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Grace and apocalypse in the novels of Cormac McCarthy

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GRACE AND APOCALYPSE IN THE NOVELS OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

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Martha Nell Sullivan

McCarty's novels articulate a vision of man's state of grace as a trajectory. Outer Dark, representative of McCarty's early career, reveals a world filled with overwhelming evil, a vision of terra damnata mitigated only by the grace suggested in the narrative tenderness toward the heroine, Rinhry. Suttlee affirms grace as the titular hero "pulls himself together" to overcome "dementia praecox," a form of madness combining the primitive implications of schizophrenia (represented by Suttlee's dead twin) and the Manichean split between good and evil that paradoxically issues in Knoxville's "good-naturedly violent" demimonde. Blood Meridian, McCarthy's apocalyptic Western, reverses the vision of Suttlee. The novel's ambiguous silences--moments of ineffability--either condemn "the kid" for his senseless brutalities or confirm the meaningless of life which the desecrating bloodshed suggests. Both possibilities leave mankind poised uncomfortably at his blood meridian, McCarthy's version of an apocalyptic foreclosure on the possibility of grace.
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Introduction

Cormac McCarthy is a contemporary novelist who hails from the environs of Knoxville, Tennessee. He has written five novels to date: *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974), *Suttree* (1979), and *Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West* (1985).¹ His first novel won the Faulkner Foundation Prize, and this distinction has been both a blessing and a curse for McCarthy who suffers from the double burden of inevitable comparisons and a certain amount of disappointed readers who expected Faulkner but got something entirely different.

Like Faulkner, McCarthy revels in the manipulation of language and the very pleasure of words. I am inclined to agree with Walter Sullivan that McCarthy "knows the word for everything";² McCarthy's description is painstakingly concrete and specific. To an extent, his role is one of novelist as namer. Like Faulkner, too, he tends to populate his novels with vulgar folk of his own region. The vulgar folk for McCarthy includes those who are not usually investigated in polite fiction, including incestuous brothers and sisters, necrophiliacs, male prostitutes, professional scalpers, and various other degenerates and reprobates. This particular, sensational aspect of his work has delighted some and enraged others, but it has left very few people indifferent.
Though McCarthy's novels have captured the attention of the book reviewers from publications as diverse as *Time* and *The Times Literary Supplement*, they have yet to secure the notice of the American academy. McCarthy criticism consists mainly of book reviews (some which afford none-too-careful readings of the texts), a few journal articles in regional journals, and a brief mention here and there in studies of contemporary Southern Literature. Walter Sullivan is one Southern literary scholar who has taken notice of McCarthy; in both his *Death by Melancholy* and *A Requiem for the Renascence*, Sullivan excoriates McCarthy, who Sullivan feels has wasted his talents by chronicling with precision the grotesque and perverse in Appalachia. Sullivan feels that prescriptive ethics should have priority over aesthetics (no art for art's sake here), or perhaps more specifically, only that which affirms traditional Christian values can be beautiful. Therefore McCarthy's novels represent failures because they contribute to the trend of "decadence" in Southern writing.\(^3\)

Currently, the neglect of McCarthy as a serious, successful writer is being remedied. In 1988, Vereen Bell's *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, the first book-length study of McCarthy's novels, was published by Louisiana State University Press. Bell recognizes McCarthy's talents and looks at him outside of the Southern tradition. Where Walter Sullivan found the absence of morality and positive values,
Bell finds a celebration of existence. McCarthy's canon, Bell suggests, represents an exploration of "existential" values, an homage to the very "mystery of being." Bell flatly states, "In each of these novels existence not only precedes but precludes essence." The desire for something beyond the human, for God, is subordinate to the assurance "implied everywhere" that "ideas and systems, the pursuits of essences and of first principles, are as dangerous and reifying as imposed social orders."

Bell's study is an important beginning in the recognition of McCarthy's talent. He has undertaken a systematic exploration of some key issues in McCarthy. However, in the service of his "existential" agenda, Bell has downplayed the ambivalence in McCarthy's works. There is something lurking about the edges in these novels which suggests a presence beyond us which judges, at least a desire for a presence beyond us which can administer judgment. The novels are fraught with an ontological anxiety which leaves the question of essences, morality, and meaning quite interpretable. It is ironic that two critics as disparate as Bell and Sullivan fall prone to the same error, that is, they both ignore the moral implications of McCarthy's works. McCarthy is unabashedly unchurched, and I certainly would not want to imply that he is a "Catholic" writer, or even a "Christian" author, the way that, say, Flannery O'Connor is. The novels' ingrained bias
against organized religion is apparent in the portrayal of Mrs. Rattner's militant Protestantism in The Orchard Keeper, the "false" preachers of Outer Dark, the antipathy toward the Catholic Church in Suttree, and the presence of an ex-priest who scalps for a living in Blood Meridian. I suspect that the thing McCarthy deplores in organized religion is its encouragement of moral cowardice: it can aid people in doing what is wrong self-righteously or losing morality in doctrine and dogma. In this sense, Bell is correct that existentialism does play a role in McCarthy's work, but that would be the existential (or perhaps pre-existential) thought of Nietzsche, whose influence is evident in various phases of McCarthy's work. The biggest sin of all in McCarthy's novels is the failure to act according to one's conscience. Weakness, impotence, and refusal to take responsibility are punished with a heavy hand in the narratives—especially in the case of Culla Holme in Outer Dark and the kid in Blood Meridian.

On the other hand, in spite of the bias against organized religions, the novels sometimes imply an older, simpler sort of religion, a combination of the fatalism of the pagan myths and the cause-and-effect vengeance of the Old Testament Yahweh. In The Orchard Keeper, the elderly Arthur Ownby adds a cedar sapling to the pit where he finds a corpse (which happens to be Kenneth Rattner, John Wesley's dead father) not simply because he wants to hide the fact of death from
himself, as Bell suggests,\(^7\) but because he is compelled to the ritual of the burial of the dead whom he must eventually join. Like Antigone, he covers the corpse so that the soul can have rest, and so that he, too, may someday have rest. In *Outer Dark*, Culla's transgression of the incest prohibition causes a plague of evil in the surrounding mountain communities. Retribution soon follows, but even the eventual sacrifice of the child does not save Culla. Lester Ballard's rampage of murder and necrophilia in *Child of God* is itself a judgment upon the people of Sevier County, who have failed to treat Lester as a human being. McCarthy makes it clear that Lester kills the women not only to provide an outlet for his sexual desires, but to provide a source of human companionship which the community has denied Lester by shunning him.

Whether the horror in *Blood Meridian* is interpreted as evil or nothingness, the kid's fate (literally horrible beyond words) results from his bad conscience, his failure to take a stand against Judge Holden. In *Suttree*, the protagonist decides to literally pull himself together in order to overcome his worst tendencies; he transcends evil when he "flies" from it.

A certain degree of lawlessness pervades these texts and encourages those like Bell to regard them as existential voids. This lawlessness is in fact a method of creating more room for free will; the moral choices in these novels belong
to individuals and not societies. All these novels take place amid frontier conditions, where civilization and an abundance of ignorance, violence, and vulgarity make enforcing law difficult, if not impossible. With their violent natures, McCarthy's characters sometimes seem to have walked out of a Southwestern humorist's tale. (Indeed, Buddy Suttree's friends often call him "Sut," a clear reference to his literary forbearer, Sut Lovingood.) But the humor which exorcises the threat posed by the inanely violent folk in Southwestern tales is rare in McCarthy's work because Southwestern humor constitutes a manipulation of the action by an extraneous voice. The works are closer to the genre of horror than to that of humor because grotesqueness is such an unmitigable fact of life in them.

This moral independence is also established in the systematic orphanning of McCarthy's characters. The father in these novels is always curiously absent—whether through death, desertion, or disinterest. In some ways, the absence of the natural father point to the absence or withdrawal of God from the text. In *The Orchard Keeper*, John Wesley Rattner seeks surrogate fathers in Marion Sylder, the man who actually killed his father, and "Uncle Ather" Ownby, who faithfully conducts the burial ritual for Rattner's corpse. (This novel is reminiscent of Allen Tate's *The Fathers*, where Lacy Buchan must "choose" a father just as he must choose the
corresponding system of values.) Culla and Rinthy Holme have the opportunity to commit incest because their dead father cannot enforce the prohibition. Lester Ballard in *Child of God* discovers the body of his father hanging in their barn; his subsequent career bears evidence of this trauma. Cornelius Suttree is fatherless due to a mutual disowning, and the kid's father in *Blood Meridian* stays drunk all the time and quotes from long-dead poets, leaving the kid to be "father of the man" (*BM*, p.3). Without fathers to enforce the law and moral prohibitions, these children are left to construct as best they can a system of morals, some method of operating in a world where there is no moral guidance.

Although these characters have the freedom to choose, they do not live in an absolute existential void because there are wrong choices to be made and they always receive condemnation based on some seemingly *a priori* standard of moral judgment. "Wrong choices" is perhaps too mild a term because they are, in effect, transgressions of taboos. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud notes that "morality of man begins" with two taboos, the taboo of incest and the taboo of the dead.9 *Outer Dark* involves the breaking of both taboos, while the other novels involve the various infringements upon the taboo of the dead, which includes prohibitions against murder, violence and various forms of desecration of the dead. Sometimes these transgressions are judged and punished by
external forces, as in *Outer Dark* when Culla stands "arraigned" before the grim triune who have been spreading terror throughout the area (*Outer Dark*, p.235). But the predominant form of judgment is internal, an enactment of a guilty conscience, for as Freud notes, "An external threat of punishment is superfluous because an inner certainty (a conscience) exists that violation will be followed by unbearable disaster." Thus, Culla's real punishment stems from a sense of guilt which makes him an outcast and a wanderer. Suttree is tormented by fundamental self-division created by his knowledge of good and evil. In *Blood Meridian*, the kid's mind is "uncotted" by the memories of the atrocities he has committed (*Blood Meridian*, p.305).

