

ABSTRACT

BOURNE, ASHLEY LYNN. "The immappable world of our journey": The Re-emergent Medieval Dream Forms in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy. (Under the direction of Dr. Linda T. Holley)

Conventional analysis of dream devices in postmodern literature does not often take into account medieval dream-visions as a potential point of origin. Looking more closely at the highly specialized spatial constructions and social functions of this earlier genre can provide new insight into why authors like Cormac McCarthy offer less readily interpretable versions of the dream-visions in later works of fiction. While these early dream forms appeared as formalized narratives that attempted to map a spiritual landscape, McCarthy's dream-visions function to map the landscape of memory, a landscape unique to each individual. The surreal landscape that Billy Parham wanders in the second and last novels of the trilogy provides a means of linking the dream-visions, as the term can imply both the cultural context in which dream-visions are formed as well as the concrete, visual backdrop for these visions. Both abstract and concrete, landscape can be as formless as the unseen religious conventions that shape the medieval dreamers' visions or as distinctive as the eerie Mexican wilderness that McCarthy's protagonists travel through. While the medieval dreamers try to understand an immaterial, spiritual world in attempt to make their way to God, McCarthy's postmodern dreamers must find order in the real world, and make their way through that world with a much less clearly defined goal. Billy and John Grady Cole wander in a landscape where what each sees in reality is alien and unfamiliar, while what is familiar—their memories—is not present, appearing only in his mind's eye, that is, in the dream-visions. These realms cannot be

reconciled; the resulting contrast makes the postmodern dream-visions less universally interpretable and increases the significance of the individual dreamer in relation to his or her own dream. By preserving the dream-vision as a potential channel for illumination and a space outside the constructs of reality, McCarthy offers a translation of conventional medieval dream-vision form into the terms of an existential, highly fragmented postmodern world.

**“The immappable world of our journey”: The Re-emergent Medieval Dream Forms in
Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy**

by
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BIOGRAPHY

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

All the Pretty Horses APH

Cities of the Plain CP

The Cloud of Unknowing Cloud

The Crossing CR

--“That if a **dream** can tell the future, it can also thwart the future... [God] is bound to no one that the world unfold just so upon its course and those who by some sorcery or by some dream might come to pierce the veil that lies so darkly over all that is before them may serve by just that **vision** to cause that God should wrench the world from its heading and set it upon another course altogether and then where stands the sorcerer? Where the **dreamer** and his **dream**?” --McCarthy, from *The Crossing*

--“He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought the world’s heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world’s pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be extracted for the **vision** of a single flower.” --McCarthy, from *All the Pretty Horses*

--“In **dreams** it is often the case that the greatest extravagances seem bereft of their power to astonish and the most improbable chimeras appear commonplace. Our waking life’s desire to shape the world to our convenience invites all manner of paradox and difficulty But in **dreams** we stand in this great democracy of the possible and there we are right pilgrims indeed. There we go forth to meet what we shall meet.” --McCarthy, from *Cities of the Plain*

Introduction

The reception of dreams in Western culture is an intricate and often complicated process that continues to evolve. The desire to interpret dreams and turn their imagery into prophecy, however, remains constant from biblical history, through Greek and Roman civilizations, into early European culture and continuing to the present day. Dreams are one cultural experience we all have in common and, as such, they have long been thought to have the mystical potential to be revelations, though any culture that relies on dream divination accepts these shadowy prophecies neither easily nor without skepticism. Secular dreams range from the mildly prophetic to the uncanny and beyond, unleashing images that both imitate and distort life. At times, dreams seem so tangible the dreamer wakes from sleep convinced their dream was no dream at all and at others, the dreamer enters the world of the surreal and grotesque, unable to find any comforting hint of reality. But always, dreams move in their own strange territory where time and space seem to be suspended and no longer subject to the rules of conscious reality. Dreams operate in a liminal realm, with

borders that protect the integrity of the dream space by restricting it to the nebulous area between waking and sleep.

When we wake and remember our dreams, it is as though we are seeing light refracted through a prism. They become inverted, unreadable by the same rationale that rules the conscious, physical world. But even so, neither postmodern dreamers nor those in the medieval period have found these dream-visions easy to dismiss; on the contrary, they fascinate with their promises of supernatural knowledge. The term “postmodern,” as it is commonly used in this paper is more ideological than chronological. It refers not to a literary characterization of McCarthy’s novels—which are more linear than fragmented—but instead to the prevalent issues of this genre that McCarthy’s narratives have subsumed and naturally exude in their telling. An absent God, a fragmented past, and an inscrutable future combined with the ultimately solitary nature of every individual are the essential pillars of the postmodern view that McCarthy uses to construct his narrative world. The “postmodern” label references the world the characters inhabit, an insular space, rather than the extrinsic world outside the novel, which necessarily includes the impositions of both time and the reader. What remains constant between the medieval and postmodern periods are the images and scenes that spring fully formed from the dreamer’s unconscious to filter the perceptions of daily experience. The dreams themselves take on the features of a narrative, a text which, at its heart, scrutinizes our ways of knowing and organizing our experiences. In this paper I first examine the medieval dream forms as they originated and then look at the transformation of dream-space in the postmodern period, where dream-visions reemerge in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy as both distinctive visions and valuable incarnations of

an older form, valuable because they reveal the continuing presence and significance of the dream-vision as a means of interpreting life itself in a new time and culture.

I

“My argument of common histories”: Early Dream Forms

Establishing dream-visions as a point of connection between the human and the divine/supernatural and characterizing the resulting interaction force the reader to consider the earthly consequences of such interactions. How should we apply these dream-visions in the waking world, once outside the internal spaces where they originate? Organizing dream-visions as narratives attempts to give these visions a purpose, a visible role within the lives of dreamers as well as their readers. In his book *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Steven Kruger explores the significance of dreams and the origins of dream interpretation in the medieval period. He intimates that the dreamer’s ability to reach the illumination he seeks is questionable at best. Kruger explains that “higher knowledge may be only obliquely glimpsed; corporeality may stand in the way of full and clear understanding. Dream fictions explore both the successes and failures of the human search for knowledge” (140). The dream scenario provides the dreamers with the hope of finding some logic in their everyday, secular experience to receive a potentially divine revelation; what they take from that revelation depends upon their abilities to reconstruct the dream into a recognizable form and extract its message. The hope is that the narrative becomes a means of translating the often random and cumulative personal visions into an acceptable, more compact and coherent structure that filters out apparently extraneous details to focus on what is perceived as the central meaning.

Discussing the metamorphosis of dream-visions from the medieval period to twentieth-century requires examining the internal and external spaces in which these dreams are shaped. The genre originated in medieval Europe as an allegorical device and narrative framework. The most overt external influences are those exerted by the Catholic Church in medieval Europe, which took on the responsibility for setting up guidelines for interpretation of dreams. In his examination of *The Medieval Imagination*, Jaques Le Goff contends that it was “because the church felt such qualms and misgivings about dreams [that] it sought to exert fairly strict control over them At the same time, dreams helped to impose a new ideology, a new system of values, a new relation with the divine” (218). Medieval dreamers were steeped in Christian oneirology, and though the “connection they saw between ecstasy, dreams, and prophecy further compromised the interpretation of dreams in the eyes of the orthodox church,” Christian leaders recognized the power of dreams because they were—and remain—a common human experience (LeGoff 207). Dream-visions are more focused than the garden variety dreams because they appear to convey a particular message or prophecy, and were therefore considered a potential bridge between two worlds: the human and the divine/supernatural. In order to translate this communication, individuals—probably at the urging of the church—felt the need to look to a more reliable source than their own intuition, namely the church authorities. In his essay on “The Liminality and Centrality of Dreams in the Medieval West,” Jean-Claude Schmitt describes the presence of dreams within this period, asserting that

the original theoretical and normative framework within which medieval scholarship evaluated dreams developed from a dual heritage: pagan (Greco-Roman) and biblical (primarily Old Testament). Rooted in this dual heritage is the view of dreams as an interaction between the dreamer and invisible powers. (275)

The dream-vision, then, is dependent on forces outside the control of the dreamer, but interaction is limited to the dreamer's movement within the dream space. This inside/outside dilemma does not imply that the medieval individual can influence the content and events in dreams; rather, dreams serve merely to relay the narrative of the visions. The dream-visions derive their significance, then, from this communication between "dreamer and invisible powers" and the difficulty lies in determining which messages have true moral value since individuals seem able to receive messages from either an omnipotent, all-knowing God, or possibly from more malevolent evil spirits bent on deceiving the individual into temptation and sin. The subsequent interpretations of these dream-visions were meant to allow individuals the guidance to live a more spiritually fulfilling life by making changes to their actions in the real world. The communication, however, is rigidly one-sided. The image of a monk laboriously and painstakingly copying a religious document in solitude is a fitting image to symbolize many who experienced medieval dream-visions. The vision itself is like the original document, written by an incontrovertible source and given without explanation. The receiver must accept the document without question and reproduce it as faithfully as possible—without any undue subjective influence—so that others may gain the illumination the divine source has to offer.

In the medieval dream visions, the dreamer evolved as an often-bewildered figure, searching doggedly for a greater understanding. The dream becomes the vehicle through which the individual has access to spiritual and secular truths. The dreamer wanders through a dream landscape, looking to a variety of signs and oracular figures to provide an explanation for this journey. The narratives of medieval dream-visions are organized to

disregard the individual dreamer in favor of the dream-vision and its message; focusing on the individual is clearly a postmodern reversal of medieval convention. A.C. Spearing mentions *De Planctu Naturae* by Alanus de Insulis, a twelfth-century theologian, in the introduction to *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, to make the point that “the visionary... is not adequate to the content of his vision . . . in this, he himself... becomes the forerunner of many medieval dreamers who fall below the level of their dreams” (20). This helps to explain the conventional narrative role of the dreamer as an unenlightened seeker of knowledge, trying to extract answers from the visions he had been given. As the dream was generally accepted as signifying contact in some form with the supernatural, it is understandable that the individual dreamer—tainted by human sin and ignorance—would be subordinate to the dream itself, a symbol of ultimate understanding. The unenlightened medieval dreamer is representative of the larger audience who were most likely struggling to understand the mysterious will of God through nebulous spiritual signs, like dreams. The medieval dream poem *Pearl* is a good example of a highly allegorical dream-vision. In examining the poem, the reader finds a familiar “dramatic tension between man in his frailty and the absolute, inscrutable decrees he must live up to” that demonstrates the dreamer’s utter bewilderment in the face of divine dictates that he cannot fully grasp (Bogdanos 87). The dreamer is downcast, struggling to attain understanding in his quest for the pearl that represents “the kingdom of God” he aspires to ascend to, though in the end, “the divine . . . withdraw[s] at his searching touch into its awesome mystery” in a sequence that is repeated, in one form or another, many dream-visions (Bogdanos 2). This type of melancholy dreamer and extensive use of symbolism are common threads that will appear later in McCarthy’s

dream-visions. The dreamer is trying to make sense of a world—in this case, the real, medieval world—that seems chaotic, full of temptations and mysterious signs. Looking to God to impose order on this medieval world meant creating, in the dream-visions, an ordered space that would reflect the meaning they so fervently sought: giving the invisible world a visible form.

