . Is it real?” (139). In the later works, the metaphysical dissolution of McCarthy’s worlds creates deeply unsettling realities in the inner lives of his characters, but, as formed in the existential questions of the boy here, grace deeply unsettles too. In *The Sunset Limited*, White cannot accept Black’s vision of “good news” (133) in the world: “I’m at a loss as to how to bring myself to believe in some most excellent world when I already know that it doesn’t exist” (133). White’s essential ontological struggle is not much different from the son’s questions—“Why is this here . . . Is it real?”—revealing that even grace is difficult to accept. A basement stocked with goods in defiance of a landscape stripped bare of everything, this moment reminds of McCarthy’s mysterious goodness. In a hellish world, the father and son discover a heaven, a “paradise,” and the son is right to wonder ontologically and existentially—grace does not seem possible, not in the ugliness of McCarthy’s worlds.

### Grace as Beauty

Except, McCarthy’s worlds are not fundamentally stripped of beauty; in the later works, though overwhelmed with ugliness and despair, beauty—both aesthetically and metaphysically—functions as another mysterious manifestation of grace. While nothing in *The Road* bursts with aesthetic potential, in one particular memory, lodged in the

father's interior world, what the father calls, "the perfect day of childhood . . . the day to shape the days upon" (13), McCarthy suggests that grace can linger in the form of a beautiful experience:

There was a lake . . . where he and his uncle used to go in the fall for firewood. He sat in the back of the rowboat trailing his hand in the cold wake while his uncle bent to the oars . . . The shore was lined with birchtrees . . . bone pale against the dark of the evergreens . . . yellow leaves . . . warm painted boards . . . They walked along the shore while his uncle studied the treestumps . . . He picked one out . . . and rowed back across the lake . . . By then it was already evening. Just the slow periodic rack and shuffle of the oarlocks. The lake dark glass and windowlights coming on along the shore. A radio somewhere. Neither of them had spoken a word . . . the perfect day . . . to shape the days. (12-13)

The moment is beautiful—in the repose of nature, in the simplicity of task-oriented systems, in the peace of friendship. Colors, sounds, movement, stillness all adorn the moment, as each contribute nuanced additions to the aesthetic shape of the experience. Perhaps the beauty, in contrast to the father's experience in the post-apocalyptic world, feels more lucid, more transcendent, which is not to say that *The Road* contains no beauty. When the father and son reach the coast and the father explores the Pajaro de Esperanza, the abandoned boat aptly named "bird of hope," he discovers, among many useful supplies, "a brass sextant, possibly a hundred years old. He lifted it from the fitted case and held it in his hand. Struck by the beauty of it . . . it was perfect . . . It was the first thing he'd seen in a long time that stirred him" (227-228). Representing superior craftsmanship and artistic excellence, the sextant evokes an aesthetic ideal in stark contrast to the fundamentally utilitarian world of *The Road*; the sextant produces visceral awe and psychically transports the father from his bleak existence. These aesthetic experiences are not dissimilar to the metaphysical moments of beauty, such as when the father, in watching his son sleep, calls him "A strange beauty" (102). In *No Country*,

Sheriff Bell marvels at the beauty of his wife, Loretta: “Marryin her makes up for ever dumb thing I ever done. I even think I still got a few left in the account. I think I’m way in the black on that” (133). After one particular bad day on the job—“Dead bodies in the street. Citizens’ businesses all shot up” (134)—Bell returns home: “behind the house his wife was looking out from the kitchen window. She smiled at him. The falling snow drifted and turned in the warm yellow light. They sat in the little diningroom and ate. She’d put on music, a violin concerto” (136). Though the world is harsh, Loretta Bell is not; whether she is “looking out,” as the “falling snow” and “warm yellow light” soften her, or whether she plays “a violin concerto,” Loretta profoundly restores Sheriff Bell’s metaphysical wonder, though she does not stop at the Sheriff. While cruelty and senseless violence erode the milieu of *No Country*, Loretta Bell counteracts the collapse by restoring the humanity of the very people responsible for the collapse, the criminals:

*I dont believe you could do this job without a wife. A pretty unusual wife at that. Cook and jailer and I don’t know what all. Them boys dont know how good they’ve got it. Well, maybe they do . . . they get fresh garden stuff a good part of the year. Good cornbread. Soupbeans. She’s been known to fix em hamburgers and french fries. We’ve had em to come back even years later and they’d be married and doin good. Bring their wives. Bring their kids even. They didn’t come back to see me. I’ve seen em to introduce their wives or their sweethearts and then just go to bawlin. Grown men. That had done some pretty bad things. She knew what she was doin. She always did. (159-160)*

Loretta, maybe more than any character in the later works, rehabilitates successfully. This inner beauty radiates such that McCarthy acknowledges her aesthetic capacity too. When Bell decides to retire, he returns home to find Loretta gone as well as her horse, so he heads out into the open country: “Forty minutes later he saw her and stopped and sat the horse and watched. She was riding along a red dirt ridge to the south sitting with her hands crossed on the pommel, looking toward the last of the sun, the horse slogging

slowly through the loose sandy dirt, the red stain of it following them in the still air. That's my heart yonder, he told the horse. It always was" (300). The imagery of "red dirt ridge," "hands crossed," "looking toward the last of the sun," and the still air" all elevate the moment in a lyrical idealism. So where *No Country* concludes with a powerful, Abrahamic dream of a father and son journeying through the darkness, a dream of grace that casts a beautiful vision of persisting in the collapse, the marriage of Ed Tom and Loretta represents a real, tangible vision of beauty that persists in the collapse.

While aesthetics represent a substantial manifestation of grace in McCarthy's later works, perhaps the best version of grace as beauty is actually the depth of relational love among the characters<sup>13</sup>: Ed Tom and Loretta (marital), the father and the son (parental), and Black and White (universal). Loretta, who "makes up for ever dumb thing" (133) the Sheriff has done, provides literally for Sheriff Bell—"Cook and jailer and I don't know what all" (159)—but not so much as the emotional and spiritual restoration she provides—"That's my heart yonder . . . It always was" (300). Throughout *No Country*, the beauty and grace of the Bells' love impacts Ed Tom's attention to the love of others:

Do you [Ed Tom] really care?  
About your [Carla Jean] husband?  
About my husband. Yes.  
Yes mam. I do . . .  
How long have you [Carla Jean] all been married?  
Three years. Almost three years.  
Bell nodded. My wife was eighteen when we married. Just had turned. Marryin her makes up for ever dumb thing I ever done. (132-133)

Where in *No Country*, the tender, marital love of the Bells embodies a beautiful, grace-filled act, in *The Road*, the sacrificial, familial, and particularly parental love of the father

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<sup>13</sup> There is a reductive but intriguing way to imagine these three later works as being fundamentally about different types of relationships: *No Country for Old Men* would be a book about marriage; *The Road* would be a book about parenthood; and *The Sunset Limited* would be a book about friendship.



and son is a kind of anthropomorphic grace. Though the father never uses the word “love,” the whole journey constitutes a long kinesthetic, manifestation of what love looks like, sounds like, feels like: “They slept huddled together in the rank quilts in the dark and the cold. He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart” (29). Where Sheriff Bell dreams of his father “*fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold*” (309), the son in *The Road*, also “in the dark and the cold,” lives out that reality. In *The Road*, canonically depicting McCarthy’s most expansive and terrifying physical and psychic devastation, the father and son’s love burns “in the rank . . . in the dark and the cold,” a total repudiation of White’s “howling void” (*Sunset* 139). For McCarthy, love cannot prevent evil but evil cannot undo love. And, in *The Sunset Limited*, McCarthy’s relationship between two strangers—spiritual and skeptic, black and white, ex-con and academic—has never appeared more dichotomized, more artificially different, yet they engage in a long, thoughtful, deeply personal conversation. The questions they ask each other reflect this unusual intimacy: “What’s it mean then?” (4), “Are you okay?” (5), “What would you say is the best book that ever was wrote?” (18), “What did your daddy do?” (31), “Do you believe everything that’s in there? In the bible?” (66), “How about some coffee then?” (80), “You sure you aint hungry?” (92). Even if Black cannot ultimately save White from the “void,” Black’s loving devotion to White—his subway rescue, his insistence to rehabilitate, his cooking a meal, his promise to rescue White again—matches White’s despair, constituting grace. Only the most cynical reading—White’s defining quality—can find Black’s actions meaningless, grace ultimately meaningless. While McCarthy allows White to remain defiant, to pursue his

inevitable death, the relational love yet constitutes a real, meaningful manifestation of grace as beauty.