Allen Tate has cited a preoccupation with history among Southern writers, while C. Vann Woodward finds the entire region is "burdened" with its sense of history. In McCarthy's work, the characters are burdened with a sense of their own personal histories, that is, the irrevocability of the past or the realization that "what is done is done and cannot be undone." Actions have consequences the characters cannot escape, and in that sense they are in need of grace. Yet, the degree to which the characters can attain grace is very much at issue in these novels. The qualities which C. Vann Woodward finds distinctive of the South as a region—poverty, defeat, and guilt—are predictors in
McCarthy's novels of man's state of grace. The poverty becomes emblematic—hunger, thirst, and "shoelessness" symbolize the deeper need for grace which may be denied them in this sort of pre-Christian morality. In these very simple equations, the wrong choice means disaster; the malefactors meet defeat in the form of death, exile, or reification.

The notable exception to all this is of course Suttree, a novel which escapes the fate of the others. After struggling with the various personal evils which beset him, Suttree manages to attain an almost lyrical transcendence by choosing (correctly) to leave his old ways and haunts and take up a simpler existence. In a sense, McCarthy's canon charts the progress of wanderers across a terra damnata. The works form a trajectory of redemption which reaches its zenith in Suttree's salvation but regresses into an apocalyptic vision with Blood Meridian. My essay will focus on Outer Dark, Suttree, and Blood Meridian, which seem to me illustrative in this cycle. Outer Dark and Suttree represent a struggle toward redemption, while Blood Meridian suggests the impossibility of human redemption, the foreclosure on grace of any kind. McCarthy's latest novel is a disturbing one, yet in its extremes it represents the best and the worst of Cormac McCarthy. In this vision of a world without grace, complacency--with ourselves and with our own vision of the world--is negated as we are forced to stare wide-eyed at the
horror.
NOTES


________ Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West (1985 New York: Ecco Press, 1986). All references to these texts will be cited parenthetically.


5 Bell, 9.

6 Bell, 8.

7 Bell, 28.


10 Freud, 47.

11 Allen Tate, "The Profession of Letters in the South," The Collected Essays of Allen Tate (Denver: Allen Swallow,


14 Woodward, 16-21.
Chapter One: *Outer Dark* and Hard Grace

In *Outer Dark*, McCarthy explores a world where redemption is problematized by the invasiveness of moral failure. The actions of the past are not merely irrevocable, they are relentless in their repercussions. Once Culla and Rinthy Holme have committed incest, a web of events spins around them. While the surrealistic elements of the novel defy the application of the term "logic" here, the events do spring from the original sin in the text with an ineluctable fatality which gives the novel the texture of moral allegory.\(^1\) Culla's attempt to conceal and then flee from his guilt only entangles him further because sins are debts which must be paid for in full. Yet there are degrees of guilt, and so there is a measure of grace, ambivalent perhaps, for Rinthy, whose ambiguous complicity in the original crime is mitigated by her subsequent attempts to act morally.

Vereen Bell perhaps understates the case when he says this novel is "untouched by wishful thinking."\(^2\) Even the title warns us of the bleakness in store. "Outer dark" is an allusion to Matthew 8:12 where Christ warns the nonbelievers the faithful (including gentiles) will be saved "while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." The title then raises the question of the possibility of grace. The
characters, seemingly damned before death, already inhabit the outer darkness.

The title also refers to the correspondence between the "outer" dark and the inner darkness, as well. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the novel establishes a symbolic, almost allegorical, connection between the external world and the human heart. While Bell posits the unheimlich in the novel (that is, a fundamental disconnection between the human and the natural world), the novel invariably shows the natural world responding to or reflecting the human. For example, when Culla refuses to fetch the midwife for Rlinky, the narrator notes, "He could hear her crying...It had begun to rain again" (p.10), as if Rlinky's tears seem to bring on the rain. In fact, Rlinky herself seems in harmony with nature; during the first part of the novel she is "attended" by birds and butterflies (p.98). (By the end of the novel, however, only "boneless shapes" are "attending her"--p.237.) Her tenacious search for her missing child is "natural," her instincts are those of a lioness or a mother bird. For Culla, there is no such harmony. Even the firewood which he gathers becomes a reproach: "scouring the near woods for old stumps which he split out and dressed of their rotted hearts, bringing in the hard and weathered shells and stacking them on the floor beside the hearth" (p.11, italics mine). The language here is reminiscent of a moment in Suttree where the
titular hero envisions his own heart, "weathered and loveless. The skin drawn and split like an overripe fruit" (Suttree, p.13). In both, the state of the human heart finds its analogue in the death or decay of the natural world. If nature seems relentlessly hostile to Culla and the others, it is because they themselves are "hard." As the tinker tells Rinthy, "hard people makes hard times" (p.192), and not the other way around.

Culla suspects this correspondence at least at the subconscious level. At the first of the novel, he wakes from a nightmare in which he has gone before a prophet to be "cured" during an awaited eclipse. When the sun does not return, the other pilgrims turn on Culla: "They grew seething and more mutinous and he tried to hide among them but they knew him even in that pit of hopeless dark and fell upon him with howls of outrage"(p.6). In his dream, the enormity of his sin actually puts out the sun forever. Similarly, the novel begins with the leader of a group of malevolent outlaws--"the grim triune" whose doings McCarthy chronicles in certain italicized, unpaginated "outchapters"--performing a gesture which parodies the eclipse in Culla's dream: "the bearded one rose and stood spraddlelegged before the fire and closed the other two in a foul white plume of smoke" (p.[3]).

The foul smoke is the natural product of a chemical reaction, but it also creates the appropriate ambience for this sinister
trio. The phenomena of the prolonged eclipse and the noxious smoke are indications of a depraved moral status in the world, but they also point to the possibility of judgment issuing from beyond this world. The tinker wonders with "the meanness of humans" why "God ain't put out the sun and gone away" (p. 192). Both the eclipse and the dousing of the fire seem to suggest that He has, for they both create an opacity which encloses the whole narrative, cutting the characters off from the possibility of redemption. If God exists in this novel, He remains at the periphery and does not interfere with the course of events.

The theological uncertainty and the thematic darkness reverberate in epistemological difficulties. An aura of mystery pervades the text. Rinchy "doesn't know" if she has been saved (p. 109), the drover does not know how many hogs are in his herd and subsequently insists "God hisself don't know" (p. 214). When the bearded one asks Culla if the child has been named, he does not know (p. 236), nor can Culla be sure, until he sees the child again, he has never killed anyone. (This, too, is problematical since Culla cannot be positive it is the same child; as the bearded one suggests, "Maybe this'n some other chap"—p. 233.) His response to a local squire's joking enquiry "Ain't murdered nobody?" is an embarrassed "I don't reckon" (p. 206). When the triune suddenly appears before the tinker's fire, he "could not account for
them" (p. [229]), and Rinthy, uneasy in a strange house, listens "for a bird or a cricket. Something she might know in all that dark" (p. 65). She hopes to orient herself with something known and familiar, but as the consequences of her past multiply, she becomes estranged from the world she once knew. The familiar is in the "old dead time" of the irretrievable past (p. 98); as the bearded one tells Culla, "We ain't in them places" (p. 174).

The problem of uncertainty is not limited to the characters in the novels; it is compounded by the narrator's denial of omniscience. He withholds key information such as the degree of Rinthy's complicity in the incest, which takes place outside the narrative. He gives us only vague notions of time and place, as well, and, as Guy Davenport notes, he never claims any access to the characters' thoughts. Moreover, he often confirms his own uncertainty. For instance, during Culla's encounter with the hog drovers, the narrator announces the appearance of a preacher, "a parson or what looked like one" (p. 221). The narrative voice often points to the possibility of error in its account. In Rinthy's narrative he notes a whippoorwill calling and later "the bird once again more faintly, or perhaps another bird" (p. 63). In Culla's narrative, he repeats this gesture: "Later still he heard a mockingbird. Or perhaps some other bird" (p. 183). The narrator describing Rinthy's encounter with
the tinker says, "They could hear the branch murmuring. Or perhaps it was the wind" (p.193). Through these gestures, the narrative voice claims that he, too, is "in the dark."

The result of this profusion of doubt is an innate suspiciousness in the characters which isolates them from each other. Culla meets hostility in the towns through which he travels simply because all strangers are suspect. He is frequently accused of crimes which he does not commit (and is thereby inadvertently rendered poetic justice since he is never punished legally for his real crimes), as when his arrival in Cheatham coincides with the discovery of some grave robberies. He must flee on more than one occasion in order to save his life. Rinthy, too, meets with mistrust. When she asks for lodging at one house, the man who answers the door asks with "narrowed" eyes, "Who's out there with you?" (p.58). He calls out to the darkness four times in an attempt to flush out the would-be intruder. Moreover, it is Rinthy's own suspiciousness which leads to her discovery of the false grave and opens the journey part of the narrative: "Some willingness to disbelief must have made her see and reflect. Certainly it could have held a grown man, this piece of ground gutted and strewn with mulch, slugwhite roots upturned to the disastrous light...she began to scoop away the dirt with her hands" (p.32).