This fleshly desire to know the ethereal, one of the most important features of the dream-vision genre, is also an implicit paradox: it highlights the duality that such narratives and accounts contain. The visions and flashes at play within the mind while the body slept were regarded as puzzling fragments whose origins were thought to be generated by forces outside the earthly individual, or at least within the soul, whose inner workings were not subject to the dreamer's conscious will. Dream-visions in the medieval period have an inherent dichotomy, which arises from questions about the legitimacy of their source, the explanation of their outcome, and the accuracy of their content. Though dreams today in Western society are regarded primarily as a psychological phenomenon, in medieval culture the main source of disparity grew out of religious beliefs implying that dreams could very easily be either divinely inspired insights or tricks of the Devil. Those who dealt with dreams in the medieval period regarded them “with simultaneous anxiety and fascination. On the one hand, they saw dreams as dangerous, associated with pagan practices and demonic seduction. On the other, they claimed that dreams could be divinely inspired and foretell the future” (Kruger 7). Being classified as either type of otherworldly communication—whether divine or evil—meant that dreams possessed an added moral and prophetic significance that they often lack in the contemporary cultural perspective. The dichotomy set up by the

unearthly forces warring with each other for the soul of the individual mirrors another dichotomy in dream visions, namely, the divergence between dreams with spiritual sources and dreams with more corporeal origins. Simply put, this is the age-old dilemma [heart versus head], the continuous debate between mind and matter, intellect and emotion; therefore, in a period where the human body was poorly understood and easily corrupted, reason and religion were far more trustworthy guides than the flesh.

Clearly, being mortal—and therefore subject to sin and temptation—cast doubts on the ability of the dreamer or the reader to discern a dream’s true meaning, for “how can human knowledge lift itself out of the material to contemplate a higher reality?” (Kruger 140). Kruger discusses the dual nature of dream visions, emphasizing that though dream visions share some standard structural elements, they offer “the depiction of a wide range of visionary phenomena” which may appear to the dreamer as real or surreal, frightening or inspiring, revelatory or puzzling (126). These dreams are seemingly able to ascend to levels of spiritual enlightenment as well as to descend into a more physical realm to mimic the dreamer’s own physical states. It is important to note that each type of dream, however spiritual or corporeal the subject matter, usually contains at least traces of the other. So “earthly visions, even when they strongly affirm physicality . . . [,] often suggest at least the potential for heavenward movement Inversely, there is often a pull downward in revelatory visions” (Kruger 129). Kruger categorizes such works as “middle visions,” dreams that occupy the murky space between the two conflicting states of being. He offers examples like Chaucer’s dream poems and Langland’s *Piers Plowman* as middle visions “evoking the possibility of revelation even as they nervously question their own reliability”

(130). The author of the dream vision, no matter how spiritual in nature, is forced ultimately to question its veracity, creating a literary form that struggles with an inherent divergence.

Because the middle visions are

neither a miraculous revelation nor merely a psychosomatic dream, ... taking place on a field of action neither confined to the earth nor hopelessly beyond human reach ... the middle vision offers a way of exploring the connections between the world in which we find ourselves and the transcendent realm for which we yearn. (Kruger 130)

This uncertainty is generated from a desire for both the security of the physical world and the enlightenment and salvation of the spiritual world, and the middle vision recognizes the conflicted nature of this desire. By the late medieval period, most dream-visions belonged to this middle category, and their “popularity can be read as one additional reaction to the perception of a growing distance between humanity and divinity” (Kruger 130). If the population was moving farther away from their understanding of the nature of divinity and God’s role in the universe, it stands to reason they were also moving away from the unconditional acceptance of signs, such as dreams, events, and natural disasters, as clearly interpretable signals of God’s will.

In the context of dreams, the question of symbolism begins to take on greater significance when we consider the accuracy of the content. Readers begin to struggle with the dichotomy of truth and fiction as they encounter dream-visions and attempt to interpret the potentially allegorical nature of these visions. They must question both the meaning and veracity of the symbols that appear in their dreams, trying to discern the knowledge that may help them make their way through the world and, more importantly, closer to God. Angels, gardens, jewels, knights, even images of Christ all make frequent appearances in medieval

dream-visions, no doubt along with recognizable faces and earthly objects more familiar to the average dreamer. But how can one hope to assign the proper spiritual meaning to such a diverse assortment? Amidst such heterogeneity, Kruger is correct in pointing out the troublesome nature of “accepting the images of corporeal things as real and valuable in themselves; yet doing so neglects truths that transcend the physical” (138). Regarding physical images and objects as significant in dream-visions highlights the chasm between the physical and spiritual worlds, a chasm which dream visions should ostensibly help the individual to bridge. Medieval dreamers make their way through the world in order to know God, whose existence is asserted by doctrine. They are pilgrims in a spiritual landscape. Later we will examine the postmodern dreamers, who can also rightly be considered pilgrims, pressing onward in order to know the world because it is the only thing they can be assured of, and the only way they can come to know the world is by their experiences in it.

A significant divergence from this insistence on secular experience as the progress of the pilgrim towards the divine, is *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In the introduction to this instructional dream narrative, Patrick J. Gallacher envisions the anonymous medieval author “practice[ing] an advanced and even austere form of contemplation—the divesting of the mind of all images and concepts through an encounter with ‘nothing and a nowhere’ that leads to the mysterious and unfathomable being of God himself” (1). According to the *Cloud* author, the aim of the medieval reader was to create a mental space for contemplation devoid of all sensory details, focused wholly on gaining a greater understanding of God’s will. This author’s conception of unknowing highlights one of the central conventions of the dream-vision genre by dissolving the idea of landscape, or a measurable space for making an image

of the divine and rendering it accessible to reason. The background in which the *Cloud* author is writing is a thoroughly internalized state of religious contemplation and instruction. There is no external landscape, only the inner reflections of the narrator, which create an uncertain path for the reader to follow towards unknowing. Seemingly in anticipation of a more postmodern epistemology, the author of *Cloud* seeks ultimate illumination in what appears to be a dense, inscrutable fog of confusion; the way of knowing in this text seems to be through a process of unraveling knowledge in order to attain a new form of understanding, a surprisingly postmodern idea. The narrator characterizes the search for spiritual guidance in terms of an allegorical vision and instructs the reader in shaping individual meditations in order to divine God's will:

And yif ever thou schalt come to this cloude, and wone and worche therin as I bid thee, thee byhoveth, as this cloude of unknowyng is above thee, bitwix thee and thi God, right so put a cloud of forgetyng bineth thee, bitwix thee and alle the cretures that ever ben maad... For why mynde or thinking of any creature that ever God maad, or of any of theire dedes outhere, it is a maner of goostly light; for the ighe of thi soule is opened on it. (35)

The dreamer seems to be advising the reader that, in order to reach true understanding, one must unravel conventional ways of knowing and submit to a state of *unknowing*. The literal landscape, usually so carefully constructed, is replaced by cloud, shapeless and blank. Seemingly, there is no dimension in this cloud, at least not any conception that medieval dreamer would be familiar with. The clouds of unknowing and forgetting provide a spiritual and internal landscape for the dreamer, in which to explore and strengthen the individual's relationship with God through contemplative action.

So, the landscape of dream-visions is not necessarily a physical setting at all. Rather, it is often an abstraction, an allegory: it is the space in which the dream is shaped. The landscape, in many medieval dream-visions, becomes a way for the writer to make the abstract concepts visible. In his analysis of the medieval dream poem *Pearl*, Theodore Bogdanos explains the impulse to bestow abstract meaning on physical objects as “the incarnational poetic principle” which states that “physical form shapes spiritual meaning” (19). The religion-centered dream-visions of the fourteenth century were written in a space of internal, spiritual contemplation. Even those dream-visions that were not strictly religiously motivated seek a source of enlightenment from the visions in their dreams. In Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* and *House of Fame* are elegiac and comic, respectively, dealing with more overtly secular themes like love, grief, and fortune. Identifying illumination as a central goal of the dream-vision, the landscape of such dreams undergoes a metamorphosis from the often meditative and instructional visions from such works as *Pearl* and *The Cloud of Unknowing*¹ to the more secular visions of the postmodern era. Often in these works a garden is carefully set out in medieval dreams as an orderly space where the dreamer learns. But McCarthy, like the author of *Cloud*, thwarts the desire to know by means of this type of artificial orderliness. In terms of spatial context, McCarthy’s postmodern shift takes these dream-visions out of the highly orthodox internal landscape to recreate them in an external, physical landscape. While this shift transports the dream-visions outside of the enclosed garden into a detailed geographic setting, it also resists the dreamer’s capacity to interpret, to *know* the space. There is no God to impose a

¹ It is interesting to note that both authors of these highly religious works are anonymous, which may have lent

predetermined order in the postmodern dreams; there is only the physical world, where order must somehow be determined and achieved by the individual dreamers.

Cormac McCarthy's narrative in The Border Trilogy seems related to the *Cloud* author's visions of unknowing: instead of imposing an outside order on the landscape, his dreamers seek a sense of order within the chaotic, often incomprehensible physical world they move through. Wandering in a real landscape which often seems indistinguishable from the journeys in their own dream-visions, McCarthy's protagonists function as dreamers who navigate a distinctly crafted terrain that is constantly shifting and surreal, with mountains, grasslands, and desert creating a nameless and perpetually enigmatic backdrop. For the postmodern dreamers, this land evokes a similar "encounter with 'nothing and nowhere,'" as Gallacher describes in *Cloud*. The difference is that in the postmodern setting, this pilgrimage leads ultimately not to God, but to the surreal quality of a world between waking and dreaming. The true link between these wildly different appearances of the dream-visions lies in a comparison between the role of the dreamer and the function of the dream as narrative. The world McCarthy creates is just as "unfathomable" as the pervasive and mystical longing for enlightenment that figures so prominently in medieval dream visions, and both worlds owe their genesis to the landscapes in which these dream-visions take place.

Traditionally, in medieval dream-visions, the landscape of a dream was not an external or literal setting, but an internal space that the mind provided as a context for the dream vision. In effect, then, faith became a landscape of the spirit, an internalized backdrop for these early religious visions and dreams. Jean-Claude Schmitt sees these early dreams as

their work a greater sense of credibility since the writers' character could not then impugn their work.