### Grace as Deliverance

Finally, grace in McCarthy's later works occurs in moments of deliverance, a combination of beauty and unmerited gifts albeit intensified, as the stakes are ultimate, life. McCarthy foregrounds survival and surviving—a deeply rooted canonical interest—in the harsh worlds of the later works as all characters contend with existential threats. As surviving the world requires diverse needs—psychic, physical, spiritual, for instance—grace as deliverance has variable forms. In the psychic sense, deliverance is not unlike the sentiment that Sheriff Bell shares regarding his wife, Loretta, in *No Country*: “*If I didnt have her I dont know what I would have. Well, yes I do. You wouldnt need a box to put it in, neither*” (305). Loretta animates Sheriff Bell's inner world, and, in that sense, she enriches Bell's life and delivers Bell from ontological angst. This is the same deliverance the son provides the father in *The Road*, what the mother implies when she tells the father, “The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself” (57), and what the father knows, “the boy was all that stood between him and death” (29). Perhaps McCarthy's most compelling articulation of grace as deliverance appears less like a dramatic extrication and more like the beauty of love, a force that rectifies the inner lives of his characters.

While the psychic deliverances lack drama, McCarthy's physical deliverances—where life, not death, occurs—take a dramatic shape, clarifying the precarious existence of survival in McCarthy's worlds. In *No Country*, Chigurh, the manifestation of evil and

a relentless killer, only once in the novel fails to kill what he intends to kill. As Chigurh drives across the “Devil’s River Bridge . . . near midnight” (98), he encounters “some kind of a large bird sitting on the aluminum bridgerail” (98). Demonstrating Chigurh’s cruelty, Chigurh “pushed the button to let the window down . . . took the pistol . . . cocked and leveled it . . . The pistol had been fitted with a silencer . . . He fired just as the bird crouched and spread its wings. It flared wildly in the lights, very white, turning and lifting away into the darkness. The shot had hit the rail” (98-99). Like the Pajaro de Esperanza in *The Road*, this bird of hope manages unwittingly to escape the inescapable scourge of *No Country*. The confluence of the “Devil’s River,” “midnight,” and “silencer” with “bird,” “white,” and “spread its wings” functions like a microcosmic marriage of evil and grace in McCarthy’s worlds to say nothing of the bird’s improbable escape from death; Chigurh, in execution-style, misses a “large bird,” which flies away toward more life. Earlier in the novel, another moment almost presages this escape. After escaping his arrest and killing both a deputy and an innocent civilian, Chigurh enters a gas station and has a conversation with the clerk. The conversation quickly becomes ontological when Chigurh asks the clerk, “What’s the most you ever saw lost on a coin toss?” (55). Like a perverse moment of Pascal’s Wager, Chigurh asks the clerk to “call” (56) the coin toss where the stakes are “everything” (56). Chigurh tells the totally confused clerk he is talking about “your whole life” (56). As it turns out, the clerk correctly calls the coin toss and manages to keep his life. Chigurh offers the clerk the “lucky coin” (57), and in this sense the moment categorically appears more like luck than grace<sup>14</sup>; while the physical deliverance depends on a coin toss, afterward, Chigurh strangely gives the man an opportunity to redeem his life from his monotonous existence:

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Chigurh gives Carla Jean Moss the same opportunity, to call a coin and escape

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)

Chigurh's coin toss moment is eschatological, and he frames the coin as way of approximating judgment of some kind: "one day there's an accounting." While it may be luck that allows the clerk to choose the correct side, the experience becomes an existential deliverance moment as the clerk suddenly gains new perspective in his life: "The proprietor watched him go . . . He laid the coin on the counter and looked at it. He put both hands on the counter and just stood leaning there with his head bowed" (57-58). As if in the posture of prayer, the clerk gains sudden cause to reexamine his psychic and spiritual priorities; strangely, of all characters, Chigurh provides this opportunity. The "head bowed" suggests an almost spiritual moment seemingly internalizing Chigurh's point, "after that nothing is the same."

In *The Sunset Limited*, McCarthy intensifies his canonical fascination with survival in the harsh world by offering his most dramatic physical deliverance alongside his most dramatic spiritual deliverance. In fact, *Sunset* hinges entirely on this plane of spiritual salvation—nothing in McCarthy's canon attends to spiritual salvation so explicitly. The two-leveled deliverance, the physical and the spiritual, represent versions of each other. Black's literal rescuing of White's mortality on the subway approximates Black's attempt to rescue White's immortality in the apartment. Before the play begins, Black "was just standin there on the platform" (23), before White makes, what Black describes as, his "amazin leap" (22); in response, Black says, somewhat facetiously:

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death; Carla Jean chooses incorrectly. It is less the choosing as it is the moment after, the internal dynamic against the external.

“You lookin at some big black angel got sent down here to grab your honky ass out of the air at the last possible minute and save you from destruction” (23). The dramatic physical deliverance, the “grab . . . at the last possible minute,” is freighted with divine intervention: “angel,” “sent down,” “out of the air,” and “save you from destruction.” In the later works, there may be no clearer example of a character receiving new life unexpectedly, the grace of deliverance, than White from his suicidal leap; and while, for White, this variation of grace may be unwanted, the grace nonetheless occurs. The physicality of grace, Black’s “grab,” anticipates the broader spirituality of grace in the play, Black’s attempted “grab” of White’s nihilism. To convince White of his need for spiritual deliverance, Black shares his own spiritual deliverance story. After a gruesome jailhouse fight, Black tells White:

I woke up in the infirmary . . . I come pretty close to dyin. And I had two hundred and eighty stiches holdin me together and I was hurtin . . . And still they got me in leg irons and got me handcuffed to the bed . . . And I’m layin there and I could hear this voice. Just as clear. Couldnt of been no clearer. And this voice says: If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here. Man. I tried to raise up and look around but of course I couldnt move. Wasnt no need to anyway. They wasnt nobody there. I mean, they was somebody there all right but they wasnt no use in me lookin around to see if I could see him. (48-49)

By all accounts, with “two hundred and eighty stiches,” Black should have died; that he does not is an unmerited gift, grace as physical deliverance. However, what follows, an encounter with God presumably, is spiritual deliverance. Lying on his almost deathbed, Black hears a voice, “If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here,” articulating McCarthy’s “there but for the grace of God go I” moment. Black’s insistence that “wasnt nobody there” further intensifies the mystery. This singular experience alters the arc of Black’s trajectory such that he has the capacity eventually to save White from the train. Everything about this moment defies possibility.