In leaving the child to die and then digging the false
grave, both efforts to obscure his guilt, Culla has increased his original guilt threefold. Not only has he broken the incest taboo, but he attempts to break the taboo against the dead, which includes both the prohibition "Thou shalt not kill" and the consecration of the dead in burial rituals. The consecration of the dead is a serious concern spanning McCarthy's narratives. In The Orchard Keeper, for example, Arthur Ownby scrupulously carries out the burial ritual for the corpse he finds in the spray pit; this consecration is no less serious a concern in Blood Meridian, where the continual desecration of the dead accounts for much of the horror. In the two weeks between Culla's abandonment of the child and Rinity's recuperation, he never returns to bury the child whom at this point he still supposes to be dead. Instead, he creates a false grave; even this seems an afterthought since the grave is so disproportionate (even Rinity notices) and sloppily "strewn" with mulch and roots. Culla's behavior is antithetical to that of Cornelius Suttree, for whom (like the father in Frost's "Home Burial") careful burial of the child becomes the expression of his love, grief, and remorse (Suttree, pp.155-56).

In breaking the taboos, or committing sins, Culla and Rinity become impure. This impurity is emphasized by the "stain" motif associated intimately with Culla and Rinity throughout the narrative. Culla's shadow is "a dark stain in
which he stood. In which he moved" (p.13). (The "outer dark" of the novel becomes the extension of this stain in which Culla moves.) Rinthy's childbirth is "bloodslimed" and after Culla delivers the baby dried blood cakes the lines of his palms (pp.14-5). While Rinthy is still recovering, "light from the window lay in a niggardly stain across the bed" (p.28). The bundle she carries with her becomes "stained" (p.97). Because Rinthy continues to lactate even after the child is taken from her, she constantly wears "milkstains" on her dress like a sort of scarlet letter, an insignia of both her love and her guilt (pp.30, 99).

Culla gradually becomes immured by his impurity. He capitulates to his unregenerate state not only by committing incest, but by abdicating his role as upholder of the Law in all respects. This fact is symbolized by his appropriation and sale of "daddy's" gun (an example of "selling out" in the extreme). Rinthy finds him dismantling the hardware of the shotgun and admonishes him, "You fixin to tear up daddy's gun" (p.30). Culla retorts, "It ain't daddy's gun," (p.30) and we are suddenly reminded what daddy's absence has meant to both of them. When the storekeeper tells Rinthy that Culla has sold the gun, she is shocked: "He done that? she said" (p.56). Her dismay at first seems odd because she knows better than anyone exactly what he is capable of doing. But then, the gun is more than any old gun. It is at once a
symbol of authority, specifically the father's authority, as well as the inheritance or reminder of Daddy, who perhaps (we do not know) represents a time of love, stability, and innocence. By selling the gun, Culla renounces his responsibility as heir to uphold the law (which has already done to a degree by transgressing it) and to protect Ringly and himself from the violence which is always a threat in a frontier environment. In Blood Meridian, the kid (who at 15 is even younger than Culla) refuses to sell his gun to Judge Holden at any price, heeding Tobin's warning that his only chance against the judge is to remained armed both literally and figuratively. In Outer Dark, the grim triune (whose role in the novel is analogous to the judge's in Blood Meridian) is at first armed only "with crude agrarian weapons"(p.[35]), but by the time Culla catches up with them, the mute one has a rifle and eyes Culla with "malign imbecility" (p.177). The rifle in some strange way becomes the gun Culla sold; by disarming himself, Culla has empowered the triune. He, in turn, is "helpless," or impotent before them (p.181).

Culla's impotence arises not only from the material fact of being unarmed, but from the whole abdication of responsibility which selling the gun represents. By continually denying volition, he eventually robs himself of any power to act at all, even in self-defense. A few days after he abandons the child, he looks at Ringly and sees "like
dark tears two milkstains" on her dress. He then looks at his hands, "he sat watching them as if they were somehow unaccountable" (p. 30). Later, he tries to blame Rinthy. When she discovers the grave is false, he kneels in the dark earth with his writhen face howling at her, saying *Now you done it. Now you really went and done it*. And her own face still bland and impervious with such wonder he mistook for accusation, silent and inarguable female invective, until he rose and fled, bearing his clenched hands above him threatful, supplicant, to the mute and windy heavens (p. 33, italics mine).

Confronted with the child later in the novel, Culla denies his complicity three times to the bearded one. "It ain't nothin to me;" "I never done nothin with her," and again, "He ain't nothin to me" (pp. 233-35). The only chance of saving the child's life and thereby saving himself is to claim the child, but Culla again shifts the responsibility to Rinthy: "We could find her and she'd take him" (p. 236). This, of course, is the wrong answer, so the child's life is forfeit. Culla, after all, wanted the child dead in the first place in order to conceal his guilt. His final denial becomes in that sense a double denial; he denies responsibility for the child's existence and thereby (since the bearded one will kill him) can preclude the necessity of having to deny it in the future. However, in washing his hands of the child, so to speak, he
creates a new guilt. The literal blood on his hands after the delivery then becomes the sinister foreshadowing of his complicity in the child's violent death which damns rather than frees Culla.

Although Culla wants to deny accountability, guilt plagues his conscience. McCarthy allows us few glimpses into Culla's thoughts, but Culla's feelings are clear nonetheless. The dream at the beginning of the novel, his recurring vision of "the birth-stunned face"(p.27), and his "writhen face howling" when Rinthy discovers the truth (p.33) all suggest the torment he must feel. Culla is always acutely aware that he is doing wrong; this is one area never subject to narrative ambivalence. This guilt feeling is a form of self-judgment easily read by others. Thus, the tinker recognizes that Culla has a "sickness," while strangers accuse Culla of having the "plague" or simply ask him if he is sick (pp.193, 138, 136). The illness of which Culla seeks to be "cured" is a sick conscience. In Nietzsche's The Genealogy of Morals, conscience is a sickness, one way in which the weak disempower the strong. Here, the conscience is more complicated, for it is sign of weakness only in that it persists, that is, it proves Culla does not have the courage to face his repressed moral knowledge.

When Culla passes judgment on himself in this indirect way, he invites others to pass judgment, as well. The sense
of the *unheimlich*, the hostility of nature, which Bell perceives in relation to Culla is really the natural world passing judgment on him. By breaking the taboo consciously, he becomes taboo in the original, primitive sense. That is, the prohibition of *délire de toucher* extends to Culla after he commits the tabooed action. The "avoidance" inherent in this injunction includes not only "touch" but also the aural contact of sound. "Swamp peepers hushed constantly before him and commenced as if he moved in a void claustral to sound" (p.131). As the expriest Tobin tells the kid in *Blood Meridian*, "it may be that the voice of the Almighty speaks most profoundly in such beings as lives in silence themselves" (*Blood Meridian*, p.124). The "void claustral to sound" here is an early version of the ambiguous silences which become thematic in *Blood Meridian*. The swamp frogs here, like Sproule in the later novel, "stitch a caesura" in their metrics to create a space in which the "silent" voice of the Almighty can pass judgment on Culla (*Blood Meridian*, p.66).

As Culla's dream suggests, his "sickness" becomes a plague on the countryside, for when the breaking of a taboo goes unpunished, the entire community must suffer. This plague is manifested in the evil perpetrated by the three outlaws ("the grim triune") whose episodes of surrealistic violence are represented in the italicized outchapters. The bearded one wears a dusty black suit pillaged from a grave,
the ironically named Harmon is like a "lean and dirty cat" (p.175), and the mute, witless one has no name. Noting that the three are "endowed with a dream's redundancy," McCarthy compares them to "revenants that reoccur in lands laid waste with fever" (p.231). Indeed, they become the enactment of Culla's nightmare, further emanations of his "sick" conscience. The italicization itself is an orthographic indication of the peculiar dreamlike unreality of these three. As I remarked above, the bearded one's Swiftian gesture at the opening of the novel parodies the content of Culla's dream, the eclipse which causes his terror. Moreover, they always strike in Culla's vicinity, implicating him in the crimes if merely by proximity. For instance, they rob Salter's barn while Culla sleeps in the loft and eventually kill Salter (p.[35], 49, [51]), and the day after Squire Clark hires Culla to dig graves for two lynching victims, he sees Clark hanging between the victims (p.146). Ultimately, it is Culla who invites them into the narrative proper by calling to them for assistance when he is trapped on a runaway ferry in flood waters (p.168). This invocation endows them with an irrevocable reality: "We ain't hard to find. Once you've found us" (p.233).

The grim triune accounts for much of the apocalyptic thrust of the novel. Robert Coles compares them to Horsemen of the Apocalypse, for they usher in a reign of death and
terror. In one of the outchapters the bearded one tells his victim that he is a "minister" and then precedes to disembowel the man: the victim "looked down at the man's fist cupped against his stomach. The fist rose in an eruption of severed viscera until the blade seized in the junction of his breastbone and he stood disemboweled" (p.[129]). While the triune's violence may at first seem random (according to Thomas Lask they represent the "mindless evil in the world"), it becomes clear that the bearded one, like Hamlet, views himself as a "scourge and minister" if not "of God" then perhaps of Culla's tormented conscience. The triune enacts the judgment on Culla and others, including the self-righteous Squire Salter, the unscrupulous Squire Clark, the tinker whose wares pronounce "perennial tin malediction" (p.[229]), and the old man who keeps avowing "I wouldn't turn Satan away for a drink" (pp.117, 127). The leader seems to know intuitively that Culla has committed incest. In their first encounter, he interrupts Culla's fabricated account of his sister's elopement with the tinker to explain why the mute one has no name: "I wouldn't name him because if you cain't name somethin you cain't claim it. You cain't talk about it even. You cain't say what it is" (p.177). Culla himself refused to let Rinthy name their child, so that the bearded one seems to be giving utterance to Culla's own motive. Later, he accuses Culla outright, "I figure you got this thing here in her belly
your own self and then laid it off on that tinker" (p.233). The bearded one ultimately murders the child whom Culla left to die, acting out a ritual of sacrificial atonement.