“part of a general belief system, enriching the religious experience of individuals and society and extending the limits of knowledge concerning the mysteries of the above and beyond” (274). It is the consistency of this “general belief system” that creates the internal landscape, a context that allows the dreamer to connect his or her dream-vision to the outside world. The dominant “religious culture that gave meaning to dream in medieval Christianity assumed a particular structure as a result of the dominant role of the church,” and this seemingly God-given structure provides a cohesive ideological landscape for the medieval dream visions (Schmitt 275). The interpretations of medieval dream-visions concerned themselves with three main elements that we find repeated in McCarthy’s twentieth-century visions: the puzzled dreamer attempting to interact with divine/supernatural forces, dreams as narrative construction, and the connection between natural—that is, what we see and understand—and supernatural, that which we cannot understand. In medieval interpretations, the dreamer was largely insignificant in this structure. The dreamer as an individual was subordinate to the dream itself, appearing usually in need of guidance and slow—albeit determined—to understand those dreams believed to come from a divine source (or, at least, a source that the dreamer could not be fully trusted to interpret without guidance). The dreamers in both Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* and *Pearl* fit this description; neither understands how to interpret the dream world they find themselves in. Both dream-poems, as well as Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, are characterized by the appearance of oracular figures that become a potential source of enlightenment for the dreamer, acting as guides as the dreamers move through the unfamiliar world of the dream. The dreamers require a guide to lead them through the dream world, a source of knowledge that did not interpret the dream,

but one that helped the dreamer navigate the dream space. These figures appear in wildly varied forms, but are almost always nameless entities: the knight in *Book of the Duchess*, the eagle in *House of Fame*, and the maiden in *Pearl*². Oracular figures always appear as a part of the dream, always within the dream itself. In McCarthy's postmodern dreams, the oracular figure is allowed to leave the dream, and the protagonists encounter such figures both in and out of their dreams, which supports the conjecture that the world itself is a dream space in these novels. The interpretations of these dream-visions were dictated chiefly by the religious beliefs of the period, which in a sense transforms them into social narratives that assigned a larger, cultural significance to the dream itself beyond mere personal meaning.

II

“I drew the path of it upon a map”: Navigating the Journey

The settings of early dream-visions formalized the dreamer's problem in order to move toward resolution; the dream landscape was a highly ordered place. In the postmodern dream narrative, however, the actual landscape is without order, and the dream landscape is externalized, reflective of the physical world. McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* creates an abiding foreign landscape that seems to simultaneously embody an oneric quality that mirrors the protagonists' dreams and to evoke those same dreams. Following the medieval conventions, the dreamers do interact with “invisible forces” through their dreams, but these later dreams are more dependent on the narratives of the individual protagonists than those we see of the generalized medieval narrator. For example, medieval dream-visions often begin with the bare assertion much like Guillaume de Lorris' in the opening of *The Romance of the Rose*:

² The oracular figures in McCarthy's trilogy are usually nameless as well, and the landscape is littered with

“Five years or more have passed by now, I think,/ Since in that month of May I dreamed this dream” (1.33-4). Chaucer’s *House of Fame* begins similarly, with the dreamer’s recollection that “the tenth day of December, when it was night, I lay down to sleep,” augmenting the veracity of the dream with the specificity of when it actually occurred (517). At a later point, I’ll discuss this typical device in one of McCarthy’s novels. As many Chaucer, McCarthy, and many of the anonymous medieval authors³ intimate, the dreamer is a pilgrim of sorts, physically venturing into an uncharted landscape that has the features of an alien land, or possibly a dream. Unlike the spiritual landscapes of the medieval dream-visions where the dreamer often seeks God’s truth, McCarthy’s landscape by itself offers no means of interpretation and leaves the dreamer responsible for making sense of the dream as well as the landscape that produced it.

Understanding the landscape also means understanding the spatial construction of the dream as a world unto itself. Applying Bakhtin’s essay on “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” forges a connection between medieval and postmodern ideologies which I will discuss in more detail later in this paper; both sets of dream-visions function similarly to Bakhtin’s concept of adventure-time, for they exist within their own unique time-space construction, and they become both a reflection and a record of an individual’s contact with the world. In this metaphysical space, dream begins to function as memory. In McCarthy’s novels, some dreams especially seem fashioned from a source of deep memories, memories of the dead, even hinting at memories from a collective consciousness in existence long

them, from the gypsy and the primadonna in *The Crossing* to the stranger and the traveler in *Cities of the Plain*
³ *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Pearl* were both written by unknown authors who cast their dreamers as pilgrim figures

before the protagonists were born. McCarthy elicits a physical landscape and journey in which dreams have the potential to be “a medium providing immediate access to hidden forces and knowledge, tend[ing] to bypass mediation or even to deny its value” (Schmitt 275). The dreamer is as important as the dreams and potentially able to shape them, a reversal of many of the medieval dream-visions where it is the dreamer who is shaped by the dream. Ultimately, the role of the dreamer, despite his confusion or ignorance, is assertive: he must find a way to comprehend the visions. In McCarthy’s trilogy, it is an individualized search for meaning that defines the journeys and the dreams themselves.

Generally, the medieval and postmodern periods seem to be completely divergent in terms of the values of culture, religion, and the individual. So, what distinguishes McCarthy’s dream-genre from the early dream forms? The medieval dreamer wakens to tell his dream, but McCarthy narrates the dreamer dreaming; he shows the reader how Billy Parham and John Grady Cole and others attempt to combine dream and waking world into a believable system of logic. Like their medieval predecessors, McCarthy’s dream-visions provide uncertain guideposts for their dreamers. However, Billy and John Grady are far more isolated than the medieval dreamers because their dreams are constructed according to a far more disjointed perception of reality. One of the most important organizing principles of the medieval world, the presence of God and his providential order, is now questionable at best. Now the physical world remains as inscrutable to the dreamer as God was hundreds of years ago. Like a scene from the *Cloud of Unknowing*, God—and, by extension, any sense of order or meaning—is obscured from the individual dreamer inhabiting the physical world. All the dreamer can do is read the visible signs—now fragmented images and visions—and

fit them to the world of reality. Michel de Certeau offers a helpful conception of space, which seems singularly attuned to the types of dream-space we are considering: “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements . . . space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities” (117). These “operations” include all the cultural ideologies and constructs that shape the population in any given period. Dream spaces are created in much the same way, subject to acclimating forces as well as the force of memory and the subconscious. In the postmodern world, McCarthy’s dreamers have no respite from the dream space since the real space they move through takes on the alien qualities of a dream landscape. McCarthy subverts the focus of the quest for illumination that characterizes all dream-visions, turning the medieval search for religious elucidation into a darker search for order in a chaotic, often savage and grotesque universe.

Beneath these dark journeys in either time period, the crux of the correlation lies in the construction of the dream-visions themselves. How does McCarthy actually create dream-visions that function both as literary devices as well as reinterpretations of the previous forms? Bakhtin’s theory of time-space arrangement within the novel centers on attempts to provide a definition and a blueprint of sorts to explain how the dream-space is conceptualized. Looking holistically at his theory, one comes to the striking realization that many modern and postmodern conceptions of surrealism and fragmented space actually have their genesis in earlier literary forms. Bakhtin contends that dreams are “an emotional, subjective distortion of space, which is in part symbolic” (155). Assigning dreams their own space implies that they function in a dimension all their own, as an alteration of reality rather

than a true reflection of it. This distorted dream space originates in the mind of the dreamer, working alongside the perceived real space, and the two can influence and even mimic each other. The visions McCarthy's protagonists experience are certainly subject to this distortion: John Grady envisions his forbidden lovers, Billy dreams of his dead brother, and both unconsciously seek to answer a question that is not articulated until the end of the trilogy, and then by a stranger, who asks:

What is your life? Can you see it? It vanishes at its own appearance. Moment by moment When you look at the world, is there a point in time when the seen becomes the remembered? How are they separate? It is that which we have no way to show And yet it is all that we have. (CP 273)

McCarthy sees the dream-visions as part of the answer to this enigma, as they bring together “the seen” and “the remembered” in the characters’ minds. Memory is what we recall that we know, while dreams recall what we have seen with the mind’s eye. Each is a form of memory, and dreams provide the only space in which such intangible thoughts can come together. Bakhtin contends that dreams are not subject to the laws of time and space that govern reality, and so neither is memory. In dreams, individual emotion has an influence on the time frame and spatial dimensions of the dream itself. This theory anticipates the twentieth century tendency to throw away the past and construct—or deconstruct—one’s own reality. The salient question becomes not how to find order and meaning, but whether they exist at all. The solitude of the protagonists as they travel through the wilderness affects their perceptions of the landscape, enhancing the inherent features of the terrain. The landscape that Billy and John Grady experience in the Mexican backcountry can be likened to the “alien world” in which the Greek adventures are set (Bakhtin 101). The forlorn

mountains, grasslands, and desert plains could be anywhere, as the protagonists realize “that noon in which [they’d] woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark... standing in that inexplicable darkness” (CR 425). Both protagonists are overwhelmed when placed against such a vast and unfathomable background, in their own minds as well as in the mind of the reader; the space they inhabit seems unreal, more so as it is altered by their individual consciousness.

The wilderness journeys that figure so prominently in The Border Trilogy echo Bakhtin’s description of the “naked expanse of space” commonly found in the Greek romances (100). The idea of pilgrimage is hardly a novelty in literature, and The Border Trilogy continues the theme of classical journeys, thus placing itself clearly within an older tradition. McCarthy’s protagonists find themselves in much the same solitary position as the protagonists of the Greek adventures that Bakhtin describes, or later, in the kind of solitude that the medieval dreamer experiences within the dream. Adrift in a world that seems

... indefinite, unknown, foreign. Its heroes are there for the first time . . . the laws governing the sociopolitical and everyday life of this world are foreign to them . . . in this world, therefore, they can experience only random contingency. (Bakhtin 101)

Like McCarthy’s protagonists, the Greek heroes are in a setting completely unfamiliar to them; therefore, the innate laws of the terrain—both man-made (in a political sense) and natural (in a physical sense)—are foreign both to protagonist and, by extension, to reader. The “random contingency” refers to the unpredictable chain of events that follows as the heroes immerse themselves in their alien surroundings; they have no internal means to judge and predict the outcome because they are no longer at home. These ties to more ancient texts and conventions are all part of McCarthy’s contextual foundation. Looking specifically at

the “Elements of Sorrow, Allegory, and Pastoralism” in the trilogy, George Guillemin argues that “it is the ritual impetus of storytelling—which is inherently allegorical—that turns the discontinuity of human lives (temporality) into continuity (immortality) through an incremental (discontinuous) and spiral (continuous) rhythm of remembrance,” which provides a convincing explanation for the impact of medieval dream-visions on such a postmodern text (106). History, then, is a cyclical rather than a linear process dependent on storytelling and other forms of ritual communication for its continuity. The earlier texts are like ripples in a pond that move outward from a central point, each ring dependent on the last to take its own shape, in part, from traces of its predecessors. In later sections, I will explore scenes in which McCarthy references this shadowy, interconnected prehistory, vestiges of which appear both in dreams and in the physical landscape.