### Grace, Miraculous and Mundane, a Mystery

Like Black's rescue of White from death or Black's own strange deathbed deliverance, grace, in many of its iterations, is inexplicable, verging on miraculous. McCarthy's grace moment for the boy in *The Road*—his joining the new family in the end—occurs so improbably as to appear contrived, incredible; in fact, the boy's rescue expresses the grace of McCarthy's later works in its most extraordinary manifestation—gift, beauty, and deliverance. After a harrowing journey the father finally succumbs to his physical ailments and dies. The son stays “three days” to mourn his father:

then he walked out to the road and he looked down the road and he looked back the way they had come. Someone was coming. He started to turn and go back into the woods but he didnt. He just stood in the road and waited, the pistol in his hand. He'd piled all the blankets on his father and he was cold and he was hungry. The man . . . carried a shotgun upside down over his shoulder . . . he smiled. (281-282)

The father dies, the son waits “three days,” and then the son returns to the road, and “Someone was coming”; it is a remarkable moment that, of all people, this man with a “shotgun” also “smiled.” More remarkable still is to the son's question—“Are you one of the good guys?” (282)—the stranger responds, “Yeah . . . I'm one of the good guys” (282). While on the road, the father and son's existence is so bleak, so profoundly terrifying, that the son's deliverance after the father's death—by “good guys” with children, no less—appears too convenient, like a nice miracle. However, that is precisely the point of the moment, emphasizing the incredible nature of such miracles should appear precisely that, incredible. Grace is a miracle, in any iteration.

Yet, grace is also mundane, for while grace has the capacity for the miraculous, many of the grace moments in the later works actually constitute the grittiness of persisting, the intransigence not to yield to the metaphysical collapse. Grace is Ed Tom

and Loretta's imperfect but beautiful marriage, the father and son's rejection of despair, Black's selflessness to rescue a stranger and cook him a meal and promise to rescue him again. The father tells the son, "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (*The Road* 137). Grace persists, uncannily, because McCarthy's characters persist, and McCarthy's grace, the grace that appears improbably in his later works, emerges, perhaps, from the belief of his characters. This is McCarthy's mystery—the miraculous and mundane capacity of grace. Facing the "howling void" (*Sunset* 139), McCarthy's characters move ever-forward in their respective "void," in possession of their own experience of grace: for Ed Tom, Loretta, "*If I didnt have her I dont know what I would have*" (*No Country* 305); for the father, his son, "My Heart" (*The Road* 29); and for Black, literally God, "the grace of God" (*Sunset* 49). To this point of persistence, the last words of the father to the son, which are a response to the son's longstanding fears about another little boy whom may be "lost," become a prophetic announcement for his own son and a reminder of McCarthy's mysterious sense of grace, "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (281).

## Chapter V

### The Paradoxical Mystery of Evil and Grace

“All things of grace and beauty . . . have a common provenance in pain”

How, then, does Chigurh’s unchecked, amoral terrorizing or the grotesque, rogue gangs feeding on humans, or the modern Texas milieu seemingly devoid of justice but full of lawlessness or the post-apocalyptic milieu burning in ashes and strewn with corpses, or White’s ultimate longing for death, for escape from the “futility,” “the howling void,” how does this world exist simultaneously with the “Goodness . . . always has . . . will again” (*The Road* 281) faith of the father? More precisely, how does Cormac McCarthy reconcile, to think of Thomas Hardy, the convergence of the twain, evil and grace?

Some scholars have argued, understandably, that McCarthy’s fiction so conveniently yields itself to nihilism, that despite even the revised stance of critics like Vereen Bell, originator of the McCarthian nihilist argument, toward a more mystical understanding of McCarthy, McCarthy’s nihilistic capacity continues to persuade scholars. Nicholas Monk, as one such scholar, notes in McCarthy’s fiction, “the capacity of humanity to be so thoroughly colonized by an ultimate nihilistic modernity that it destroys itself in apocalypse, which it does in *The Road*, where alienation is driven to its ultimate pessimistic destination” (“Modernity” 36). Like Monk, Allen Josephs considers the overwhelming tone of *The Road* in such passages as, “The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void” (11), as exactly what they



appear to be—they appear to “point convincingly to nothingness and doubtless are among the major reasons the novel has been labeled as nihilistic” (“The Quest” 136). In McCarthy’s nihilistic worlds, “failure,” argues Jay Ellis, “overwhelms the generative possibilities of love, let alone grace” (*No Place for Home* 289). And yet, the magnificent, seemingly impossible converse exists, that somehow, in spite of the apparent “failure . . . of love, let alone grace,” in spite of even the actual destruction of the world, the exclusive nihilistic reading seems incomplete. Even though the world appears to be in its final stages in *The Road*, as Steven Frye argues, this possibility should not simultaneously occlude the converse possibility, the “overwhelming sense that material existence shrouds a transcendent mystery” (“Histories, Novels, Ideas” 7). Edwin T. Arnold, to the convenient, even credible nihilistic reading, ultimately refutes the “void” that Josephs cites as being seemingly devoid of meaning, of mystery: “For it is not that [McCarthy] 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, Knowing and Nothingness” 66). Apart from what exactly the mystery is, as Arnold and others argue, such as Timothy Parrish, “At issue is how the world is known and ordered” (“History and the Problem of Evil” 77), and, whatever exists at the very core of McCarthy’s terrifyingly bleak and cruel world, be it nothingness or something else, the order of McCarthy’s worlds must include a mysterious sense of grace. “How,” Jay Ellis rightly wonders, “can these two critical possibilities (nihilism and morality) continue to be as convincing as they are . . . without canceling each other out” (*No Place for Home* 289)?

In fact, the central McCarthian paradox—the convergence of unintelligible pain and suffering and cruelty with transcendent beauty and goodness and love—consistent

throughout his canon but particularly intensified in the later works, is the very point of McCarthy's later works. Far from "cancelling each other out," these forces function complementarily. In the later works, evil exists in all its variety: infanticide, senicide, homicide, cannibalism, grotesque displays of violence, despair induced suicide, to name several. However, grace—as gifts or beauty or deliverance—exists too. And it is in *The Road* that the father articulates this precise vision, rendered in lyrical elegance: "All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes" (54). The "pain" of the world—the "grief and ashes"—just so happens to be the locus "of grace and beauty." The "birth" occurs in, and occasionally because of, death, "grief and ashes." The very origins "of grace and beauty" are in "pain." Nothing could be simpler, then, when the father "would begin to sob uncontrollably," he knew "it wasn't about death . . . but he thought it was about beauty or goodness" (129). In fact, the only way grace could possibly exist, in any of the argued iterations is for pain to exist, pain, in some cases, of the most horrendous, most horrible, and most harrowing capacity. Yet, within the ashes of loss, grace has "birth," the capacity for rehabilitation, possibly reconstitution; evil cannot be undone but the loss and pain, forged in fires, can be reborn. In the rubble of McCarthy's ground zero worlds, grace remains, holds up, and survives. This is the paradox of the world, which does not increase its intelligibility or attractiveness, but this is the mystery of McCarthy's works, what Edwin T. Arnold argues, "is the very stuff of our existence" and, simultaneously, a mystery that "we are blind to" ("Naming, Knowing and Nothingness" 66). Grace must have its "birth in grief and ashes."