The three dwell in "consubstantial monstrosity" (p.[129]); they come to represent the power unleashed by the breaking of taboos or the trinity of the unholy spirit, as it were. By breaking the taboo, Culla has become part of them, and so they rightfully claim him. He unwittingly takes part in a eucharistic transsubstantiation, sharing first flesh, then blood. In his first encounter with them, the bearded one invites Culla to share their meal. He takes a piece of the meat:

It had the consistency of whang, was dusted with ash, tasted of sulphur... Whatever it was had swollen in his mouth and taken on a pulpy feel warped and run with unassailable fibers...Holme chewed. I don't believe I ever et no meat of this kind, he said (p.172).

Harmon "giggles" at this; the intimation of cannibalism is not lost on Culla, who "roached toward the pan before he thought and checked too late" (p.176). Tellingly, the meat grows "truculent" in the pit of his stomach (p.178). In his next encounter with the triune, he symbolically shares in the "blood"; when the bearded one slits the child's throat, the mute one "burie[s] his moaning face" in the fresh wound
(p.236). This acquired consubstantiality with Culla allows the bearded one to appropriate Rinthy (by the commutative property of kinship), with whom he has no direct contact, by referring to her as "little sister"(p.234).

Rinthy, too, is taboo even though the degree of her complicity with Culla remains in question. She most often meets with kindness, but her perpetually "stained" dress marks her taboo status. This is evident in her treatment at the hands of grandmother of the first family with whom she stays. Curiously, Bell notes that this woman is particularly "kindly" to Rinthy.\(^9\) Closer investigation of these passages, though, reveals the old woman avoiding contact with Rinthy most assiduously (or practicing délie de toucher). The family stops at a well for a drink. Rinthy drinks first and then hands the cup to the old woman who "turned the cup to drink from the back side of it" (p.69). When Rinthy offers the old woman her hand in descending from the wagon, the old woman refuses it, looking "about with disapproval" and "glaring out from beneath her dark bonnet fearfully"(p.71). Finally, after Rinthy returns unexpectedly to ask for a ride out of town, the old woman rises from her chair and stares "down at [Rinthy] as if beset by dogs or some worse evil" (p. 76).

Although Rinthy has been tainted by the incest (as the old woman's behavior proves), she strives to be moral in every other respect. She rebuffs a young boy's advances with "her
air of staid and canonical propriety" (p. 64). Later, she visits a doctor and although she is "ragged, shoeless, deferential, and half deranged," she nonetheless moves "in an almost palpable amnion of propriety" (p. 151). Before she visits the doctor she inquires how much it is likely to cost, because she only has one dollar and she wants to pay her own way: "I mean if it's more'n a dollar I'd just as leave not bother him" (p. 150). This differentiates her sharply from Culla, who steals Squire Salter's new cowhide boots after working on his place.

Furthermore, Rินthy accepts the responsibility for her actions instead of trying to conceal it as Culla does. She does not deny the chap, as Culla does, but instead spends a year of agony searching for him even though she only has a vague intuition that the tinker (she does not know his name or even what he looks like) has the child. When the tinker confronts her with the child's origins, she admits it is the product of incest: "It's no right child" (p. 194). Unlike Culla, she does not have a sick conscience ("I wasn't ashamed" -- p. 194) because she is willing to accept the consequences of what she has done or what has been done to her. McCarthy speaks of her "labored heart" (p. 57) and we are reminded of both the brutal childbirth she endures alone--which McCarthy describes in harrowing detail--and of her subsequent, all-consuming struggle to find the child. If
anyone deserves grace in this novel, it is Rínhtry because she has both faith (perhaps localized not in God, but certainly in life itself) and good works. She is drawn to light as one "seeking... grace" (p.188). Rínhtry seeks, and she shall find, but the grace bestowed upon her must be in keeping with the nature of the world she inhabits, which requires the satisfaction of all sins.

Rínhtry's ultimate fate creates a sort of dissonance, for it seems a rather harsh one for such a moral person as Rínhtry tries to be. In spite of the constant bombardment of misery which would surely destroy anyone as fragile as she, Rínhtry's heart does not harden. Because she does not harden from within, the text undertakes to protect her from without by reifying her. After she gives birth, the suffering is already beginning to take its toll on her, for she looks "as if a great age had come upon her" (p.29). Then, however, Culla notices that she moves "like a crippled marionette" (p.32). By the time Rínhtry begins her search for the child she "pirouette[s] slowly in the center of the room like a doll unwinding...with a piece of broken comb rake[s] her dead yellow hair..and set[s] forth, shortgaited and stiffly" (p.53). The "dead yellow hair" is precisely that of a doll, and her "shortgaited" and stiff walk is more appropriate to a wooden soldier than a young girl. Later in the novel she is simply "doll-like."
The same process is implied for the chap, although we only see him at the beginning of the narrative and at the end. The arduous childbirth ages him, too, for he sleeps with "his old man's face flushed and wrinkled" (p.15). When the tinker finds him, his face is "mauve and wrinkled as though beset already with some anguish or worry" (p.20). When we do see him again two hundred pages later, the narrator's coolness successfully disguises the child's humanity:

It had a healed burn all down one side of it and the skin was papery and wrinkled like an old man's. It was naked and half coated with dust so that it seemed lightly furred and when it turned to look up at him he saw one eyeless and angry red socket like a stokehole to a brain in flames (pp.231-32). It made no gesture at all. It dangled from his hands like a dressed rabbit, a gross eldritch doll with ricketsprung legs and one eye opening and closing softly like a naked owl's (p.235, italics mine).

The child has continued to age at an accelerated rate (his scar tissue is like "an old man's" skin), but he has been remarkably dehumanized. He is compared to a "dressed rabbit" (not even a live one), a "naked owl," and a small animal which is "lightly furred." He becomes "a gross eldritch doll," the sinister version of his mother. Although the narrator's tone is detached (perhaps illustrating the fact that the child "ain't nothin" to Culla), McCarthy does hint at what the child
has suffered in this unchronicled year of his life. The missing eye with its "angry red socket" suggests violence at the hands of the tinker which the massive burn scar corroborates. The "ricketsprung legs" suggests malnutrition, another sort of abuse. The child has spent a year of physical and emotional hunger, so that his dehumanization, like Rinthys's, is in some ways a form of mercy.

In the "hard" world of Outer Dark, one would expect that any form of grace would be marginal, for the outer darkness is itself antithetical to grace. There is grace for Rinthys and the child, but it is as "hard" as the world itself. The narrative reduction of the child to non-human status becomes a mercy in that it reduces his capacity to suffer, and suffer he must ("the sins of the father are visited upon the son"). His fate is horrible:

The man took hold of the child and lifted it up. It was watching the fire. Holme saw the blade wink in the light like a long cat's eye slant and malevolent and a dark smile erupted on the child's throat and went all broken down the front of it. The child made no sound. It hung there with its one eye glazing over like a wet stone and the black blood pumping down its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. He was drooling and making whimpering noises in his throat. He knelt with his hand outstretched and his nostrils rimpled delicately. The man handed him the child and he seized it up, looked once at Holme with witless eyes, and buried his moaning face
in its throat (p.236).

The brutality of this scene is mitigated only by the child's lack of cognizance, or even sentience. The child makes no sign of pain or protest because he no longer has the capacity to fear or suffer.

Rinthy, too, is spared through reification. In the scene where she confronts the tinker, he refuses to give her the child and leaves her crying. Bell finds that she is "extraordinarily transformed in the prose, as if in a pagan myth, by an ambitious reach of metaphor";¹⁰ "He could hear it far over the cold and smoking fields of autumn, his pans kneeling in the night like buoys on some dim and barren coast, and he could hear it fading and hear it die lost as the cry of seabirds in the vast and salt black solitudes they keep"(p.194). The metaphor is reminiscent of the grieving Alcyone's metamorphosis into a bird. But Rinthy's continued transformation into a doll or wooden marionette is more akin to the fate of other mythological figures, such as Daphne or Myrrha, who are metamorphosed (less transcendentally) into trees. Such de-animation in the myths is sometimes a punishment, but it is most often, as in these contexts, a saving grace. In Myrrha's case, for example, the metamorphosis saves her from being killed by her enraged father whom she has tricked into sleeping with her and allows
her son Adonis to be born in safety. Rinh's transformation protects her from the knowledge of her son's fate. At the end of the novel she is "innocent" in the original sense of the word, that is, she is uncomprehending and therefore cannot know the evil that has taken place. When she comes upon the campsite where the triune has passed judgment on Culla and the child, "she trailed her rags through dust and ashes, circling the dead fire, the charred billets and chalk bones, the little calcined ribcage. She poked among the burnt remains of the tinker's traps...She did not know what to make of it" (p.237). She completes her quest for the child by finding the charred remains, but mercifully, she does not understand this; nor will she ever have to suffer the knowledge of how the child itself suffered, not in death, but in the life for which she was partially responsible.