Bakhtin’s concept of adventure-time also clarifies the effects of McCarthy’s narratives: his characters often seem suspended in a particular period of their lives as time stretches out past their actions. Bakhtin explains that “moments of adventuristic time occur at those points when the . . . intended or purposeful sequence of life’s events is interrupted” (95). Contingent events disrupt the lives of both protagonists: John Grady, by the loss of his home and his subsequent flight to Mexico, and Billy, by his decision to take the captured wolf back to Mexico and the loss of his parents, home, and brother. The bewilderment and utter loss are described in metaphysical terms as a moment when John Grady “saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter him like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe that it would ever leave” (APH 254). The loss

becomes a living creature, a nameless “being” that seems to settle inside John Grady, creating a void that echoes what has been lost. As both protagonists lose childhood homes, parents, loved ones, and—most distressingly—their understanding of the world around them, they descend into habitual wandering, in which “all moments of this infinite adventure-time are controlled by one force—chance” (Bakhtin 94). The individual is ultimately at the mercy of an indifferent universe; both Billy and John Grady show frustration with and then eventual acceptance of their own inability to change the course of their lives. One cannot help but feel that, at their core, these are stories that could be told in almost any era, reconstructed within other cultures and times. Links to earlier literary forms and the continual exploration of dreams as a perpetual cultural phenomenon give these novels a sense of timeless, even borderless continuity.

But even though the dream forms are clearly linked, it is the distinct narrative crafts that reflect their own periods and provide evidence for their striking capacity to adapt meaningfully to new beliefs and cultures and retain their significance. The dream-vision seems not unlike a chameleon, changing the shades of its skin to blend in with varying surroundings without altering the shape of its body. Like many of the medieval dream-visions, McCarthy’s dreams allow the mingling of unearthly and earthly concerns and can be motivated either by purely physical promptings or by spiritual inspiration. Judging from John Grady’s experience, dreams are just as likely to be inspired by something as invisible and unfathomable as the “cold and soulless” entity that he admits awareness of as they are by something as concrete and physical as the pain from the knife wounds he receives in a

Mexican prison.⁴ Medieval examples of this complex shift in the uses of dream forms are characterized by Kruger as “middle visions” because of the acknowledgment of both realms. He theorizes that “the late-medieval popularity of the middle vision can be read as one additional reaction to the perception of a growing distance between humanity and divinity” (130). This increasing division might explain the deep-seated significance McCarthy bestows on these dream-visions, as his protagonists—as well as his readers—struggle in a postmodern world in which vestiges of divinity go unacknowledged or unrecognized. A whole new space has opened up for McCarthy to reassemble, as it were, the remnants of spirituality into new metaphysical guideposts: the dreams of his protagonists. What McCarthy creates in each novel is an “open-ended, episodic narrative told by an amorphous narrator” who follows the protagonists through “an anachronistic pastoral world” (Guillemin 93). This world is characterized by typically modern and even postmodern expressions of existentialism, fragmentation, and questioning. In characterizing the dreams as narratives, the writer assigns a more clearly defined purpose: as the protagonists move through the world on their journeys, their dream-visions seem to be some attempt through narrative construction by their own subconscious—or perhaps, if the idea of a divine and overseeing power still remains a possibility (and there is evidence to suggest McCarthy thinks it does)—to offer guidance in the face of a bleak, uncertain world.

Throughout the Border Trilogy, McCarthy’s landscape reflects clearly the postmodern sense of alienation and uncertainty. The entire series can be read as a continuous dream-vision as the characters cycle through waking and sleeping in their search for some

⁴ The initial fight sequence in *All the Pretty Horses* ominously foreshadows a similar sequence of events—knife

ultimate way of knowing. They are not even aware of what it is that drives them into this dream landscape, but ultimately they are trying to create a new epistemology that will restore their sense of belonging *in the waking world*. The medieval conventions of the pilgrimage, the puzzled dreamer, the unfamiliar landscape, and the transcendence of time and space are all elements shared by both the medieval and postmodern dream-visions. What McCarthy is able to do with these conventions is translate them into a new reality where knowing means deconstructing the familiar, taking such conventions apart to look for meaning among the pieces. Though still concerned with the spiritual aspect, the secular world is given a much larger significance in these twentieth-century dream-visions. The physical landscape is more than just a backdrop, a “place” as de Certeau describes it (117). It is, instead, a “space,” where the dreamer is the catalyst, playing an active role in shaping the space as he moves through it. The centralized power of God seems to have dissolved literally into the earth, carrying with it a disinterred omniscience that medieval dreamers would have characterized as the mysterious and inscrutable will of the divine. That transformation is at the heart of the postmodern period. No longer do dreamers operate on the assurance of an all-knowing God acting as a puppeteer in the heavens; instead, they operate on the determination to know if there might be some meaning beyond themselves, declining to define what such a force might be or how it could affect their lives. But in losing that confidence, McCarthy’s postmodern dreamers have gained a measure of freedom that comes with the idea that the individual might control his own dreams and, in so doing, is able to shape a portion of his own world.

III

“Between the telling and the told”: The Space between Waking and Dreaming

Edwin T. Arnold has called *The Crossing* “a mystical text in the guise of a western adventure,” a description which properly extends to the trilogy as whole (59). Arnold’s description lays the groundwork for a recognition that McCarthy’s narratives are reminiscent of medieval dream texts and that McCarthy’s trilogy is a direct reversal of the traditional narrative framework of the medieval dream-vision. While the medieval texts begin with the dreamer’s sleep and end with waking, each of McCarthy’s books begins with a waking moment and ends as the protagonist passes into either sleep or a dream-like world. At the opening of *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady finds himself staring at his grandfather’s corpse chanting internally, “that was not sleeping. That was not sleeping,” himself fully awake (APH 3). He tries to comprehend what the physical state of death means by differentiating it from the physical state it most resembles: sleep, calling to the reader’s attention the intertwined relationship between death and sleep, both realms beyond consciousness. At novel’s end, he rides again into the Mexican wilderness where he “passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come,” a scene whose apocalyptic undertones demonstrate his existence in what is essentially a dream-world (APH 302). The central events of the novel constitute what would be, in the medieval narratives, the dream section. And instead of waking, John Grady passes into a shadowy, inscrutable landscape that is as formless as his own dreams. In a similar fashion, the first moments of *The Crossing* describe Billy’s memory of moving to Hidalgo county with his family,⁵ and how he “woke to the sound of

⁵ Note that even in this passage, the first reference to Billy’s brother Boyd shows him as a memory, foreshadowing his eventual passage completely into the realm of memory after his disappearance.

wolves in the low hills to the west,” (3) while at the end of the book Billy contemplates a dream-like landscape eerily similar to the one at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*: “the road was a pale gray in the light and the light was drawing away along the edges of the world after awhile the east did gray and after awhile the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction” (425-6). Memory and sleep function together in the opening scene, and the memory of childhood—which is detailed before the narrator introduces Billy’s waking—could very well be a convergence of the narrative perspective and his interrupted dream. Again, the intervening events of the novels’ courses almost seem a series of fantastic dreams and adventures, taking place in the alien Mexican landscape. At the close of *The Crossing*, Billy is left looking down a long seemingly unending road, just the sort of scenario a puzzled dreamer might encounter—though in medieval dreams, this would be the beginning of the vision, not the end.

Finally, *Cities of the Plain* opens with both protagonists very much awake and in a whorehouse in Mexico, amidst the garish “bloodred barlight and the drifting smoke,” more a nightmarish setting than anything (3). The main text of the book ends again with passage into a dream-like world, as “the man and his burden passed on forever out of that nameless crossroads.... and all continued on to their appointed places, which, as some believe, were chosen long ago even to the beginning of the world” (CP 262). For John Grady, the passage into his “appointed” place means death; for Billy, more wandering, until the end of the epilogue, in which he is an old man being told, gently, “You go to sleep now. I’ll see you in the morning” (CP 292). This reversed narrative framework allows McCarthy to suggest that it is the dream state—whether dream, memory, sleep, or death—that holds a deeper reality.

All these states are connected, allowing the dreamer to reach a world that the conscious mind cannot enter. The narrative taking place in the actual world corresponds more closely to the medieval construction of the dream, and when McCarthy's dreamer "wakes," it is not a literal waking but a stepping into a realm of deeper understanding that individuals can only commune with by transcending their waking lives.

Unlike the medieval dreamers, who had at least the solid world of spiritual ritual to guide their daily lives, Billy and John Grady find themselves in a world where they have no guide in either waking or dreaming beyond their own limited intuition. The landscapes they move through contribute to their bewilderment; it often seems that part of the illumination they are seeking involves pilgrimage, which is ultimately an attempt to locate themselves—physically and metaphysically—in the world or, in some instances, out of it. The alien space they inhabit makes them "right pilgrims indeed" who must "go forth to meet what we shall meet" in a landscape—or a dream space—that they have no reliable way to locate themselves in (CP 284). Like the medieval dreamer, McCarthy's dreamers are adrift in a confusing land that they cannot make sense of or map. They continue to move onward through physical uncertainty and trials, sustained in some ways by their dreams as early Christian pilgrims may have been sustained by Bible verses or similar doctrine. All pilgrims set out from somewhere, an identifiable location by which they measure the strangeness of the unfamiliar territories they enter. Since the novels begin with the young men in a home landscape, they, and the readers, are provided with a familiar context from which to begin their journeys. The importance of this initial, well-known landscape in Bakhtin's estimation rests in its ability to provide an "organizing center for the point of view, the scales of comparison, the approaches

and evaluations determining how alien countries and cultures are seen and understood”

(103). This relationship between the home space and alien space seems reflexive: it is after the protagonists experience the alien landscape that their perceptions of their home space are altered. When John Grady comes back to Texas for a funeral, he:

held out his hands as if to steady himself or as if to bless the ground there or perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she. Nothing for their struggles, nothing for their names. Nothing for the living or the dead. (APH 301)

The violence and chaos that he experiences in his journey through the Mexican back- country has changed his insight into his own home. The space is no longer comfortable; it suddenly seems harsh, apathetic, and unknowable as John Grady transfers his new sense of alienation onto a landscape that is geographically familiar but remains otherwise impenetrable. Now he tries physically to “steady himself,” against the realization that neither he nor anyone else seems to matter even in the familiar landscape of his childhood. The landscape has become psychologically unfamiliar, even though the physical features remain the same. Bakhtin describes the home space as a convention of the travel novel, useful in that it provides the protagonist with a foundation for the resulting view of the foreign world he or she enters (103). But McCarthy distorts this convention by the deeper estrangement of the protagonists from their homes so that even when they return from the wilderness, they are suddenly as adrift in the familiar landscape as they are in a foreign one. The external world itself becomes like the “alien countries” Bahktin envisions, taking on the characteristics of a dream landscape: unfamiliar and subject to an undecipherable sense of order. Effacing the borders between the geography of the novel’s world and that of the dream calls to mind the old nursery tune that tells us: “life is but a dream.”