## Two Faiths, Two Responses

The convergence of evil and grace, as much as it does pose a problem for McCarthy's fictional characters and critics of McCarthy's fiction, does not appear to be a problem for McCarthy—mysterious, yes, but not a problem. McCarthy's canon, certainly the later works, depends on this tension, a terrible tension too. "All things of grace and beauty . . . have a common provenance in pain" is, in itself, an act of faith, a belief that such a mystery could ring true, and the faith of this belief takes a sacrifice of the self, a resignation to deny accessible reality, Steven Frye's contention about "material existence" serving as only an illusion for "a transcendent mystery" ("Histories, Novels, Ideas" 7). McCarthy probes, it seems, the extent to which the external reality, the "material existence," controls the internal reality of his characters, for all the characters of the later works possess either a materialistic faith<sup>15</sup>, a contention the metaphysical collapse undermines, or a mysterious faith that goodness can occur in spite of the horror, the collapse. Ultimately, two camps emerge, characters with eviscerated inner lives marked by the loss of faith—Ely from *The Road* and White from *Sunset*, to name two—and characters with invigorated inner lives marked by the persistence of faith—Sheriff Bell from *No Country*, the father and son from *The Road*, and Black from *Sunset*. Central to this notion of faith, and central to McCarthy's later works, is fire imagery, "Their birth in grief and ashes." Of these two camps, characters marked by a loss of faith only see ashes where characters with faith see the fire.

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<sup>15</sup> I am thinking of materialism as in assigning physical matter exclusive priority in forming meaning, and "materialistic faith" as a term to categorize characters whose faith depends on assurances from the physical world to give them meaning. In the collapse of metaphysics, the material coherence of *The Road*, quite obviously, disappears, so characters like Ely can no longer extract material meaning from the devastated world. White, in *Sunset*, sees through, so to speak, the material world into the emptiness of the collapse, which is why he imagines himself as "A thing dangling in senseless articulation" (139).

In *The Road*, Ely, the ancient figure, “bent and shuffling” (161), serves as the ironic mouthpiece for faith overwhelmed by metaphysical collapse, by evil: “There is no god and we are his prophets” (170). Though Ely is not suicidal (169), he tells the father, “I might wish I had died” (169). Though not willing to commit suicide, Ely also rejects the capacity for goodness, for when he see the boy, Ely tells the father, “I didnt know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didnt know that would happen” (172). There are practical reasons for why Ely could justifiably imagine never seeing a child, but Ely seems also to articulate a vision that cannot imagine seeing goodness, believing in beauty. After all, when asked to describe the boy, Ely says, “I dont know. I cant see good” (166). Though “I cant see good” refers to literal sight, the verbal irony suggests the blind prophet cannot see the possibility of grace too, and so, in his physical and spiritual blindness, Ely departs “with his cane, tapping his way, dwindling slowly on the road behind them like some storybook peddler from an antique time, dark and bent and spider thin and soon to vanish forever” (174). Where Ely passively accepts his static and ultimately hopeless position, “Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave” (169), White of *The Sunset Limited* rejects meaning in a universe dominated by pernicious cruelty, violence, and loss. White, unlike Ely, longs for death: “I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death. Real death” (135). Like the verbal irony of Ely’s “cant see good,” White’s “pray for death,” for someone without spiritual faith, reveals White’s intensity—he is even wiling to pray. White takes Ely’s prophetic mantel, intensified in despair and bleakness, and offers McCarthy’s ultimate rejection of the father’s faith, that “All things of grace and beauty . . . have a common provenance in pain.” White cannot accept such a notion:

Cant you see? The clamor and din of those in torment has to be the sound most pleasing to his ear . . . Your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. And if that pain were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash . . . The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy. Every road ends in death . . . Every friendship. Every love. Torment, betrayal, loss, suffering, age, indignity, and hideous lingering illness. All with a single conclusion. (137-138)

Almost in response to the father's faith, White denies the possibility that pain is anything other than "clamor and din," "torment," and "nothing more." Furthermore, White imagines this pain in the world as "reiterative" and not "collective," a distinction that prevents the world from total collapse; in the "collective" narrative, the "sheer weight" of suffering would function, oddly, as a sort of hell, "crashing and burning . . . until it was not even ash." The interplay between the father's argument that "grace and beauty" finds its locus in "grief and ashes" and White's contention that pain is pain and "ash" simply ash represents dichotomized options; either pain is good for nothing and ash is the remnant of goodness, of beauty, or goodness and beauty have its origins in pain, in ashes.

While Ely and White reject the possibility of goodness and beauty, not all the characters—namely Sheriff Bell, the father and son, and Black—reject the possibility; instead these characters possess a mysterious faith, a faith freighted with an inveterate persistence to survive, a grittiness to keep going, a rejection of rejection, and the capacity, not to ignore the darkness, but to see the light too. The physical darkness of Ely, he "cant see good" (*The Road* 166), and the psychic darkness of White, the "howling void" (*Sunset* 139), is not so different, maybe not different at all, than Sheriff Bell's imagination, "out there in all that dark" (*No Country* 309), or the father and son's lived-reality, "ashes of the late world . . . in the void" (*The Road* 11), or Black's isolation, "about everybody I ever knowed is dead" (*Sunset* 37); every character is surrounded by a

physical or psychic darkness. However, in Bell's imagination, his father is "fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark" (*No Country* 309), and both the father and son "carry the fire" (*The Road* 278), and Black, against White's "howling void," believes, "The light is all around you, cept you dont see nothin but shadow. And the shadow is you" (118). The recurring insistence of light imagery<sup>16</sup> in the later works frequently expresses this sense of grace in the world. Certainly, the characters that persist, who keep going, their interior worlds engage with psychic iterations of light, whether it is Bell's vision of his father in "all that dark," or the father providing the son with a psychic narrative of "fire," or Black suggesting that the "howling void" is merely a self-imposed shadow, that "light is all around." Again, McCarthy seems to insert this strange paradox within his later works, as grace and beauty depend on pain so does the intensity of light depend on the intensity of the darkness. For, in the concluding moments of both *No Country* and *The Road*, the darkness makes the light possible, activates grace: Sheriff Bell, "goin through the mountains of a night . . . out there in all that dark" (309) sees a vision of his father "carryin fire" (309), and the trout pulsate with a symbolic energy, "white edges of their fins wimpled softly . . . they hummed" (286-287), in contrast to the deep retrospective narrative darkness. In fact, the mythical, Promethean and Abrahamic imagery of "carryin fire," introduced in the conclusion of *No Country*, emerges as a central psychic posture in *The Road*. In key dialogical moments between the father and son on their journey, the father and son refocus their ethical imaginations around "fire,"

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<sup>16</sup> I recognize that McCarthy's light imagery only coheres reductively, that "carryin fire" in *The Road* and "light all around you" in *The Sunset Limited* signify, in the particular uses, different manifestations. The "fire" imagery of *No Country* and *The Road* engages the Abrahamic archetypal journey, a deeply ambivalent journey, both of its capacity for horror, the human sacrifice of a son, and for grace, the sudden gift of life. In *Sunset*, light does not evoke the Abrahamic narrative but evokes a more general representation of a metaphysical capacity to make meaning. However, the light imagery, whether the Abrahamic archetype or symbolic goodness, broadly manifests in the character possessing a faith that goodness can still exist, that grace exists.

typically at the son's inquisition. The son repeatedly asks, "Because we're carrying the fire" (83), "And we're carrying the fire" (129), or "they could be carrying the fire too" (216), and always in response, the father confirms the psychic navigation of the son, "Yes. Because we're carrying the fire" (83), "And we're carrying the fire. Yes" (129), and "They could be. Yes" (216). The son's continued self-imposed scrutiny to legitimate the distinction between good guys and bad guys becomes the ultimate shibboleth to assess his new family at the end:

How do I know you're one of the good guys?  
 You dont. You'll have to take a shot.  
 Are you carrying the fire?  
 Am I what?  
 Carrying the fire?  
 . . .  
 So are you?  
 What, carrying the fire?  
 Yes.  
 Yeah. We are. (283-284)

Light becomes the sign for those with faith; it is remarkable that the son, newly orphaned in a nightmare world, finds someone who passes the test, "Yeah. We are." And, there is in McCarthy's worlds, as contrary as it seems, truth to Black's claim to White, "light is all around" (118). McCarthy's worlds are dark, not deprived of light.