In an earlier episode of the novel, a parson of dubious authority gives a sermon. "The grace of God don't rest easy on a man. It can blind him easy as not. It can bend him and make him crooked" (p.226). He speaks tellingly of men "scarred with God's mercy. Stricken with his love." In spite of the parson's somewhat demented character, his sermon rings true in the particular world he inhabits. Grace is hard, very hard in *Outer Dark*; in some ways it is only marginally preferable to the alternative. Rinh is "stricken with his love"; in some uncanny way, her love becomes the mirror image of her
brother's guilt and marks her in the same manner. As Vereen Bell notes, her "love and her pain are inseparable." As long as Rinthy is capable of loving—and surely in her hard world the ability to love is itself a sign of grace—she must suffer, in spite of the text's valiant effort to protect her through metamorphosis. She approaches the campsite "in her sundrained cements" and stands "cradled in a grail of jade and windy light... stepping softly with her air of blooded ruin about the glade in a frail agony of grace" (p.237). The language of this passage clearly suggests some kind of redemption or salvation for Rinthy; "cradled in a grail" suggests she is nurtured and protected by communion with something. And yet she is in an "agony of grace," for grace, as the parson tells us, is not "easy." "Agony" not only suggests her suffering and pain, it suggests struggle (as in agon) as well. Rinthy's struggle clearly differentiates her from Culla. In spite of her frailty, she is not "helpless" the way he is, she neither takes the easy way out nor simply submits to the situation. Her love is a moral strength even when it engenders suffering.

Ultimately, we are never given the specific details of Rinthy's fate the way we are the child's. After she pokes through the ruins of the fire, she sits to wait for someone to return, "but no one returned....and after a while little sister was sleeping" (pp.237-8). This is the last mention of
Rinthy in the text. The narrator goes on to describe "the tinker in his burial tree" and his subsequent decomposition (p.238). Then another chapter is devoted to Culla "in later years"(p.239). Rinthy's narrative ends simply with the word "sleeping." At one level, her sleep is a form of grace, an alleviation of the weariness of her year's sojourn. (The notion of sleep as grace is reflected in the saying "no rest for the wicked.")) But the "agony of grace" she experiences could also be the "mortal agony," the last struggle before death. McCarthy calls her tattered clothes "cerements," which are burial robes, and speaks of her "air of blooded ruin" as though she were already decomposing while still alive. Indeed, it would hard to imagine Rinthy's life after this dénouement, reduced to futility as it would be.

But if her life does end here, the very gentle euphemism "sleeping" seems an odd act of narrative tenderness in the wake of the description of the child's violent dénouement ("a dark smile erupted on the child's throat") and the subsequent description of the dead tinker hanging in a tree: "in the spring a new branch pierced his breast and flowered in a green boutonniere perennial beneath his yellow grin"(p.238). But "little sister" is simply sleeping. No violence, no brutality taints the narrative appropriation of her as its little sister. Bell suggests that in "a world as bereft of God, or at least of grace," there is no place for Rinthy except in
words. And yet, even this aesthetic apotheosis, or perhaps more precisely, appropriation, is an act of grace within the context of the novel. The child and the tinker are coldly objectified in their deaths, and the novel ends with Culla wandering aimlessly into a "landscape of the damned" (p.234). Although Rinty's quest for the child has been her life, the sacrifice of this child of incest is necessitated by the rigorous fatality which governs her world. The narrative's enfolding of her is thereby a saving grace. She is spared the violence of narrated death, on one hand, the sort of living damnation Culla suffers, on the other.

In the final chapter of the novel, "in later years" (p.239), he is given an opportunity to redeem himself. He meets a blind man who asks him if there is anything he needs; the blind man will pray for it if Culla needs anything. The incredulous Culla asks the man, "Why don't ye pray back your eyes?...Still I believe you'd like to see your way" (pp.240-41). Culla passes on down the road which ends in a swamp, "a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned" (p.242). Culla returns the way he came and passes the blind heading in the direction of the swamp: "Holme watched him out of sight. He wondered where the blind man was going and did he know how the road ended. Someone should tell a blind man before setting him out that
way" (p. 242). The novel ends with Culla pronouncing this moral imperative ("should"), but once again he fails to do what he clearly recognizes as the right thing. Walter Sullivan blithely misunderstands the import of this final scene, finding the theme of this novel is "we go blindly through the world and therefore the gods have been unjust to us." ¹³ McCarthy is not blaming "the gods" for man's fate. The final scene makes explicit that conscious moral failure leads Culla into the miasma, that Culla's road justly leads him to an infernal wasteland because he is too weak to implement the values he recognizes as good. His fate is like that of the "wretched souls" of the Neutrals in Dante's Inferno: "They have no hope of death, and so abject is their blind life that they are envious of every other lot....Pity and justice despise them." ¹⁴

Even if Rinthy's fate is a sort of marginal grace, the prevailing conditions in the novel are the indigenous poverty and defeat. These socioeconomic conditions become symbolic of spiritual impoverishment. Rinthy is overwhelmed by the fatality in the world, and Culla is "whipped" (p. 136) by his guilt and his abdication of moral responsibility. McCarthy describes the meager diets in detail, including Culla and Rinthy's last meal together: "the last stale pieces of cornbread, a fine mold like powdered jade beginning on them" (p. 27). Both of them end up "shoeless and
tattered" (p. 186); McCarthy makes the symbolism explicit when he describes Culla at the end of the novel, "soundless in his naked feet, shambling, gracelorn" (p. 241).

The ontological uncertainty in the text makes it impossible to blame God or the gods for man's fate, as Walter Sullivan insists McCarthy is doing; in McCarthy's novels, we can never be sure that there is even a god to blame. The actions of the novel stem from man's cruelty to man. Culla's real sin is more than just the commission of incest, or abandoning the child to die and Rinthy to fare the best she can; his real sin is in attempting to cut himself off from the human community. He realizes that kin are "trouble when you got em and trouble when you ain't" (p. 127), and he opts to be alone, anyway. Like one of the Neutrals in the Inferno, Culla has been "only for himself,"¹⁵ which results appropriately in his aimless wandering. Conversely, Rinthy is destroyed by her unfulfilled need for love; her only available objects of love are the brother that shuns her and the child of incest which, as an aberration, represents the wrong kind of love and must die. The narrative tenderness to Rinthy is in part a response to this need, but Rinthy nonetheless suffers from the "unkindness" of the people (in both the sense of unnatural and uncompassionate). The couple who have lost all their children to a cholera plague hurl both bitter recriminations and freshly molded butter bricks at each other rather than
attempting to console one another, demonstrating the woman's claim that the world is "sorry ways and sorry people and heavensent grief to make you pine for your death" (p. 105). They have so little mercy for each other, they cannot (and do not) expect mercy from God.

Modern sensibilities may be offended by the disproportion of the suffering to the crime; the atrocities committed in the novel may indeed seem extreme forms of punishment for one act of incest. But then, Miss Rosa Coldfield was convinced that the ignoble defeat of the entire South was required to root out the evil of one Thomas Sutpen. The textual integrity of an allegory with such a "hard" moral perhaps requires this sort of rigor. The novel is, as Vereen Bell noted with chagrin, devoid of any wishful thinking. The only deus ex machina McCarthy employs is the narrative appropriation of Rinhry, which is itself ambiguous and certainly only mildly analgesic. Yet, this narrative "kindness" to Rinhry manages to prevent foreclosure on the possibility of grace in the novel, opening the way for the more transcendent vision of Suttrey.
NOTES

1Bell does not explore the moral implications of the novel, but finds Outer Dark "an obscure, existential void" that has "an almost medieval aura of allegory to the events" in which, however, "meaning is thwarted," 33.

Walter Sullivan finds the novel lacking in coherent "unity," that the events of the novel "remain separate features of the surrealist landscape." Like Bell, he misses the heavy moral implications; he views McCarthy's theme as a Gloucester-like railing against the gods. "The Novel in Gnostic Twilight," Sewanee Review 78 (Autumn 1970) 661-62.

2Bell, 34.

3Bell, 33.

4Page numbers for the outchapters will be enclosed by brackets to indicate interpolation.


7Robert Coles, "The Empty Road," New Yorker 45 (22 March 1969) 139.


9Bell, 46.

10Bell, 49.

11Bell, 50.

12Bell, 51.


15Dante, *Inferno* III.39, 49.
Chapter 2:
Dementia Praecox: Suttree's Dark Night of the Soul

In Outer Dark Culla Holme fails to forge a meaningful morality for himself. The absence of the father leaves a void in which only a rudimentary "eye-for-an-eye" justice operates. The text suggests that even this operation stems from a "sick" conscience. No positive moral processes survive in this void, however, as Culla, failing even in the end to take positive moral action by aiding the blind man, ends on a road that leads to a "landscape of the damned," a terrestrial cognate of Dante's Inferno, and Rinthy, who is moral, ends defeated and insane, too fragile to stand the sheer weight of the oppressive evil. McCarthy's third novel, Child of God, marks little progress in the status of man's redemption; although the title may imply that Lester Ballard, the necrophiliac protagonist, is "somehow mysteriously forgiven," as Vereen Bell contends,¹ the novel ends with a description of Lester's unclaimed corpse being dissected in an anatomy class at the university. McCarthy's 1979 novel Suttree, however, marks a definite achievement of grace for McCarthy's pilgrim, but one made only after an arduous journey through the terrain of the human soul.