As the song intimates, time seems immaterial in the dream state; it has no effect on the dreamers or the world they move through. Billy contemplates this feeling of suspension in solitude: “He seemed to himself a person with no prior life. As if he had died in some way years ago and was ever after some other being who had no history, who had no ponderable life to come” (CR 382). Isolated in the wilderness, time falls away and the idea of ordering the past (as history) or the future has little tangible consequence. He is hovering in a space that makes the measurement of time all but meaningless. This timelessness is a central characteristic of all dreams, and though the medieval dreamers recognized this, the convention is attributed to the divine presence in dreams and goes largely unexplored until Bakhtin articulates it in his theory of adventure-time. The purist version dictates that “in this kind of time, nothing changes: the world remains as it was, the biographical life of the heroes does not change, their feelings do not change, people do not even age. This empty time leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing” (Bakhtin 91). Bakhtin’s “empty time” echoes the medieval construction of the dream-vision, creating a world of strange consistency: though all events are controlled by chance, the heroes remain curiously static against a backdrop of endless, arbitrary occurrences. McCarthy’s presentation, however, differs from the strict stasis of adventure-time that Bakhtin presents. Though the external world of McCarthy’s landscape does not change, despite the individuals’ passing through the environment, his dreamers become jaded. Billy ages physically, while his brother Boyd, John Grady’s companion Jimmy Blevins, and eventually John Grady himself, remain forever the age they were at their premature deaths. At the end of *Cities of the Plain*, the adventure-time is over, and Billy grows old in three brief sentences: “Days of the world. Years of the

world. Till he was old” (264). McCarthy does not dwell on the passage of time, not allowing it to affect the overall shape of the novel, as it is immaterial to the journey at the center of the characters’ existence. The major changes in his characters’ worldviews are their realizations that the events of the world and their own existences are not foreseeable but are full of uncertainty, contingency, “congealed suddenlys,” as Bakhtin writes. As an old man, Billy’s hands manifest the changes wrought on both his body and his mind, as the narrator describes in a brief tableau, “Gnarled, ropescarred, speckled . . . the ropey veins that bound [his hands] to his heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God’s plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world” (CP 291). McCarthy takes his protagonist beyond the adventure-time that he functions in for most of the trilogy by noting the effects that it has on the body when the individual moves out of that “empty time.” Time, in this manifestation, has turned the physical features of the man into a personal landscape, reflective of his interaction with the world. Adventure-time, as McCarthy translates it, allows his protagonists to explore the chance interruptions of their lives in an unchanging landscape though eventually they move beyond this chronotope into a tentative awareness of the unseen forces that influence their lives. They are descendants of the ancient Greek heroes, stoic men on epic journeys, though the postmodern heroes seem ultimately more human, their impulses towards self-awareness, doubt, moral uncertainty serving as the components of their isolation.

IV **“The template for the world”: The Power of Geography**

By creating a natural world imbued with its own supernatural force, McCarthy opens up a whole new space, unrestricted by the conventions of dream-visions. As John Grady Cole watches his employer's daughter riding out of a rainstorm, his perception becomes a vision:

The last time he saw her before she returned to Mexico she was coming down out of the mountains riding very stately and erect out of a rainsquall building to the north and the dark clouds towering above her . . . and she rode all seeming unaware down through the low hills while the first spits of rain blew on the wind and onto the upper pasturelands and past the pale and reedy lakes riding erect and stately until the rain caught her up and shrouded her figure away in that wild summer landscape: real horse, real rider, real land and sky and yet a dream withal. (APH 131-2)

John Grady desperately seeks to make a fit between what he sees and what he dreams.

This space is confined in a literal sense to the concrete features of the physical world, to provide a *tabula rasa* on which to reorder the interaction between dreams and reality. The postmodern dream-visions seem to blend into the landscape to become a mystical part of daily existence rather than a purely revelatory experience: not separate from the world, but participating in it. The storm transforms the landscape into a surreal image of simultaneous possibility and loss that surrounds John Grady's last glimpse of the girl before she returns to her country, just before they become lovers. The storm seems to foretell something about the ill-fated nature of their relationship, imbuing the scene with prophetic undertones that turn reality into something more transcendent: a vision. The world McCarthy creates, with its "dark clouds," "pale and reedy lakes" and the girl herself "shrouded" by the weather, has the power to turn sensory perceptions into dream-like scenes of mystical significance, or of doomed romance at least. The natural world as John Grady sees it seems to give evidence of a synthesis, as opposed to a division, between itself and the underlying guiding/life force.

The medieval constructs that distinctly separate the physical world from the mystical do not

explain John Grady's view and use of the world, for the landscape he literally moves in exerts a dreamlike power and order. The Mexican wilderness becomes the "other world," which is characterized in Spearing's essay "Dreams and Visions." He describes the dreamer's journey as he "goes to the other world in order to learn something: that is the usual pattern, and it is an important feature of medieval dream poems" (Spearing 18). Even though this goal is never articulated, it is nevertheless the reason behind John Grady's journey—the sale of his grandfather's ranch is merely the catalyst—and the wilderness operates on both Billy and him as much more than a lifeless, unresponsive physical setting.

This landscape, complete with specific, detailed geographical and physical features, imposes its presence on Billy as he travels into the mountains in *The Crossing*. He finds the terrain around him to be both reflexive and catalytic in terms of the dream-visions it elicits. As Billy rides through the high country, his visual impressions of the landscape display a subliminal need for the landscape to fit some memory or dream:

At the eastern escarpment, he dismounted and led the horse along a shelf of gray rock. The scrub juniper that grew along the rim leaned in a wind that had long since passed. Along the face of the stone bluffs were old pictographs of men and animals and suns and moons as well as other representations that seemed to have no referent in the world although they once may have . . . the terrain lay clawed open north and south, canyon and range, sierra and barranca, all of it waiting like a dream for the world to come to be, world to pass. (CR 135)

We see Billy in the midst of all the concrete details of rock and mesa, a landscape with the distinct feel of another world or time. The setting both dwarfs the dreamer himself and provokes the dream-visions that follow. The juniper that seems to move in "a wind... long since passed" and the ancient pictographs lining the stone walls of the canyon evoke the strange, consecrated atmosphere of things remembered, remnants of ancient knowledge. The

land is subtly personified, lying “clawed open” like a carcass and “waiting,” as though it is conscious. The land itself seems to dream, subject to unseen forces and colored by the psychological impressions of powers that pass through and leave traces of a purposeful intensity. Billy makes no claim to know or to name what he sees, and the precision of the details only serves perversely to cloak the mystery.

The eerie details of terrain contribute to Billy’s growing feeling of abstraction, for “his home had come to seem remote and dreamlike” (CR 135). The surreal quality of the landscape he is absorbed in has distanced him from the reality his childhood home had represented. Obviously influenced by the pictographs he has viewed, he dreams about prehistoric men who “gathered round him and warned him of their work” (CR 136). So intertwined are the landscape and these dreams that Billy wakes listening for the men he has dreamed of, in the shadow of the pictographs, “as if they [these men] might yet be there just beyond the darkness of his hat” (CR 136). The landscape becomes reflexive, and the division between internal and external are blurred: the terrain influences the internal content of Billy’s dreams, dreams which then seem to inhabit the physical landscape. The borders cease to exist. This dream-vision falls into the old category of enigmatic dream, one which, according to Macrobius, “conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding” (90). Billy has no means of outside interpretation: as language, the forms of the pictographs are alien to him. Certainly the significance of the dream is never articulated in the text. It is as if he must read not the indecipherable pictographs but the landscape itself and himself in it.

The meaning occurs by means of the dreamer's presence within that mapped-out space; it is a subjective and personal vision.

The readable dream world becomes a structural feature in the Border Trilogy. McCarthy organizes his trilogy around the idea of a crossing, which is, not coincidentally, the title of the second—and central—book of the series. Obviously the geographical crossings are the most evident physical journeys; Billy and John Grady cross the border into Mexico again and again in search of something to define their lives, in search of an order that eludes them. The more metaphysical crossings between waking and dreaming, past and present, between life and death, appear to offer Billy and John Grady a special awareness, though in actuality they discern little certainty from these passages between worlds. It seems that a different realm (like death or dreams) requires a different language, one the dreamers do not have access to. John Grady remembers a dream in which he asks his murdered companion Blevins what death is like, to which Blevins only replied “it was like nothing at all,” without actually speaking the words (APH 225). John Grady gains no sense of either the space the dead reside in or even an authentic voice since Blevins no longer communicates with words. Billy's younger brother Boyd appears over and over, both before and after his death, in his brother's dreams though communication between the two is succinct while Boyd was alive and at home with Billy. Even as an old man, after years of such silent visitations, Billy still vainly tries to communicate with Boyd in the final dream of the trilogy: “he dreamt that Boyd was in the room with him but he would not speak for all that he called out to him” (CP 290). These apparitions derive their shape from memory, appearing within the protagonists' dreams not by their own volition but because dream and memory fuse within

the individual psyche. The intricate functioning of the mind allows the dreamers to choose subconsciously the shapes most suited to convey the understanding that they seek.

McCarthy's dreamers seem inadequate somehow in light of the significance they seek in the world itself. The postmodern reality is a fragmented space, filled with seemingly random encounters and events that offer the dreamer what amounts to a broken mirror with which to discern a reflection. And dream-visions seem to mirror this reality, as Kruger explains that

dreams can, like spiritual visions more generally, provide a route to knowledge, but they must do so ambiguously. Poised between corporeal and intellectual vision, dreams occupy a space between the mundanely real objects of sense perception and the transcendently real objects of abstract thought. (41)

Seemingly, the friction between the tangible, physical world and the psychological space of the mind sparks the dream. It is precisely between the physical reality of the landscape and the abstraction of his own thoughts that both protagonists have their most vivid dream-visions, often sparked by memory. As John Grady camps in the mountains with the Mexican captain he has taken hostage, he is enclosed literally by the physical world: sleeping on the ground, still reeling from the physical pain of his wounds. The earth acts as a conduit for his dream-vision:

In his sleep he could hear the horses stepping among the rocks . . . the horses in his dream moved gravely among the tilted stones like horses come upon an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed and if anything had been written on the stones the weathers had taken it away again... (APH 280).

The noises of the horses among the rocks lull him to sleep; this noise is an aspect of the physical world that provides an entrance into the dream state. His preoccupation in this and

other dreams with “some ordering of the world” indicates John Grady’s uncertainty in not being able to foresee his own future and control his destiny, an uncertainty not unfamiliar to medieval dreamers. The motions of the world have erased whatever might have “been written on the stones,” presumably some sort of guide, some prehistoric knowledge significant enough to be carved into the rock. But, in typical dream-visions fashion, the writing—like the “ordering of the world”—remains a mystery, unrevealed to the dreamer at the end of the visions. In this way, the dream, like the memory, is a liminal space that has definite borders the dreamer cannot cross. John Grady can only feel that there is somewhere, written in some inscrutable language, a sequence that orders the physical world, though he must remain within the borders of the dream and, therefore, on the periphery of true knowledge.