### Thematic and Lyrical Bleakness

Which is not to somehow dismiss the overwhelming sense of despair, horror, and cruelty—the "howling void" of McCarthy's worlds; for all the discussion of grace, particularly as grace might express some implicit beauty and goodness within the metaphysical collapse, McCarthy does not offer a convenient panacea for the evil, nor does McCarthy suggest that his fictional worlds may bend, in any shape, toward anything

remotely good. The later works do not rationalize, excuse, justify, romanticize, or contextualize evil in any sense, nor do the later works reconcile the perverse cruelty and unintelligible evil of the milieus—they are howling voids. In *No Country*, after a laborious and ultimately ineffectual pursuit of the drug money, Sheriff Bell retires unceremoniously and unsatisfied: “He’d felt like this before but not in a long time and when he said that, then he knew what it was. It was defeat. It was being beaten. More bitter to him than death” (306). Bell must reconcile his failures: Moss and Carla Jean are dead, the drug wars will continue with the help of Chigurh (252-253), and, of Chigurh’s disappearance, “He’s pretty much a ghost . . . out there. I wish he wasn’t. But he is” (299). In *The Road*, the cruel and perverse behavior of *No Country*, by comparison, looks merely like “bad manners” (*No Country* 304). McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic treatise terrifies to numbness; the world, burning to its physical death, never recovers nor forecasts recovery. The mother’s suicide and the father’s death orphan the child, which, under any circumstance, is awful, but unconscionable in McCarthy’s wasteland, “a blackness without depth or dimension” (67). Though the son gains a new family at the end, even so, the son’s trauma will likely never abate. And, in *The Sunset Limited*, a novel in dramatic form that distills McCarthy’s canon-long ontological interests into one long conversation, though the narrative begins with deliverance—Black’s rescue of White from suicide—the narrative ends with White’s expected suicide, “Now there is only the hope of nothingness” (141). As White leaves Black apartment and disappears off stage, McCarthy ultimately concludes the narrative with a psychically—and physically—shaken Black:

Black Professor? I know you dont mean them words. Professor? Im goin to be there in the mornin. I’ll be there. You hear? I’ll be there in the mornin.



*He collapses to his knees in the doorway, all but weeping.*

Black I'll be there.

*He looks up.*

Black He didnt mean them words. You know he didnt. You know he didnt. I dont understand what you sent me down there for. I dont understand it. If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words? You give em to him. What about me?

*He kneels weeping rocking back and forth*

Black That's all right. That's all right. If you never speak again you know I'll keep your word. You know I will. You know I'm good for it.

*He lifts his head.*

Black Is that okay? Is that okay?

*The End*

(141-143)

At “*The End*,” in the wake of White’s rejection, his “hope of nothingness,” Black’s unsettled exterior—“*He collapses*,” “*He looks up*,” “*He kneels weeping rocking back and forth*,” and “*He lifts his head*”—expresses his divided and previously undeterred interior—“I know you dont mean them words,” “I dont understand . . . I dont understand,” “Is that okay? Is that okay?” Black self-converses in psychic vacillation, while his physical postures reveal anything but confidence—the narrative ends in a question. “*The End*” starkly delineates the space between Black’s “okay?” and McCarthy’s emotional, intellectual, and spiritual closure, which does not exist here. The conclusion of *The Sunset Limited* fittingly concludes the later works, works deeply uncertain about the realities of the past, present, and future.

Canonically, the later works thrust McCarthy’s thematic interests to extremity, particularly in terms of physical destruction, *The Road*, and psychic despair, *The Sunset Limited*. The loss of faith for Ely and White, as untethered as their belief may be, represents the reality of McCarthy’s worlds, for the worlds certainly appear as a “howling

void,” and this “howling void” extends beyond just theme to aesthetics. Lyrically, in the later works, Cormac McCarthy’s formalistic evolution to a chiseled and pared style does nothing to abate the sense that doom either awaits or has already arrived:

minimalism, pragmatism, and naturalism are not stylistic choices he may or may not employ as he sees fit . . . nor are they philosophical positions that might underwrite his fiction and lend it gravitas . . . They are, instead, endgames . . . what one must play out, once one’s worst doubts have been confirmed and one’s cynicism, skepticism, and nihilism have been validated. (“He Ought Not” 184)

As Dana Phillips suggests, “what one must play out, once one’s worst doubts have been confirmed,” this is precisely the problem for Ely and White.

Throughout the later works, McCarthy’s minimalistic lyricism reinforces the ever-expanding sense that the metaphysical collapse in the narratives extends to words, to language. Language is McCarthy’s formalistic technique to approximate, at the micro-level of the word, the terrorizing despair of his fictional worlds; McCarthy’s words microcosmically embody both an aesthetic beauty and a metaphysical hollowness, which exacerbates, as Dana Phillips argues, the ending to *The Road*, lyrically beautiful but ultimately illusive:

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. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286-287)

As I have previously argued, the ultimate paragraph in *The Road* expresses a profound moment of McCarthy’s grace in the later works—marvelously surprising, aesthetically beautiful, and even possibly hopeful. But, as I also suggested, arguing the sense of grace here must reconcile language that seems, simultaneously, to cast the moment as anything

more than ethereal fantasy. For one, McCarthy employs the past tense: “Once there were,” “You could see,” “They smelled,” “On their backs were,” and “where they lived”; however, the phrases, “Of a thing which could not be put back” and “Not be made right again,” ultimately frame the conclusion as unmitigated loss and, as Dana Phillips argues, therefore seemingly “more hopeful than it actually is” (186). Where I have argued that beauty is a version of grace, Dana Phillips confirms my contention that “this may be the most beautifully written passage in the book,” but, he adds, “it is also the most damning . . . Once there were brook trout, and there are not. You could see them, and now you cannot. They smell of moss, and now not even moss smells of moss anymore . . . It is hard to see an upside here” (186). Dana Phillips is correct. The entire paragraph, cast in the past tense, concerns the past, a world so foreign to the contemporary context of *The Road* that the paragraph appears shocking. It is disingenuous to ignore these linguistic phrases, conveniently suggesting that *The Road* is hopeful, and, of hope, Dana Phillips says, no, “*to read The Road for signs of hope and redemption is to misread it, and worse: it is to miss the boat not by an hour or a day, but by an epoch or even an era. In The Road, there is no boat: all boats have been sunk . . . the end of the world is simply the end of the world*” (italics his, 188). In a sense, Dana Phillips argues what Ely and White argue, McCarthy’s worlds are a “howling void,” and to read any of his worlds, certainly *The Road*, for “signs of hope and redemption” requires a faith in something that the novel does not provide.