In his review of the novel, Walter Sullivan takes McCarthy to task, deploring "what seems to me to be a limited
use of an enormous talent. In his almost exclusive concern with the grotesque McCarthy offers a distorted view of creation, fragmented and debauched though that creation may now be.\textsuperscript{2} In light of Sullivan's charges against McCarthy, I would here remind Sullivan of Flannery O'Connor's observations on what constitutes identity: "It is not made from the mean average or the typical but often from the hidden and most extreme."\textsuperscript{3} At any rate, Dr. Sullivan apparently misunderstands McCarthy's project in Suttree, for it does not constitute a tearing down but rather a building of human value even in the midst of undeniable degradation. I am reminded here of what William Piper calls the Empirical method--finding the weakest case, the one where the theory is least likely to hold. If you can prove that case, your theory is sound.\textsuperscript{4} The inhabitants of Suttree's world are definitely the least likely candidates to prove the existence of Grace--whether God's Grace or a humanly instituted one. But, while the world is no less degenerate than in McCarthy's earlier works, grace is achieved in Suttree. The positive nature of humanity prevails in a dénouement which is not merely an inferior imitation\textsuperscript{5} but is transcendence.

Suttree, McCarthy's most introspective character, spends half his time in a painful self-reflection which verges on petulant self-indulgence. A non-practicing Catholic of the
Stephen Daedalus school, Suttree's formal education (which sets him apart from his cohorts) provides grist for the mill of spiritual reflection. He turns his back on all the propriety of his middle class upbringing, becomes a fisherman, and passes time by getting drunk or arrested with his lower class friends. The violent atmosphere of the Knoxville *demimonde* provides the appropriate elements of dementia, which the already troubled Suttree wallows in rather conspicuously.

*Suttree* opens with a prologue voiced by an omniscient narrator who offers the reader the following description of Knoxville, Tennessee, circa 1951:

*Old tins and jars and ruined household artifacts that rear from the fecal mire of the flats like landmarks in the trackless vales of dementia praecox. A world beyond all fantasy, malevolent, tactile and dissociate...*(p.4)*

Here McCarthy playfully inverts the vision of Agee's *Knoxville: Summer, 1915*, which his posthumous editors used as a prologue in *A Death in the Family*. Agee's lyrical description of Rufus's benign if bewildered view of the world with crickets chirping in the grass, fathers watering lawns, and children playing is updated by a more jaded view of a "malevolent" world of filth, the "trackless vale of dementia praecox." McCarthy's rage for the *mot juste* provides not only an apt description of a sort of paradoxically fecund wasteland, a junk yard of a city, but the very metaphor by
which to understand and represent "what's wrong with" Suttree and everyone else who inhabits his world.

The "sickness" which plagues Culla Holme in Outer Dark is manifested in Suttree as dementia praecox. "Dementia praecox" is a latin term for schizophrenia; but its literal translation is "premature madness." The clinical version of schizophrenia includes a wide range of mental disorders, but the popular version of schizophrenia, the condition the word connotes for most people, is the split or schism within the self. Suttree suffers from a divided self, and under the pressure of the atmosphere permeated with insanity, he is threatened with a breakdown into premature madness as well. This threat is dramatized early in the novel when we learn that Suttree is a twin, that his twin brother was "stillborn," and that they were both "premature." (p.18). According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, certain "pre-writing" cultures disparaged twinship as dichotomous split of the self into good and evil. These tribes sometimes killed twins at birth to eradicate the possibility of the proliferation of evil. Suttree's situation is complicated by the death of only one half the pair, leaving him anxious over his incompleteness and the possibility of evil within himself.

Suttree's obsession with both the existence and the death of his twin is the major source of brooding. The fact that he was conceived at the same moment with another who shared an
intimate space with him but who never quite made it into the world is the source of both dread and guilt. "His subtle obsession with uniqueness troubled all his dreams. He saw his brother in swaddling, hands outheld, a scent of myrrh and lilies" (p.113). He projects his dead twin upon the space of his internal conflicts so that his "dementia praecox" creates a murky sort of separate, second identity. It is as though the dead twin remains alive within part of Suttree, that the "child buried within him" (p.119) is in fact the perpetual innocence of that soul in limbo. Suttree gives his twin at least metaphorical reality by playing on the mirror images of himself. Three times in the novel he sees himself "twinned" in the eyes or eye glasses of others. He is twinned in Byrd Slusser's "cool brown eyes" just prior to a fight between the two men, when predictably "he didnt like what he saw" (p.51, sic). Later in the novel, Suttree sees himself twinned in the waterbearer's eyes, "blue eyes with no bottom like the sea" (p.470). These two twinnings take on a sinister and a restorative aspect, respectively, but when Buddy sees his image "twinned and blown in the smoked glass of blindman's spectacle," the scene is more ambivalent. For "twinned and blown" suggests that Suttree suffers the fate of his dead brother within the confines of the man's lenses. His double assertion "I am, I am" upon seeing himself so twinned affirms his own existence against the pressure of the death-tainted
"blown," although the very repetition also gives life to the other (p.80).

The idea of the mirror image giving shape to his other self plays throughout the novel. "He marches darkly toward his darkly marching shape in the glass of the depot door. His fetch comeup from life's other side like an autoscopic hallucination, Suttree and Antisuttree, hand reaching to the hand" (p.28). Later in the novel, Suttree has a whole conversation, a sort of antiphonal confessional, with this Antisuttree whom he spies in the blackened glass of a burnt-out bulb. "Suttree's cameo visage in the black glass watched him across his lamplit shoulder. He leaned and blew away the flame, his double, the image overhead" (p.414). Always, though, when his twin is confined within the surface of a reflection, the menace is controlled and Suttree does not fear.

The physical presence of his twin is never made real to him, but he remains alive (with terror) to this possibility. During his bout of typhoid, he feels strangely dissociated from his body and wonders "who is this otherbody?" (p.449, sic). Suttree's feeling of dissociation from his physical experience often takes on the air of a scene of usurpation. When he and Joyce move into the Laurel Avenue apartment, for example, he feels himself "detached, a displaced soul musing on the hiatus between himself and the Suttree moving through
these strange quarters" (p. 402). When the suspicion of the
twin's autonomous physical existence becomes overwhelming,
Suttree is either already immersed in an atmosphere of
dementia or he is in danger of "cracking up" himself. He
attempts to leave the scene of a drunken mêlée in which his
skull has been fractured and realizes that the man he has just
passed is dead. "Someone going with him saw him see. That's
fucking awful, he said. Suttree was bleeding from the ears
and couldn't hear well but he thought so too" (p. 187). The
wording of this scene is purposefully ambiguous. Who is the
"someone going with" Sut? Is the someone the "he" who makes
the profound statement on death, or does "he" refer to Sut
himself, who had the pronoun form in the previous sentence.
And if Suttree is the one who makes the statement, why is it
necessary to note that he thought so too? And if "someone"
else makes the statement, how can Sut agree since he cannot
hear it in the first place? The answer to all these questions
is simply that that someone is the Antisuttree, who exists
internally, the perceived existence of whom is a side effect
of a combination of Sut's fractured skull (the fractured skull
is metaphoric for the fragmented self), the atmosphere of
violence, and the recognition of a dead man who brings to mind
the dead twin within Suttree's imagination. This antisuttree
also attends the funeral of Suttree's son, where the dead
child brings him to mind: "Suttree went to his knees in the
grass, his hands cupped over his ears. Someone touched his shoulder. When he looked up there was no one there" (p.153).

Suttree's suspicion of the physical reality of the other Suttree becomes a parody of Dante's *Inferno*. When Suttree wanders the Smoky Mountains aimlessly after a fishing trip, he worries that he will come to his other self in a dark wood where the straight way is lost:

> In these silent sunless galleries he'd come to feel that another went before him and each glade he entered seemed just quit by a figure who'd been sitting there and risen and gone on. Some doublegoer, some othersuttree eluded him in these woods and he feared that should that figure fail to rise and steal away and were he therefore to come to himself in this obscure wood he's be neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling with his ghosty clone from sun to sun across a hostile hemisphere forever (p.287).

In Suttree's *selva oscura*, coming to oneself does not mean spiritual salvation as it does in Dante's. It means, rather, entering the inferno never to return to the world of the living, to be deprived of a "whole" mind and to "dodder drooling" forever through the vales of dementia praecox. This may seem an exaggerated fear on Suttree's part, but later, the appearance of a real set of twins--Fernon and Vernon, who look alike, talk alike, and know each other's thoughts--precipitates disaster. Hours after they leave the encampment where Buddy is staying with Reese and his family, a rock overhang falls on the sleeping Wanda, Buddy's lover and
temporary means of salvation. The episode suggests that he cannot simply retreat from his schizophrenia, that his dead twin, as it were, will seek him out.

Suttree does not come face to face with his doublegoer during his sojourn through the Smokies; his sanity is maintained even against his "broken mind" (p. 291). Yet, the very element in which Suttree has immersed himself guarantees that he will be unable to hide from his own particular demons, since he lives in a world of the demented, a world replete with "wave on wave of the violent and the insane" (p. 4). A brief catalogue of Suttree's own intimates reveals a plethora of mental maladies. There is Gene Harrogate, "a convicted pervert of botanical bent" (p. 54). Daddy Watson lives for a while in an abandonned train and still wears a huge railroad timepiece. There is the ragman, a homeless ventriloquist who lives beneath a bridge. Mother She, a witch who is rumored to cast voodoo spells for money, shadows Sut. There is the "goodnaturedly" violent Billy Ray Callahan (p. 51). And there is Ab Jones, a black man who takes on the Knoxville Police Department every day of his life until they kill him--a noble kind of madness, but madness nonetheless, especially for a Southern black man in 1952. Suttree would contend that "we're all right," but his friends testify to the contrary. The ragman puts it succinctly: "We're all fucked" (p. 366).