In the closing scenes of *Cities of the Plain*, Billy interacts with the source of the dream-visions, potentially shaping his own dreams, but not his destiny in the physical world. The stranger Billy converses with here rejects the idea that men can control the events that shape their external lives. He argues:

You think men have power to call forth what they will? Evoke a world, awake or sleeping? Make it breathe and then set out upon it figures which a glass gives back or which the sun acknowledges? Quicken those figures with one’s own joy and one’s despair? . . . You call forth the world which God has formed and that world only. Nor is this life of yours by which you set such store your doing, *however you may choose to tell it.* (CP 285)

The dreamer is the creator; the narrative is the dream. The sensory details in the stranger’s description underscore the physical demands of creation: the incredible force it would take to “make [a world] breathe” and “quicken those figures” are powers that the individual does not

possess. The stranger's medieval evocation of God's omniscient hand as the creative force contradicts postmodern modes of thought where one must be content with less universally significant interactions with the supernatural. The ability to shape dreams provides a brief, yet personal, connection with that mystical realm more along the lines of individual intuition than the medieval ideal of comprehensive, prophetic visions. The individual can commune with the source of his or her dreams, even alter their subject matter and outcome. However, reality, the daily world in which one functions, is beyond an individual's ability to affect. The stranger acknowledges the presence of a God that is noticeably absent—at least as far as the protagonists are concerned—in the rest of the trilogy, except in glimpses of a highly—almost primitively—Catholic peasant element of Mexican culture. In the simple villagers we become aware of their sense of an unseen force that oversees the events of a journey, but this presence is not identified by the protagonists as a specific God so much as the inscrutable will of the world itself. This force—possibly God, possibly an abstraction—has dominion over the events of the external world but not over the events of one's dreams in the postmodern construction. Although McCarthy takes his cue from post-medieval explanations “that reduced the process of dreams to the individual and the brain and nervous system, wresting it away from the old interpretive framework, which laid stock in supernatural forces,” he does not completely ignore the supernatural dimension (Schmitt 281). The effect includes the simple faith of the native people as another singular, readable fragment in the shattered landscape.

V

“The peregrine bones of a prophet”: The Haunted Landscape

Visions of the dead are common in the recorded medieval dream-visions, but like most other motifs that appear, the medieval dreamers did not necessarily trust these apparitions as harbingers of truth or prophecy. Writing extensively on dream interpretation in the early medieval period, St. Augustine’s argument from *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* is cited by Kruger and explains that “even seemingly miraculous dreams—the oracular apparitions of the dead—are spiritual phenomena, in many ways no different from the most commonplace of dreams... merely called up out of our memories” (Kruger 39-40). Significantly, Augustine begins to attribute the imagery of dreams to a physiological source, characterizing the visions within dreams as “intermediate, incorporeal likenesses” developed within the machinations of the human mind, whether divinely inspired or not (Kruger 39). The presence in a dream of someone who has died does not consecrate the dream and does not necessarily make that dream a message from the spirit world, according to Augustine’s treatise. The figures seen in dreams are merely shadows of human beings, images that can be called to mind without any kind of divine intervention. The emphasis on the imitative nature of dreams warns the dreamer of the difficulty of discerning a spiritual meaning in his or her dreams as well as cautioning against the danger of doing so without careful examination of the vision by religious guides.

Augustine’s admonitions against interpreting dreams anticipates the postmodern world that offers no pretense of a spiritual guide, leaving the dreamers to their own devices. The caution that medieval writers like Augustine warn dreamers to adopt is typical of

McCarthy's dreamers: they do not mistrust their dreams so much as they mistrust their own abilities to discern their significance. Transporting the bones of his dead brother across the wilderness in *The Crossing*, Billy dreams of him:

In the dream he knew that Boyd was dead and that the subject of his being so must be approached with a certain caution for that which was circumspect in life must be doubly so in death and he'd no way to know what word or gesture might subtract him back again into that nothingness out of which he'd come. When finally he did ask him what it was like to be dead Boyd only smiled and looked away and would not answer. (400)

Always, the dreamer asks what the shade refuses to answer: the dead will not speak about crossing into the next world. The sense of superstition surrounding the appearance of what Billy likens to an apparition is reminiscent of the mysticism often surrounding supernatural communication in medieval dream-visions. In accord with the writings of St. Augustine, Macrobius also believes the apparition appearing in a dream-vision "has no prophetic significance . . . [and] offer[s] no assistance in foretelling the future" (88-9). Despite the prophetic quality Billy wishes to ascribe to the dream, it offers no further insights either into the events of his brother's life or into the physical direction of his own journey. Meaningful communication between human and apparition is tentative and fruitless; thus Billy's question about death goes unanswered. The apparition "would not answer" Billy's question, prevented perhaps by the same barrier that exists between dreams and reality—and between memory and reality—limiting human understanding of or control over the connection between past and present.

Rather than focusing on divine revelation, however mysterious, the modern culture is more interested in how the human mind works and, specifically, how memory functions to represent the mind at work. In Augustine's theory, the apparition of Billy's brother is a self-

constructed image only, with no volition of its own. Nor does the landscape Billy moves through—the barren Mexican mountains—provide him with the emotional or physical means to interpret the dream with assurance. It is the landscape of Billy’s memory that is significant here because it is what Billy remembers of Boyd that becomes more important than what he sees. The memories are, ultimately, what Boyd *means* in the trilogy. Boyd functions as a product of memory, an elusive, dream-like form through which Billy attempts to understand death and his own position in the world. Even before his death, Boyd’s appearance indicates an otherworldly quality. It is after the brutal murder of their parents, as Billy studies his little brother, that he is first aware of an ethereal quality surrounding Boyd: “His pale hair looked white. He looked fourteen going on some age that never was.... He looked like his own reincarnation and then his own again” (CR 177). Clearly Boyd is not of this world, at least not in the same way that Billy is, and in another hundred and fifty pages, he will have vanished forever, leaving behind only his bones and the folk legends of his alleged crimes.

Perhaps it is because of this unearthly quality which Billy imagines Boyd to possess that he continues to conjure the visions of his dead brother in his dreams. On one of the last nights the brothers spend together, Boyd appears haunted, as though he is already moving towards a realm beyond Billy’s reach. Billy’s perspective is apparent in the narrative consciousness, as he studies his brother: “Above all else, he looked to be filled with a terrible sadness.... Some vast tragedy not of fact or incident or event but of the way the world was” (CR 177). Boyd is one embodiment of the pervasive melancholy that wafts throughout the trilogy like an ancient wind that reminds the dreamer of the precarious state of

his own existence.⁶ Later, Billy's fruitless encounters with the apparition—or at least the memory—of his brother in dreams strike an eerie parallel to Robert Edwards' reading of the dreamer's encounter with the knight in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, where “in the dramatized encounter with the knight [the dreamer] poses questions about the adequacy of language and the play of the imagination and memory in commemorative art” (67). Billy is not nearly so eloquent, of course, but his questions amount to the same thing. The medieval oracular figure, exemplified by characters like Chaucer's knight or the Maiden in *Pearl*,⁷ seems to be working through Boyd, though he, unlike some of the medieval figures, offers neither answers nor certainty. Of all the characters in the trilogy, Boyd seems the most clearly confined to the liminal realm of dreams. Restricted to silence, he can only stare back at Billy during their recurring dream encounters, left wordless to acknowledge or guide his brother. It is Billy who continues to ask the questions, conjuring the image of his dead brother even though Boyd is powerless to enlighten him in the dream visions. Billy encounters a wandering band of gypsies near the end of *The Crossing*, and one of them tells him, “Memories dim with age. There is no repository for our images. The loved ones who visit us in dreams are strangers It is the history that each man makes alone out of what is left to him” (411). The gypsy describes an essentially fragmented world, where memories and dreams are like scraps of cloth whose clarity and form become worn over time, valuable only to the dreamer who can make something more significant from combining them. The postmodern view would question whether such scraps can ever really be pieced together at

⁶ This precarious state evokes the invasive sadness John Grady describes in APH, as well as the medieval convention of the melancholy dreamer.

⁷ Bogdanos, 91 “The maiden tries to explain to the dreamer divine justice... again resorting to the images and relationships of earthly existence in order to accommodate his human perception.”

all. It is not inconceivable in the postmodern world that the oracular figure may be one of the dreamer's own creations, since the dreamer now has the power to shape his own dreams.

The figure of Boyd that inhabits Billy's dreams is a figure of Billy's own making, one who perhaps cannot answer Billy's questions because he is essentially Billy's creation, a stranger in dream form, who Billy has cloaked to look like the brother he will never see again.

McCarthy leaves his protagonists with a plea on their lips, a small hope that they are in the presence of something larger than themselves though they are unsure how this force affects their struggles. Since one of the most powerful transformations from the medieval to the postmodern temperament involves the disappearance of God, the divine presence is no longer the acknowledged source of order but instead has been diluted and reconstructed as an amorphous force that seems to be altogether less a traditional entity than a formless energy that shifts to shape the events of the waking world in much the same way plates shift unaccountably in the dark beneath the surface of the earth to cause earthquakes and form mountain ranges. Billy's dead brother offers the possibility of some word, but he has no real news. As John Grady lies dying, the boundary between waking and death becomes blurred, and he

felt it over and over, that lightness he took for his soul and which stood so tentatively at the door of his corporeal self... He heard the distant toll of bells from the cathedral in the city and he heard his own breath soft and uncertain in the cold and the dark... in that alien land where he lay in his blood. Help me, he said. If you think I'm worth it. Amen. (CP 256-7)

Dying, he once again finds himself in an "alien land" reminiscent of the landscape he has traveled through. He is conscious of his own mortality, and faced with the realization that he can do nothing physically to help himself, he invokes the presence of an omnipotent force

with his brief prayer. His acceptance is somewhat grudging, not asking for anything miraculous, only if he is considered “worth it” by an unseen judge. Billy is troubled by the violent death of his friend and reacts against the same omnipotent force in anger: “he called out to the broken day... he called out to God to see what was before his eyes. Look at this, he called. Do you see? Do you see?” (CP 261). Unlike John Grady, Billy calls out to God only in anger because he is less sure that God is observing the events of their lives and offers an accusation and a question instead of a prayer. The acceptance he comes to in the end of his own life is equally uncertain; when told that he will surely see his dead brother in the afterlife, the only reply he can make is “I hope you’re right,” as though he is doubtful but still willing to entertain the possibility when confronted with another’s clarity of conviction (CP 291). Both protagonists’ relationships with the divine force acknowledge the powerful presence of chance in their lives and their uncertainty as to whether God exerts any influence over the contingencies that befall them. It is as though God and chance are two separate powers, independent of each other. And while God at least can be referred to by name, considered an entity, chance is a force with no form or consciousness. In the world of McCarthy’s characters, the heedless and inscrutable whims of chance pull individuals along in a cloud of unknowing and, in doing so, create the narratives that take them into a foreign landscape haunted by vestiges of the familiar and the dead.