### Yet, the Hum of Mystery

A “howling void,” maybe, hopeful, maybe not, but the contention of this thesis concerns the pairing of the “void” with an unmistakable sense of grace, which is not only present throughout *The Road* but present in the very last words of the novel. Dana Phillips, who understandably wonders how “to see an upside” in the conclusion of *The Road*, makes the concession that the conclusion “will seem redemptive . . . nonetheless, because placed as it is—at ‘the end’—it appears to hold forth a promise of a new beginning, provided one reads the brook trout as, say, allegorical, symbolic, mythic or otherwise charged with greater meaning . . . McCarthy really ‘ought not have done it,’ given . . . readerly expectations and genre conventions” (186). In fact, yes, what may “seem redemptive” may actually constitute redemption, though not in the genre conventions of comedy, of happy resolutions. While I can appreciate Phillips’ contention, I would contend that “readerly expectations and genre conventions” still matter<sup>17</sup>, that McCarthy, the storyteller, chooses “trout,” of all imagery, at the end of the road. After all, the novel’s final word, “mystery,” engages the very possibility of the inexplicable. Shockingly and improbably, McCarthy places this paragraph at the end of a novel filled with the terror of the darkest nightmare, so naturally it “will seem redemptive,” but just because the paragraph concerns the past, “Of a thing which could be not be put back,” and just because *The Road*—and *No Country*, for that matter, which ends, “And then I woke up” (309)—concludes in a retrospective gaze, offering no prophetic future vision,

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<sup>17</sup> No to digress too far into metatheory, but McCarthy, unlike Dickens, does not appear to gauge the popular opinions of his audience. The audience ought to have the capacity to reconcile the paradox that even though the paragraph is in past tense it does not necessarily constitute a meaningless illusion. Either the ending signals something or it signals nothing, and if the ending signals nothing—if it cannot mean anything other than an illusion—where does one ground meaning in anything as everything is certain to die eventually, to eventually not have an end?

does not invalidate the sense of grace. Logically, it seems counterintuitive, even ridiculous, imagining the conclusion of *The Road* possesses any semblance of grace, but that would also seem to use Ely and White's logic, characters, who may be right but who also deny the possibility, based on a materialistic faith, that goodness could ever occur inexplicably, impossibly. The "brook trout" did exist, and that is grace even if they no longer exist. The grace of this paragraph, ultimately, is also what the paragraph does not say. This paragraph has nothing to say about the father or the son or the future; the paragraph seems untethered, retrospectively, to any component of the father and son's contemporary world. The paragraph gazes retrospectively, remembering a totally beautiful moment about a world "older than man," older than the human capacity for destruction. And, in this sense, although Dana Phillips offers a persuasive, entirely plausible interpretation about the future, "*there is no boat: all boats have been sunk . . . the end of the world is simply the end of the world*," the future is not the concern. Phillips is totally justified in projecting the future, but, to counter his curiosity, no one really knows. Who could possibly know? Who is the narrator? What are the origins of the final paragraph? Where are the "trout" coming from? I would not go as far to say that conclusion of *The Road* is miraculous, but the conclusion seems like an impossible non sequitur, and, by definition, a miracle defies logical conventions, a miracle, it could be said, "hummed of mystery." In this sphere of impossible "mystery, the conclusion of *The Road* is less Beckett's *Endgame* and more Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; in fact, the conclusion is Cormac McCarthy's Ghost of Hamlet moment, the spectral figure refocusing Hamlet's gaze to the past. Where the "brook trout" return in an uncanny, almost spectral appearance, McCarthy's insistence on memory—"Once there were," "where they

lived”—evokes the hauntingly beautiful wisdom that some “things [are] older than man,” that things may die but of their afterlives none could know, for it is a “mystery.” Maybe the bad guys will savagely murder and cannibalize the son and his newly adopted family immediately after the narrative ends, or maybe the son and his family will live long lives in the post-apocalyptic landscape. Would any of those hypothetical though probable scenarios invalidate the son’s deliverance moment, or temper the beauty of the “brook trout . . . the white edges of their fins . . . Polished and muscular and torsional . . . maps of the world in its becoming” (*The Road* 286-287)? As the “brook trout” are tethered to a time “which could not be put back,” which could not be “right again,” the son’s new mother-figure counters the irreconcilable with the mysterious, “that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (286), and so the “breath” may continue into the unknown, into the “mystery.”

Ultimately, what follows the ending of *The Road* is unknowable as is the capacity for redemption. Common sense will confirm what King Lear declares, “Nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.90). Short of divine intervention, *The Road* ends in death. But as Shelly Rambo argues, perhaps “the question of a redemptive ending is not *the* question that McCarthy presents” (101). As much as redemption and hope occupy the literary conventions of genre, maybe the question *The Road* offers, in the ending, is not about redemption but rather “what does it mean to witness . . . what remains” (Rambo 101). Grace, in this sense, constitutes a present tense concern not the future.

### Questions Not Answers

If grace depends on a future certainty, then I yield the foundations of my argument, for Cormac McCarthy's later works, far from answering questions, pose questions, and, far from resolving narratives, the later works resolve to be inconclusive. It is unfair to suggest that, since McCarthy's fiction is inconclusive, therefore nothing truly can be known; that is dishonest. But, it is fair to suggest that McCarthy's later works raise more questions—ontological, theological, ethical, moral, philosophical—than they provide answers, and to many of the questions that McCarthy raises, Matthew L. Potts rightly argues, "I don't believe McCarthy offers anything in the way of conclusive answers to these questions" (*Signs of Sacrament* 188). In making sense of the macro-narrative, a helpful cognitive framework imagines McCarthy's later works as triptychs, three-part dramas: the first panel concerns the occurrences prior to the texts—for instance, Sheriff Bell's war years, or Chigurh's descent into evil, or the father and the mother's marriage, or White as university professor and Black as a murderer; the middle panel represents the narratives of the texts themselves—the Bell-Chigurh-Moss conflict, or the father and son on the road, or Black and White's conversation; and the last panel represents what occurs after the texts, that which is unknown. Within this triptych analogy, all three of the later works, at particular moments of the middle triptych stage, pose three essential, metanarrative questions that express this larger sense of late canonical uncertainty: how does one live, is that enough, and how will this end.

Not all of McCarthy's integral ontological questions defy answer, as two of McCarthy's essential questions—how one lives and is that enough—constitute the entirety of his later works. In *The Road*, when the father and son meet Ely, the father, in

almost disbelief at Ely's existence, asks, "How do you live?" (168). The "live" question occupies, maybe more than any other question, the pages of McCarthy's later works, the middle-panel of the triptych. Every character—Llewellyn, Carla Jean, Ed Tom, Loretta, Ellis, Chigurh, Carson, the father, the mother, the son, Ely, Black, White—explicitly or implicitly, considers this question. The first level response returns the conversation to faith, the dichotomy between material faith and metaphysical faith. Living in McCarthy's later works constitutes survival, both physical and metaphysical. Some characters cannot live, the wife of *The Road*, or do not want to live, Ely of *The Road* and White of *Sunset*, but the majority of characters persist into the "howling void." The father in *The Road* delineates this posture of persistence best: "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (137). Here McCarthy throws the blueprints on the table for how to confront evil: "keep trying . . . dont give up." Loss does not have to deprive humanity of the self; this would make people passive agents when in fact agency remains an option. McCarthy gives his "good guys" agency, the faith to continue amidst "ashes." Beyond the utilitarian scope, the "live" question also concerns the spiritual, the psychic, and the emotional spheres, how to live metaphysically. This is the question that undergirds Llewellyn's decision to take the drug money and then, later that night, return to the shoot-out scene to provide water to the wounded man—"I'm fixin to go do somethin dumbern hell but I'm goin anyways" (*No Country* 24); this is the question that haunts the father, carrying his two-bullet pistol, as he wanders through the wasteland with his son, to an unknown end—"My job is to take care of you" (*The Road* 77); this is the question that frames each twenty-four hour day of Black, living in a "room in a . . . ghetto in New York City . . . fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars" (*Sunset* 3), trying