The ambient madness of Suttree's world demonstrates its
potential power in its effects on Gene Harrogate. A sane adult mind, it could be said, enjoys a healthy relationship to reality which includes the ability to differentiate self from world. Sanity also involves to an extent an "orderly" mind. Gene's sanity is always suspect, at best, but after he starts exploring the city's system of subterranean passageways--apparently forgotten by most of the city's populous--he shows signs of further mental deterioration. During his exploration (and attempted exploitation) of these tunnels, Harrogate notices a lack of an ordering based on those above ground. He is confused and begins to "suspect some dimensional displacement" from the world above (p.262). But Gene's initial confusion in the underground is nothing compared to his subsequent inability while trapped below to differentiate between himself and the world. His last candle (i.e. source of illumination) extinguishes and "dark closed over him so absolute that he became without boundary to himself, as large as all the universe and small as anything that was"(pp.274-5). He hallucinates the presence of others and "talks" to them. This episode is both touching and funny, for Gene's grandiose schemes have once again wrought havoc; the day after Gene ignites the dynamite in the tunnel the newspaper headline reads "Earthquake?" (p.270). But this episode is frightening, too, for the vulnerable Gene experiences the same disintegration process, even in his blissfully ignorant state,
that the more reflective Suttree experiences when hunger and isolation beset him in the Smokies. Suttree too hallucinates, talks with nonexistent people and "discourse[s] with the birches," and, like Gene, he loses finite identity: "He scarce could tell where his being ended or the world began nor did he care" (p.286).

The novel suggests that the difference between the "certified" and the uncertified insane is very little, indeed. The difference is one of degree rather than kind, for the confusions experienced by both Gene and Sut are miniatures of those suffered by those in the asylum where Suttree visits his Great Aunt Alice. Buddy recognizes them as "survivors in a realm that all must reckon with soon or late" (p.431). Being "certified" these people are "invested with a strange authority, like folk who'd had to do with death some way and had come back" (p.431). Vereen Bell notes that in Suttree, "the suspension or disintegration of identity" that both Gene and Sut experience "is like death in being a different effect of the same process; both real death and this radical decentering of the ego have a common source in the world's disinterested authority over individual being."7 In either the face of death or madness, the individual must indeed feel powerless, insignificant. Suttree ultimately "recants" the vanity of thinking he could "take [his] own part against the slander of oblivion and against the monstrous facelessness of
it" (p.414). It is important to note that the threat of madness comes to Suttree in the guise of his dead twin, and that conversely, Suttree's fear of death is awakened after his lapse into temporary insanity during his stay in the mountains. Upon his return (to Knoxville and to himself), he is "seized" with "a sudden understanding of the mathematical certainty of death"(p. 295). Suttree cannot bear to be faced with the "so many" insane people at the asylum, because they are momenti mori, palpable and undeniable. But he fears them also because they represent something with which he is threatened, something he fears will surface "soon or late": the break down of individual identity into oblivion.

Insanity itself is associated in Suttree with original sin, a condition of the absence of grace. The "certified" insane of the novel, like Lady MacBeth, have seen what they should not. To an extent, the dementia praecox in the novel takes on a Manichean aspect: Suttree and antisuttree become the manifestations of a split between good and evil. Both McCarthy and his protagonist are Catholics and would be familiar with the Augustinian reworking of Manichaeism: there was no "force" of evil, per se; evil is defined as a privation of the force of goodness, that is, of God. (And one can see this doctrine inscribed in Dante's Divine Comedy,--the many allusions to it in Suttree will testify McCarthy has read it--where Satan is bound by ice in the farthest reaches of the
Inferno, farthest from God's love.) But the powers of
darkness are imaged so vividly that in Suttree the world is as
dualistic as it is in the Manichean system. Inspite of
Catholic doctrine, the novel posits the co-existence of evil
with good, but as an independent force.

From the prologue it is evident that evil is a thing
which can invade, usurp:

The murengers have walled the pale, the gates are shut,
but lo the thing's inside and can you guess his shape?
Where he's kept or the counter of his face?...Dear friend
he is not to be dwelt upon for it is by just such wise
that he's invited in (pp.4-5).

The invasion of evil is often in the form of death, so that
the narrator of the prologue poses as possibilities for the
thing's "shape" familiar folk incarnations of death: a
weaver, a hunter with hounds, and a driver of a "deadcart"
drawn by "bone horses"(p.5). Yet these are projections of
something which is "invited in," something which inhabits the
self. Suttree's dead twin, for example, is a more
personalized version of the death's heads mentioned in the
prologue. His continual brooding has indeed ensconced the
dead twin within himself. Because it inhabits rather than
merely dispossesses us, evil is never quite as simple as a
stereotypical personification. Ab Jones's wife Doll warns Sut
"Don't let em get on you...They never will get off"(p.444).
She is literally referring to the police, who have "got on" Ab
and have hounded him to death. But her words could just as easily refer to any of a number of "demons" who await Suttree in the Prologue, for the police in this novel are not the only servants--voluntary or involuntary--of evil. They represent only one manifestation of evil in its lesser forms. In jail, Suttree dreams of a flayed man, "nailed to a barn door...tacked open like a cooling beef"(p.86). Sut wakes screaming with the recognition that the flayed man's "surgeons move about the world even as you and I"(p.86): evil does not always appear in the easily recognizable form of folk incarnations.

More frightening than the possibility of the evil being "out there" is the existence within the self of potential evil. Elements from McCarthy's earlier novels carry over here, especially from Outer Dark, where the grim triune seemed to be emanating from Culla's guilt-ridden nightmares. Although it never manifests itself in such strident forms as Culla's does, Suttree's fear of the possibility of evil within himself is real and, in the context of the novel, not exaggerated. There is something about him which affects others, too. For example, Suttree agrees to accompany Ab to Mother She's, the witch, who refuses to put a death curse on Tarzan Quinn, Ab's mortal enemy in the Knoxville police department. She does agree, however, to read Ab's fortune, but her voodoo implements will not cooperate:
It don't say. It ain't you nor Quinn neither. It's him. Suttree felt the skin on his scalp pucker (p. 281).

Later, after his affair with Joyce ends disasterously and he finds the ragman dead in his "wretchedness," Suttree returns alone to Mother She's where she gives him a hallucinogenic potion which "reveals" the future. This hallucination episode accelerates the process of "sickness" which, in turn, precipitates his literal illness and near death experience in the final pages of the novel. In fact, Suttree's dabbling in the occult, in the face of his out-right rejection of Catholicism as "superstition," reveals a desperate attempt to exorcise the "monsters" he fears are within him (p. 366).

Moreover, the monsters which Suttree fears within himself are only internalizations of the vicious and the barbarous who actually compose his circle of friends. When Vereen Bell suggests that "there is hardly any sense conveyed of a specifically human evil," he ignores the fact that although there is no simple scapegoat or repository for evil in the novel, all the evil manifests itself in human behavior. This behavior runs the gamut from simple depravity to outright barbarity. Leonard, the male prostitute, hides his father's death from the welfare authorities so that he and his mother can draw the full rate. He later sinks the body, which has been decomposing for months in the back of his family's house, to the bottom of the Tennessee River. Suttree sees some
hooligans as "the iniquitous and unshriven howling curses at the gates and calling aloud for redress of their right damnation" (p. 246). Even Gene Harrogate, whose youthful enthusiasm and ingenuity engages our compassion, is "Sly, ratfaced, a convicted pervert of the botanical bent. Who would do worse in the world again. Bet on it" (p. 54). Suttree himself engages in all sorts of reprehensible behavior; memories of his "abandoned" wife sends him to his knees with grief and shame (p. 153). The most telling indictment of Suttree comes in his near-death delirium, when he is brought before a dream tribunal:

Mr. Suttree it is our understanding that at curfew rightly decreed by law and in that hour wherein night draws to its proper close and the new day commences and contrary to conduct befitting a person of your station you betook yourself to various low places within the shire of McAnally and there did squander several ensuing years in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, paltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpotts, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, topers, tossspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees.

I was drunk, cried Suttree. Seized in a vision of the archetypal patriarch himself unlocking with enormous keys the gates of Hades (p. 457).

While Sut's plea makes this scene humourous, the charges themselves are all too true. McCarthy may just be showing off his formidable vocabulary again, but McAnally Flats supplies every one of these transgressors. Moreover, the crime he is accused of here seems so serious to Suttree in his delirium
that he imagines God Himself escorting him to hell.

Richard Gray notes that in McCarthy's novels the emphasis on what the characters have already done instead of their "future possibilities" creates a sense of "profound evil", the sense that people are "deeply flawed." Suttree is certainly acutely aware of his own mistakes and the tenuous balance between good and evil within his own psyche. At times he fears being overwhelmed by the evil, and this feeling is reinforced by the rapacity with which violence or "certifiable" insanity consumes his friends. That McCarthy's characters often call Suttree "Sut" for short is a direct allusion to one of East Tennessee's literary forefathers, Sut Lovingood, the hero of George Washington Harris's frontier tales. Like his predecessor, McCarthy's Sut lives in a world where unrestrained violence and grotesque behavior are the norm. McCarthy is only being slightly ironic when he says, "Callahan would get slightly drunk and look about goodnaturedly to see was there thing or body worth destroying" (p.51). Everything is suggestive of this violence, even the music they listen to, "with its upbeat country tempo," is conducive to the destruction like "an overture of the gatherings of violence just beneath the surface" (p.185). Even the relatively pensive Suttree tends to take it all for granted, reading the news of "wildness and violence across the
cup's rim. As it was then, is now and ever shall" (p.381).