VI

“The world unraveling at his feet”: The Way of Knowing

Though their journeys start out with seemingly clear purposes—John Grady to escape a home no longer his and Billy to find a home for a captured wolf—each becomes tangled by

unforeseen contingencies in struggling to avenge personal wrongs and satisfy his own sense of duty. Chance leads them into meaningful encounters with strangers who become lovers, advisors, pursuers, jailers, and saviors in turn. Even the weather takes on random significance, as the protagonists occasionally encounter weather patterns that seem to threaten or warn in a vaguely familiar language. In the midst of one thunderstorm, John Grady watches as “distant lightning glowed mutely As if repairs were underway at some flawed place in the iron dark of the world” (APH 67). The “flawed place” John Grady senses in the “iron dark” implies an otherworldly locale, a space altogether foreign to the travelers and distant from the wilderness they travel through, as well as a powerful, overarching craftsman at work. Billy describes seeing “thunder in a snowstorm and lightnin [where] everything would light up all around you, white as cotton,” a strange storm that he claims to have seen only in Mexico (352). The lightning in both instances, when viewed from the wilderness, suddenly appears to give evidence of a connection with another world beyond the visible one. Some inherent quality of the alien landscape they move through creates these spectral scenes that impress upon both boys the idea that there are powers elemental to this landscape of a magnitude that they have not sensed before, at least not directly. Still, this natural phenomenon is part of the landscape, adding to the sense that the external world and the supernatural realm are connected and together influence the paths of individuals.

The physical world is once again a catalyst for dream-visions that seem to hold some hidden meaning, as Billy rides through the Mexican wilderness looking for his brother’s trail, though the visions prove insufficient to aid his quest. Setting up camp, the landscape

suddenly becomes a living force; the narrator describes the coals of Billy's campfire as "the eyes of things disturbed that had best been left alone" and the lake nearby "lay like a hole in that high desert world down into which the stars were drowning" (CR 325). Clearly, this landscape is able to communicate at will with its inhabitants though the implications are not always understood. A sense of a vague warning is all Billy is conscious of in the "eyes" of his dying fire and the dark lake where "stars were drowning." Continually troubled by the terrain around him, Billy recalls the dream he has just awakened from:

lastly he saw his brother standing in a place where he could not reach him, windowed away in some world where he could never go. When he saw him there he knew that he had seen him so in dreams before and he knew that his brother would smile at him and he waited for him to do so, a smile which he had evoked and to which he could find no meaning to ascribe and he wondered if what at last he'd come to was that he could no longer tell that which had passed from all that was but a seeming. He must have knelt there a long time because the sky in the east did grow gray with dawn and the stars sank at last to ash in the paling lake... and the world to appear again once more. (CR 326)

This vision of his brother is hauntingly similar to the last: once again Boyd smiles but cannot speak. The inscrutable landscape provides the surreal setting for the dream, offering neither clues for its interpretation nor comfort for the travelers passing through it. The landscape of the vision is undefined, unreachable, and echoes the physical surroundings: grey sky, ashen stars, "paling lake." For all their physical detail, the features of the landscape seem remote and dream-like. Even their coloring suggests an amorphous world of shadows and dreams: they are neither white nor black, but all different shades of grey. The ominous descriptions of the landscape before Billy falls asleep mirror the shadowy uncertainty of the dream itself and its auspices of death. Whatever supernatural force is responsible for producing the dream-vision goes unmentioned, but its presence is felt in the eerie pre-dawn landscape that

prompts Billy to recall the dream. The dream itself is again enigmatic, seemingly removed from reality several times over, as Billy can find no meaning behind his brother's actions. The only lasting impression he takes from the dream is just that: an impression, with no certainty or specific warning.

The distance Billy feels from his brother's presence, the "world where he could never go," creates for him a whole new realm: an unnamed, indescribable space that exists in his mind and in his dreams (CR 326). The space itself is a subjective creation, influenced by his perceptions of reality, memory, and previous dreams. He is actually allowed to interact with his brother within the landscape of the dream-vision, noting in his brother's expression "a smile which he had evoked" (CR 326). Clearly, within the space of the dream, Billy is able to affect actions in the vision. There is the overwhelming sense, at least in Billy's mind, that his presence in the dream enables him to communicate on a mystical level with the spirit of his brother. The uncharted distance between them strains their interaction, creating a subjective space they are both conscious of. There is no regard for time or reality in the dream; McCarthy's long sentence stretches out a very simple image from the vision into a seemingly longer, more complex meditation in the mind of the protagonist. The connection between the brothers consists mainly of visual detail and the thoughts behind their interaction, which eventually fade into the external landscape where Billy awakens.

Billy's vision of his brother is reminiscent of a scene in Cicero's *De Re Publica*, where "[Scipio] Africanus foretells his grandson's future, and speaks to him of the nature of the heavens... the smallness of the earth, the vanity of earthly fame, and the immortality of the soul. Like the journeys to the underworld in Homer and Virgil, this vision includes

information about the fate of human souls after death” (Spearing 9). The fate of Billy’s brother, now dead, is unclear, so the postmodern reinterpretation of these earlier conventions involves an element of uncertainty and ambiguity. Billy knows only that his brother is “windowed away” in some space that he cannot reach or describe (CR 326). Many of McCarthy’s dream-visions occur in this kind of limbo, a space without a clear time or landscape, a liminal realm which seems to support Guillemin’s theory that history in the trilogy is “recurrent enactments of ever the same drama whose individual events are highlighted as exemplary moments within the set course of history” (105). This theory applies to memory as well, for what is history but the acknowledgment of collective memories? The individual is unable to discern a specific meaning in the images of the dream, only impressions that serve to reinforce the reality that there is not necessarily a comprehensible meaning or order in the world the characters travel through. In medieval dream visions, this inadequacy is due to the character’s own insufficiency in light of the incomprehensible power of God; in McCarthy’s view, the character’s inadequacy comes from this existence in an indifferent, indecipherable universe.

Dreams seem to fall into two main categories in the trilogy: collective memory and the prophetic, both of which are recognized in medieval categorizations of the dream, based on Macrobius’ system. Descriptions of the “*visio* like history, the *oraculum* like prophecy, the *somnium* like allegory” more explicitly combine the “hierarchy of dreams and a hierarchy of literary forms” and offer a foundation from which dreams in the trilogy originate (Kruger 133). Dreams do maintain their prophetic potential in The Border Trilogy, though it remains unclear to the dreamers exactly who or what is dictating the dreams they receive or how to

comprehend the knowledge they are offered. Sometimes, they do not recognize this knowledge at all, or what the dream foretells. In *All the Pretty Horses*, Alejandra dreams that she sees John Grady dead, a vision which he disregards until the eerie and mystifying details become clear in *Cities of the Plain* at the moment of his death. John Grady ignores the dream because it does not make sense to him, but fatefully, “the bleak image.... specifically foretells the place of his dying, to which he will be brought by the same unchecked and despair. All the signs prove true; all the warnings fail to prevent this doom” (Arnold 55). The dream is an example of one of the mysterious manifestations of knowledge, and this time the dreamer is inadequate for the task of interpretation. He cannot transpose the knowledge presented in the dream onto his own perception of reality, and so the warning is unheeded. However, the potency of the dream itself is verified when the events it foretells come to pass in *Cities of the Plain*.

Besides the prophetic, dreams also seem to offer the dreamer access to a deeper collective consciousness inherent in the world. Many of the dreams involve mystical figures and shadowy, prehistoric scenes that seem to function as both allegory and memory. These dreams are a kind of palimpsest, written in the language of dreams, overlapping the protagonists’ dreams with previous dreams that seem to emerge as a collage of scenes from earlier times. Arnold contends that dreams in the trilogy “may also provide direct contact with the true and essential, unmediated by conscious formulation of symbolic substitution or undistorted by intentional misrepresentation” (49). There is no conscious manipulation of the dreams; each vision comes to the dreamer, who simply falls asleep, lulled by the landscape and the events he has experienced. John Grady often dreams of horses, who seem

to fulfill an allegorical function as well as directing the dreamer into a deeper realm of symbols and truths. The horses in his possession, whose noises inspire the dream, quickly become a more elusive breed, shadowy and equipped with a strange awareness. Camping in the wilderness on his way back to Texas, the horses in his dreams

were wary and moved with great circumspection carrying in their blood as they did the recollection of this and other places where horses had once been and would be again. Finally what he saw in his dream was that the order in the horses' heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it. (APH 280)

McCarthy's language in this passage seems deliberately ambiguous; when he describes the memory of places "where horses had once been and would be again," is he referring to the places themselves, or is he actually imbuing these dream horses with the mystifying power to know both the past and the future? The horses know of a deeper order written in a language that John Grady can only witness as dreamer but can neither participate in nor translate. His conclusion places value on the horses' ability to discern an order to the world of which he is ignorant; perhaps the horse who, like all animals, relies on inherent knowledge and instinct rather than a developed consciousness, is able to perceive an order that human awareness makes the dreamer unable to see. Billy's dream-visions are also occasionally littered with highly symbolic images though he does not meditate consciously on their significance. He wakes from sleep in the desert, just before his brother disappears, remembering a dream in which his brother has died, and subsequently has a vision "of things seen and unseen. He saw the she-wolf dead in the mountains and the hawk's blood on the stone and he saw a glass hearse with black drapes pass in a street He saw the solitary sexton in the ruins of the town where the terramoto had passed He saw a goat with golden horns tethered in a

field of mud” (CR 326). The language preceding this vision is again ambiguous: Billy wakes to the memory of a dream, and it is unclear whether this vision is a part of that dream or a separate waking vision. The dead wolf, the blood, and the hearse all underscore the prophetic dream of his brother’s death. The images in this vivid sequence spiral out of each other; mirroring the visual juxtaposition, the connotations of the images overlap suggesting death and isolation endlessly entwined. The images help to foretell the fate of Boyd, who will disappear only three pages later, but they do so in a way that leaves the dreamer to extrapolate the significance of the montage he has seen. They also intimate that the dreamer’s own memories have conspired to produce a visual prophecy that draws on the connectedness of the dream world and the waking world; inexplicably, Billy remembers and visualizes those images that imply his brother’s eventual fate.