to “save [people] from destruction” (23). The second question, is that enough, gauges the psychic acceptance of the first question, “How do you live.” The last words of Black in *The Sunset Limited*, “Is that okay” (143), speaks more to the psychic than the physical and represents the canonical motif of certain characters, namely the “good guys,” who process ethics in a metaphysical collapse. This question, returning to the triptych analogy, extends beyond just the second panel to the first, as in the Case of Sheriff Bell’s psychic wound from World War II or the father’s decision to not commit suicide like his wife. “Is that okay,” as a question, functions at the psychic level only; characters must face their own interior reckoning as individuals, as this question, like the many that McCarthy’s texts raise, often remains inconclusive.

The third question occupying the minds of scholars and certainly McCarthy’s characters concerns endings, resolutions; representing the third panel of the triptych, this question extends to what is ultimately unknown and unknowable. In *No Country*, Sheriff Bell asks Carla Jean Moss, “How do you think this is goin to end,” to which, in response, Carla Jean says, “I dont know. I dont know how nothin is goin to end. Do you” (129). Bordering on eschatology, the back and forth questions perfectly express this larger uncertainty of the later works—how do they end, maybe even, how does the world end? Carla Jean is not being ironic when she says, “I dont know how nothin is goin to end,” as if ironically responding to the nihilistic criticism of McCarthy. Even so, the question is magnificent in its simplicity, for McCarthy’s later works seem implicitly preoccupied with this question during the works but even more so when the works conclude: what will happen to Sherriff Bell and Chigurh, the son and his new family, Black and White? The milieus, in metaphysical collapse, will remain in their dissolution: the interminable drug

wars and the inexplicably cruel people in *No Country*; the global conflagration and the lawless survivors in *The Road*; and the “horrible life” (40) and “howling void” (139) in *The Sunset Limited*. As previously mentioned, so much of what happens in McCarthy’s later works remains inconclusive, unfinished. In this sense, “How do you think this is goin to end” is a question for the future, a third-panel triptych question, and perhaps unanswerable.

The later works of Cormac McCarthy ask more questions than they answer, for McCarthy appears not so concerned with ready-made answers to complex issues as presenting the terrifying complexity of modernity, of humanity, letting his tortured characters hew out the possible responses. After he visits Uncle Ellis, Sheriff Bell reflects on their conversation and, in particular, his psychic wound: “*When he asked me why this come up now after so many years I said that it had always been there. That I had just ignored it for the most part. But he’s right, it did come up. I think sometimes people would rather have a bad answer about things than no answer at all*” (*No Country* 282). Bell’s monologue is interesting on two levels. First, Bell engages both the “live” and “enough” questions by suggesting the psychic wound “had always been there” but Bell had adapted to live with regret and shame, nonetheless. The second level, however, occupies the metanarrative, critical response to the skeletal system structuring McCarthy’s canon, the inconclusive: “*sometimes people would rather have a bad answer about things than no answer at all.*” It is as if McCarthy speaks on behalf of his own canon, offering a response to, among other topics, the convergence of evil and grace. Paradoxes often look like “a bad answer,” and I can think of no paradox more essential to the later works than: “All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s

heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes” (54). This is the paradox of evil and grace, “grief and ashes,” yes, but “grace and beauty” too. Maybe this is “a bad answer,” maybe not. We lose the “brook trout” (*The Road* 286), and the beauty of a certain world “could not be put back . . . be made right again” (*The Road* 287), yet, as Matthew L. Potts renders so eloquently:

[I]f, in spite of all the gruesome violence of these novels; if, in spite of all their dark fatalism and tragic loss; if, in spite of all this, we can close their covers and place them down and still hear the faint hum of their mystery, still feel the frail agony of their grace, then perhaps this persistence itself should become the awful object of our theology. (*Signs of Sacrament* 188)

Potts advocates that McCarthy’s audience adopt precisely the sort of hermeneutical activity occupying the father and son’s own imaginations on the road, interpreting their own story; the father and son contend with “gruesome violence,” live under a “dark fatalism,” suffer through “tragic loss,” and yet the father and son persist in telling their own stories:

Why dont you [the son] tell me a story?  
 . . . stories are supposed to be happy.  
 They dont have to be.  
 You always tell happy stories.  
 You dont have any happy ones?  
 They’re more like real life.  
 But my stories are not.  
 Your stories are not. No.  
 The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad?  
 What do you think?  
 Well, I think we’re still here. A lot of bad things have happened but we’re still here.

. . .

After a while the man said: I think it’s pretty good. It’s a pretty good story. It counts for something. (268-269)

Are the later works “good” even though they terrify, wretch, and disquiet? Is the paradox of “grace and beauty . . . in pain” tolerable or too terrible? If the father can declare that

their story is “pretty good” and that “It counts for something,” then whatever was “In the deep glens . . . [that] hummed of mystery” perhaps still hums.

## Chapter VI

### Facing the Void—Concluding McCarthy’s Later Works

“to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark”

If Cormac McCarthy’s later works offer any coherent certainties about the world, it is the paradox that strewn in the “pain . . . grief and ashes” of the world” (*The Road* 54)—mass murder, infanticide, cannibalism, suicides, cyclical violence, the end of the world, failed marriages, death of children, permanent trauma—stands the “birth” of something entirely unexpected, “grace and beauty” (54). In as much that McCarthy eschews easy answers, this is at least a start to the question premising this thesis: how does one reconcile the overwhelming capacity for human cruelty, perversion, and evil without, first, conceding any coherent notion of beauty in the world and without, more broadly, yielding to a total state of despair? While human cruelty, universal indifference, and despair dominate McCarthy’s later works, not only do grace and beauty simultaneously exist—they depend on the very “pain” dominating the works, “birth in grief and ashes.” Reconciling the evil of the universe does not require denying the pain or suffering. Still, some of McCarthy’s characters—Ely and the mother from *The Road* and White from *The Sunset Limited*—cannot reconcile this disparity, cannot accept anything other than the “howling void” (*Sunset* 139). But, what of the characters that do reconcile this disparity?