The uncanny ability of dreams in the trilogy to offer insight—even direct warnings—into future events and underlying metaphysical truths creates a potent and constant subtext that even the characters seem to sense, though they cannot articulate it. It is the stranger in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, another oracular figure, who comes closest to verbalizing and interpreting the powerful function of dreams. This stranger considers the ways that dreams become narratives and both the internal and external landscapes that produce them. He is well-placed in the epilogue of the final book to function as an oracle of sorts, and the epilogue itself functions as the reader’s guide to elucidate the entire trilogy and the dreams therein. His remarks often display a meta-critical quality that transcends the scene and even the texts, as he seems to be speaking more directly to the reader about the role of dreams in reality. It seems as though he is consciously offering his own postmodern oneirologic text in

the guise of his conversation with Billy. He is set up as another oracular figure to Billy's ignorant dreamer, who questions the stranger's interpretations and the value of all dreams, his own included. This stranger is one of many nameless figures the protagonists encounter throughout the trilogy that profess an oracular knowledge, an uncanny insight into the workings of the world. Rendering him nameless aligns the stranger with the convention of the character who is both "everyman and nobody" (de Certeau 2). This figure clearly alludes to medieval depictions of an ordinary, anonymous figure representative of the collective humanity,⁸ but takes on an important new dimension in the postmodern period, which necessitates that this character is also "nobody," a shadowy figure with no literal identity. The stranger's role "is to formulate a universal connection between illusory and frivolous scriptural productions and death [he] makes plausible the universal character of the particular place in which the mad discourse of knowing wisdom is pronounced" (de Certeau 2). Because he has no earthly identity, he can navigate the space of dreams and also validate their meaning in a language Billy can understand, even if he does not fully comprehend the explanations offered. The stranger connects the earthly and spiritual planes through recounting his dreams.

In his interpretation, dreams function as an outlet for the individual's need to control the events of life, a portion of existence one can affect as opposed the unalterable events of the external world. He contends that

Dreams reveal the world also... We wake remembering the events of which they are composed while often the narrative is fugitive and difficult to recall. Yet it is the narrative that is the life of the dream while the events themselves are often

⁸ This reference brings to mind the religious morality play *Everyman*, where the title character literally represents "every man." The concept of individuality in the medieval period was not an established principle.

interchangeable. The events of the waking world on the other hand are forced upon us and the narrative is the unguessed axis along which they must be strung. It falls to us to weigh and sort and order these events. It is we who assemble them into the story which is us. Each man is the bard of his own existence. That is how he is joined to the world. For escaping from the world's dream of him this is at once his penalty and his reward. (CP 283)

The narrative here merges with the dream, and the narrator with the dreamer. In his vision, the waking world and the world of the narrative are not mutually exclusive. The dream narrative has its origins in the waking world, to the extent that the narrative is not so much waiting to be revealed as it is waiting to be reconstructed in the dreamer's subconscious. According to the stranger, dreams—the landscape within one's own consciousness—are the only narratives that the individual has the power to affect, and they are minted from the raw material that makes up the waking world. Again, the reader's attention is directed to the intertwined relationship between dream and memory: how often do we wake unable to tell whether the recollections fresh in our minds are dreams or memories of actual events?

Both types of recollections survive in a fragmented space that the dreamer cannot revisit or influence once it has passed, just as Billy cannot communicate with the apparition of his brother when it appears in his visions. The difference, as the stranger explains it, is that only the dream can be formed by the individual, who has the autonomy—at least in this dream world—to break with “the world's dream of him.” Having the power to fashion one's own dreams is a radical departure from the medieval conception of dreams as message from the supernatural. The idea of unraveling conventional ways of understanding in order to reach a more perfect knowledge is precisely what McCarthy seems to advocate. The narrative is both “the life of the dream,” as McCarthy's stranger explains, and also the

“unguessed axis,” the ultimately ambiguous coordinates where events of the waking world intersect with dreams. The dreamer is able to find this axis only in the subconscious world of dreams, which “continue to remind us of what we fail to apprehend in our daily existence, but they cannot and should not ‘satisfy’ our ‘yearning’ for a perfect and complete understanding” (Arnold 67). Such an understanding is reserved for the divine and is not accessible to the flawed human consciousness. Like the narrator’s directives in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, McCarthy asks his protagonists and his readers to surrender to unknowing in the quest for greater understanding, a feat that requires both spiritual fortitude and pliability.

The stranger makes us aware of the distinction between the “waking world” and the world of dreams. In the former, the individual’s power to shape the motion of his or her life is severely limited; the dreamer can “weigh and sort and order” the events that befall him, but can not change their outcomes. The waking life is “the world’s dream of him,” a space where an unseen outside force is manipulating the events of reality. Only in dreams can the individual dreamer assume power and create an alternate, subjective narrative space in which to construct a personal narrative. McCarthy’s postmodern interpretation of the dreamer’s capabilities highlights the power of the individual, valuing it as at least equal to the power implicit in the dream itself: the power of the vision as a supernatural communication. This shift of power makes the landscape of the dream far more dependent on the scope of the individual dreamer. By contrast, the medieval dreamer’s power rested with the vision itself ; the dreamer was significant only as a vessel through which the dream passed. Suddenly, the landscape of the dream is not dictated by shared cultural conventions but is instead created by the subjective experience unique to the individual dreamer.

The mysterious power to shape one's own dreams culminates in Jorge Luis Borges' short story, "The Circular Ruins," in which the protagonist actually shapes a living man within his own dreams. It seems an extension of McCarthy's philosophy of dreams and the power of the dreamer. The comparison implied is that shaping one's own dreams enables the individual to tap into the awesome creative powers of God. The magician in Borges' story realizes both, for

the purpose which guided him was not impossible, though it was supernatural. He wanted to dream a man: he wanted to dream him with minute integrity and insert him into reality. This magical project . . . which would redeem one of them from his condition of empty illusion and interpolate him into the real world . . . the effort to mold the incoherent and vertiginous matter of which dreams are composed is the most arduous task a man could undertake. (46-7)

In this dream, the magician transcends the laws of physical creation and creates life completely through cerebral and imaginative powers, acts that require a similar surrender to unknowing and spiritual fortitude. The interaction between the mind/consciousness and the physical world is skewed in dreams because the laws of reality can be subverted in the formless realm of the dream-vision. Therefore, the distinct shape of the dream is entirely dependent on the landscape that provides the context for the dream-vision, and that landscape is the dreamer's mind, memory, and experience. The desire to shape the formless content of dreams, as Borges' magician does quite literally, is apparent in both the medieval dream-visions and in McCarthy's protagonists. However, since medieval visionaries confine their subjective influence to the mandates of religious convention, they would never have attributed this type of individual power to the dreamer, for complete authority was contained within the divine power that created the dream: "dreams had no social existence except as narratives, relevant not only to the individual but also to the social group that recounted,

transmitted, and adapted them to its values and the framework of its beliefs” (Schmitt 282). The stranger in *Cities of the Plain* directly challenges this assertion with his belief in dreams as an innate source of individual power through which one is able to commune personally with the force that dictates the “unguessed axis” of one’s life (CP 283). In the twentieth-century, there is no ‘social group’ outside the individual dreamer to ‘adapt’ these dreams, so it is particularly critical to consider the personal relevance of the dream as a way of knowing in a more fragmented cultural framework. The dreamers in The Border Trilogy do not shape living people (though they do seem adept at calling images of the dead to mind in their dreams) but perhaps more ambitiously, they attempt to shape a whole world from the content of their dreams.

Conclusion

Ultimately, McCarthy’s dreamers want to find order, or simple rest, in the real, material world, and the medieval dreamer expects to find order and rest in the immaterial, spiritual world. So, the medieval dreamer longs to make the invisible world visible by recalling the dream, while the postmodern writer construes reality as dream but also as the only true way of knowing. Having translated a version of the medieval dream-vision into an existential postmodern world, McCarthy manages both adherence to some of the defining principles of the genre as well as transformation to suit the demands of a radically altered audience and culture. Fundamentally, the medieval dream-visions and McCarthy’s postmodern visions share a common desire to know one’s place and role in a larger world. Both rely on landscapes: one springs from the largely internal, allegorical background provided by the Catholic faith in Europe; the other, the external, physical terrain of the

Mexican wilderness that forms the primary setting for McCarthy's trilogy. But McCarthy exploits the dream-vision genre by elevating considerably the significance of the dreamer and the ability of that dreamer to shape or influence his own dreams. He places the alienated, puzzled dreamer in a space subject to random contingency, without the medieval assurance of divine guidance. In doing so, he contrasts the postmodern dreamer's difficulty in interpreting dream according to their limited, subjective experience with the precedence of dream as sacred, unalterable communications as dictated in the medieval period. The narrative space he creates is a literal landscape complete with physical details that offer the reader a solid sense of place. At the same time, the landscape becomes a catalyst for the dreams the protagonists experience while they travel within it, and it influences the setting of their dreams. The "cloud-cover like ghosts of mountains," "barren gravelly hills beyond" and "the bloodred sunset... the bloodred dust" all appear repeatedly throughout the trilogy, contributing to the sense of solitude and meaninglessness proffered by the existential overtones McCarthy embraces (APH 43, 302). His protagonists are adrift in a landscape that is otherworldly and unfamiliar, both psychologically and geographically, and Billy offers only the conviction "that the one thing he knew of all things claimed to be known was that there was no certainty to any of it" (CR 346). The descriptions of the space itself reinforce this admission. Billy wanders in a landscape where what he sees in reality is alien and unfamiliar, while what is familiar—his memories—is not present, appearing only in his mind's eye, that is, in the dream-visions. These realms refuse to be reconciled and, perversely, both Billy and John Grady can only act according to their understanding of a past that defies understanding.

Whether or not McCarthy consciously incorporates the frameworks for medieval dream-visions is immaterial; in fact, the conclusion is all the more interesting if he was not aware, perhaps indicating that dreams have a collective social and historical consciousness passed on despite centuries of changing literary forms. Though McCarthy's dream-visions often correspond to medieval categories—the prophecy, the apparition, the enigmatic—the ultimate significance of such dreams is vastly more fractured in the postmodern world since they are subject to a reality with no discernible sense of order. The cornerstone of the transformation, then, is evidenced in terms of the dreamer. Though Billy tells the stranger in *Cities of the Plain* “I ain’t thought about em [dreams] at all. I’ve just had em,” clearly his response belies the recurrent role dreams have played in his life (277). Billy’s dreams haunt him right to the end of the trilogy, where he is still seeking a source of communion with his dead brother and with the world. The stranger sees more than Billy will admit, and his description that “the core of our life is the history of which it is composed and in that core are no idioms but only the act of knowing and it is this we share in dreams and out” echoes beyond the pages of the novel to explain the fundamental significance dreams have as an experience that transcends culture and time (CP 281). Dreams are the essential “act of knowing,” where memory and vision come together in a liminal space. McCarthy’s dream-visions offer an unceasingly violent, otherworldly landscape in which the dreamer wanders, casting about in a physical world where he is both haunted by and forced to cling to his dream-visions as his only connection to a force larger than himself and the landscape, a force that might offer him a glimpse of meaning in an otherwise indecipherable existence—if he can learn to read his own dreams.

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