For the characters that acknowledge the terror of McCarthy’s worlds but also the grace, McCarthy characterizes them as inveterate survivors, as not only persisting and

resisting but as facing the “howling void.” Facing the void, as a McCarthian posture, constitutes recognizing the stakes, as White delineates: “The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy. Every road ends in death. Or worse. Every friendship. Every love. Torment, betrayal, loss, suffering, pain, age, indignity, and hideous lingering illness. All with a single conclusion. For you and for every one and every thing that you have chosen to care for” (*Sunset* 137-138). For White, this “sickens [him]” (138). However, for Sheriff Bell of *No Country*, the father and the son of *The Road*, and Black of *Sunset*, though the void terrifies, “the good guys . . . keep trying . . . dont give up” (137). In the last chapter of *No Country for Old Men*, a chapter entirely dedicated to Sheriff Bell’s interior processing, Bell reflects on this notion of faith without compelling evidence, of persistence in the face of destruction, of living forward facing toward the void:

*When you went out the back door of that house there was a stone water trough in the weeds by the side of the house . . . and I remember stoppin there one time and squattin down and lookin at it and I got to thinkin about it. I dont know how long it had been there. A hundred years. Two hundred. You could see the chisel marks in the stone. It was hewed out of solid rock . . . Just chiseled out of the rock. And I got to thinkin about the man that done that. That country had not had a time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of. I’ve read a little of the history of it since and I aint sure it ever had one. But this man had set down with a hammer and a 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. Which is what you might think, I suppose. He had to know bettern that. I’ve thought about it a good deal . . . about him settin there with his hammer and his chisel, maybe just a hour or two after supper, I dont know. And I have to say that 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. (307-308)*

This marvelous moment, the “stone water trough” persisting against the metaphysical collapse galvanizes Bell’s physical and psychic selves, “*stopping . . . and squattin down and lookin at it and . . . thinkin about it.*” In a posture of reverence, Bell condescends to

the level of the trough, studying its ancient facade, “*A hundred years. Two hundred,*” its rugged appearance, “*chisel marks in the stone . . . hewed out of solid rock,*” its future outlook, “*to last ten thousand years,*” and its mysterious origins, “*Why.*” The stone water trough, ultimately, casts for Bell a psychic vision of a man not unlike himself, who lived in the metaphysical collapse—“*That country had not had a time of peace much of any length at all . . . and I aint sure it ever had one*”—yet who possessed a “*faith,*” a persistence to face the void with faith not “*that nothin would change*” but with “*some sort of promise in his heart.*” This anonymous man that Bell conjures in his imagination emerges as McCarthy’s version of a good guy, one who neither denies the collapse nor passively accepts the collapse but faces the collapse, “*hammer and . . . chisel*” and all.

Like all of McCarthy’s characters, Ed Tom understands trauma. Whether the great psychic wound of World War II, or the death of his daughter, or guilt about his father, or his inability to protect Llewellyn and Carla Jean, or his inability to arrest Chigurh, Bell could reasonably feel despair. Instead, he ponders the anonymous artisan of the stone water trough, “*there was some sort of promise in his heart. And . . . I would like to be able to make that kind of promise. I think that’s what I would like most of all.*” In *The Road*, the father and son must reconcile the micro-level trauma of the mother’s suicide against the macro-level trauma of the world burning down and the death of everyone they ever loved, and they feel every bit of despair imagined. Instead of Ely or White’s nihilistic despair, though, the father and son keep walking on the road, keep surviving, such that the father’s last words, “Goodness . . . always has. It will again” (281), defy their experience. In *The Sunset Limited*, Black has lived a life of trauma, always in legal trouble, his two sons dead, his identity as a murderer, and his life in a ghetto full of drug

users and thieves. Instead of jumping in front of the Sunset Limited train, he rescues a suicidal man from the Sunset Limited, and instead of seeing the “howling void,” he sees “light . . . all around” (118). Trauma does not impede these characters. They face the void.

As if facing the void is easy, it is not, but these characters intuitively grasp McCarthy’s mystery, the paradoxical confluence of grace and beauty and pain, of ashes and grief and birth. McCarthy’s characters dwell perpetually in the unknown, the liminal void, haunted by questions such as “how do you live,” “is that okay,” and “how will this end,” just as McCarthy’s later works do not really conclude, raising a series of unanswered questions. Llewellyn Moss, a character who understands the vagaries of life, shortly before his untimely and sudden death says, “Things happen to you they happen. They don’t ask first. They don’t require your permission” (*No Country* 220). But in the later works, McCarthy suggests, though horrible and cruel “Things happen,” they do not define people, or they do not have to define people. Not too long after the murder of Moss, Chigurh horrifically kills his wife, Carla Jean. Nothing about their deaths approximates, what Bell wishes for them, “a nice endin” (*No Country* 132). Yet this cruelty does not attenuate the reality of their love, “like a dream” (131), when Carla Jean, working at Wal-Mart met Llewellyn for the first time:

he walked in and he asked me where sportin goods was at and it was him. And I told him where it was at and he looked at me and went on. And directly he come back and he read my nametag and he said my name and looked at me and he said: What time do you get off? And that was all she wrote. There was not no question in my mind. Not then, not now, now ever. (132)

Ed Tom and Loretta’s marriage, an act of grace, exists in spite of his inability to prevent the Moss’s deaths or Chigurh’s escape, in spite of his lingering psychic wound from



World War II. The grace is still there in spite of the inconclusive nature of the novel. But perhaps it is *The Road*, his most canonically intense foray into unintelligible cruelty, where McCarthy tests the truth, “All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes” (54). If, as McCarthy imagines, the world can burn down, the social institutions—church, state, law, politics—dissolve, the majority of people die horrific and cruel deaths—friends and spouses, if all of the worst imagined scenarios play out and love can still survive, then McCarthy argues that grace still exists, standing in the rubble.

“Things happen,” as Llewellyn says, what Bell, the father, and Black all intuitively know, and “They don’t require your permission,” but they provide moments, as the characters demonstrate, to face the void. Which is why, in *The Road*, journeying on the road as a mythical, archetypal experience of life—the journey not the destination—manifests so clearly the notion of love amidst hyperbolic cruelty and uncertainty. I have been speaking about uncertainty, for McCarthy’s later works conclude with important unanswered questions. However, every character knows one certainty, at the end of the road is death. What the mother and father bring into the world—the son—must eventually leave the world, and maybe this is what Cormac McCarthy accomplishes with such beauty at the end of *The Road*. “All things” must also cease to be things:

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. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286-287)

Like the “*stone water trough*,” the “brook trout,” apart from the strange linguistic similarity of “*trough*” and “trout,” also constitutes a historical relic, “a thing which could not be put back.” Both “*trough*” and “trout” are “Once” things, things that once were but no longer are. Eventually the “*stone water trough*” will disappear, as the “brook trout” in the post-apocalyptic world must. Even then, Cormac McCarthy suggests, the beauty that once was remains a grace, even in the past tense. The simultaneity of grace, mundane and miraculous, withstands the terror of the metaphysical collapse, the terror of the unknown, or even the terror of the known, death—even if grace ceases in death and loss.

I do not know if this is what Cormac McCarthy imagines at the end of this narrative, of his later canonical works, that things of the past remain powerfully present in their grace. Sheriff Bell’s thinks about his father in a dream on horseback through “*mountains of a night*,” and as Bell remembers, “*I knew that he was goin on ahead that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there*” (309). The vision, “*he would be there*,” will undergird Bell for the remainder of his life as he faces the void, “*all that dark and all that cold*.” The father in *The Road*, who also predeceases the son, leaves a similar legacy—to fix a fire—for the son literally living in a world of “*dark and . . . cold*.” The son must move forward with the certainty of death looming. Black offers White, of *The Sunset Limited*, a promise, to “be there in the mornin” (142), even if White is certain to die. This—for Bell, father, and Black—is the “*promise*” of the “*stone water trough*,” the “*promise in his heart*” of the anonymous artificer, to invest in the world in spite of the collapse, to move forward no matter the circumstances, to engage the world for what it is in the present and not what it has been or what it will become. Eventually the “brook

trout” will be “Once,” as cruel as it may be, as “all things” will be a “were,” but McCarthy accepts that. Until then, while they are, grace improbably and inexplicably moves forward too, never far behind, such that one might say that grace “hummed of mystery.”

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