Sutttree and his rowdy friends constantly indulge in pantomimes of death through their violent behavior, but they submerge the threatful within the framework of comedy and play. In her study of Shakespearean comedies, Ruth Nevo noted that Shakespeare was attempting to transform and subdue the unpleasantness of more serious matter in the ameliorative space of comedy, "the frontier between harm and remedy." The characters in this novel attempt this same process with their lives; what frightens them (or what they ought to be frightened of) is incorporated into their games and converted to the stuff of jokes. Early in the novel some of Sut's friends go on a two day drunk, drinking a homemade concoction which J-Bone claims is Early Times. "Early tombs is more like it" insists an unidentified voice (p.24). Billy Ray Callahan, especially, plays violence like a joke. In the barroom brawl where Suttree's skull gets fractured, he sees Callahan "go by, one eye blue shiny smiling, his teeth in a grout of blood. His busy freckled fists ferrying folks to sleep" (p.186). The rather overdone alliteration of "freckled fists ferrying folks" obscures the reality of Callahan's brutal, possibly murderous behavior by playing up his clownishness; "ferrying folks to sleep," with its Charonic implications, may be simply euphemistic for sending people to Hell, that is, killing them.

Both stoical complacency and comic subversion give way
for Suttree when the deaths of his friends start bringing home the intractibility of human frailty. In the scene of a barroom brawl discussed above, Suttree's recognition that the man he has just passed is dead comes to him as "a faint surge of that fairyland feeling from childhood wonders" (p.187). The unalterable reality of death is still disguised by a "fairyland feeling" of unreality. He does not yet recognize death how "Fucking awful" death is. It's quite another story, however, when the deadmen Sut sees are close to him. During his affair with Joyce, he reads the paper over his morning coffee and discovers the death of his friend James Henry. The terseness of the language makes the fact solid, stark, unequivocal: "There was Hoghead's picture. He was dead. Hoghead was dead in the paper...He had been shot through the head with a .32 caliber pistol and he was twenty-one years old forever" (p.403). Fact is suddenly unmediated by impressionistic fantasy language. Similarly, when Billy Ray is shot, the narrator reports not impression but a sort of photorealistic description: "He was bleeding from the ears and from the nose and from the hole in his face...His whole face was blue and he closed his eyes so that you could not see death come up in them like a face at a window" (p.376).

Death becomes the predominant expression of the dementia praecox theme. In his review of the novel, Anatole Broyard notes, "there are a lot of dead people in Suttree."
himself wrestles with death three times in the novel—when his skull is fractured, when he nearly starves in the mountains, and when he contracts typhoid fever. "The murengers have walled the pale, the gates are shut, but lo the thing's inside" (p. 4) For Suttree, death, like the antisuttree, is always already inside, even at birth. Ironically, in his mother's womb, another sort of "walled pale," death co-habits with life since he and his stillborn twin shared the confines for a brief span. Suttree intuIts the implications of this when he thinks about his own dead son, for "Death is what the living carry with them" (p. 153). Being mortal, each carries within the seeds of his own destruction.

After Suttree's first round with death, he suddenly understands "the mathematical certainty of death" (p. 295), realizing that it will eventually happen to him. The problematization of identity, which death like insanity engenders, frightens him because he does not embrace any sort of Dantesque version of an afterlife. In his near-death experience, doors close continuously, he sees "gray images that clicked apart in jagged puzzle pieces," and he when thinks "I am going out of the world" it issues forth only as "a long silent scream" (p. 452). Suttree's inability to speak—his silencing—is one aspect of the anonymity death threatens while the being "clicked apart," Suttree's own version of what Leo Bersani calls "the violent deconstruction
of self,"13 is another. His "subtle obsession with uniqueness" (p.113) extends to his reluctance to relinquish identity up to nothingness. Death like insanity is a "breaking down"—a final response to the pressure of human misery.

Death in the novel becomes a reversal of birth, a de-individuation as it were. The first corpse of the novel, a man who has jumped off a bridge down stream from Suttree's houseboat, illustrates this process. Suttree watches as the rescue crew raises the body: "He was very stiff and he looked like a window-dummy save for his face. The face seemed soft and bloated and wore a grappling hook in the side of it and a crazed grin" (p.9). The language of Suttree's first experience with death is indicative of the disintegration of human identity. To Sut, the corpse is not like a human at all, but a mannequin. The distorted and mutilated face (gashed by the grappling hook used to raise him), however, shows the signs of psychic deterioration and dementia; the "crazed grin" and the bloated features are similar to the signs of dementia his Aunt Alice shows at the asylum. When Suttree files past the body with the rest of the onlookers, he "noticed with a feeling he could not name that the dead man's watch was still running" (p.10). The dead man, in spite of his signs of his personality (yellow socks, seersucker suit, a watch worn on the inside of his wrist), is now another victim of dementia
praecox in its terminal form. Suttree intuits but cannot (or will not) articulate the meaning of the suicide, which collapses the stages of the disintegration of being, madness and death, into one single moment. The ticking watch still keeps time, in spite of its wearer's premature termination.

Because violence and death and play seem inextricably bound in the alcohol-fogged culture of McAnally Flats, it is appropriate that during Sut's near death delirium, he envisions himself and his dead friends returning to Mr. Hatmaker's bar, one of their favorite earthly haunts. The scene is a parody of an actual transaction at Hatmaker's (pp.72-3) which happened almost four hundred pages earlier:

Hey Hatmaker. Tell Hoghead and Donald and Byrd and Bobby and Hugh and Conrad and all em that they aint barred.

They're dead.

Whoops of laughter among the watchers at the door. Well you wouldn't bar a dead man, would ye? The tavernkeeper folded his towel and wiped the long mahogany bar. He said he would not (p.456).

In Suttree's fantasy of death, his friends retain their identities and their jovial imperviousness to their own degradation. While there is something remotely comforting about the familiarity of the scene, it does point out the inequities of Suttree's lifestyle: death is not all that different from the life he has been living. Thus, the dream
is interrupted with an admonition from the authoritative voice of a "small nun with a bitten face" addressing Suttree:
"Cornelius you come away from here this minute" (p.457).

There are moments in the novel where his overwhelming sense of doom makes Sut cruelly pessimistic, especially when he deals with Gene Harrogate, in whom Sut himself recognizes "something vulnerable" (p.54). He tells the "countrymouse", who is planning one of his many enthusiastic, forward-looking big schemes "You will always look wrong," to which Gene protests strickenly (p.60). Later in the novel, however, Gene is defeated by experience—and perhaps condemned to some extent by Sut's assessment of him—"Just everthing I touch turns to shit" (p.436, sic). The novel is filled with many moments which seem to confirm Gene's pessimistic suspicion that everything is doomed to go awry. The most tragic moment for Suttree is the death of Wanda, his young lover. Their affair provides Suttree a brief respite from his accustomed brooding as he "was struck by the fidelity of this earth he inhabited and he bore it sudden love" (p.354). But Wanda is not to be his means of salvation, it will not come that easily to the inhabitant of the terra damnata. In an earlier scene in the novel, he stares at the arm of a tattooed whore and notices "a wreath with the name Wanda and the words Rest In Peace 1942" (p.75), foretelling his Wanda's doom. Later in the novel, a rock ledge collapses and kills Wanda. The country to
which he "bore a sudden love" a few pages earlier he now passes through without marking. Unlike Dante the Pilgrim, "he was a man with no plans for going back the way he'd come nor telling a soul at all what he had seen" (p.363). Bereft of the modicum of faith he had experienced, he is now sickened by the mother's cries to God, which he recognizes as expectant of an answer from Him. To Suttree, the easy religious faith of Reese and his family, even amidst the mini-Apocalypse, is not only incomprehensible, it is somehow a brutality, a source of more pain. Thus, when he receives Extreme Uction during his bout with typhoid, he "layed aneled. Like a rapevictim" (p.460).

Suttree is repulsed by religion as salvation because it is not the means by which he can be saved himself. When he attends a series of baptisms at the river, an old man asks him if he is "saved." Suttree replies simply "no," and the narrator tells us "But Suttree knew the river well already" (pp.122-25). He cannot receive any sort of external assistance to find grace until he accepts responsibility for himself. (In Outer Dark, Culla Holme is faced with the same situation, but never takes the necessary responsibility.) Suttree's own particular brand of rooted sorrow is dementia praecox, and "Therein the patient must minister to himself" (MacBeth V.iii.46).

When Suttree visits his aunt in the sanitarium, she
recognizes him as "Grace's son" and he realizes with irony that he is therefore "son of Grace" (p.432). By the end of the novel he will achieve this status by calling upon the goodness which, like the evil, is inherent within him. The sheriff who "escorts" Suttree out of town after his son's funeral recognizes Suttree's tendency to wallow in his abasement and gives him a brief sermon on the necessity of taking one's own part in redemption:

That's where you're wrong my friend. Everything's important. A man lives his life, he has to make that important. Whether he's a small town sheriff or the president. Or a busted out bum. You might even understand that some day. I dont say you will. You might (p.157).

The sheriff's fatherly advice takes several hundred pages to sink in, but ultimately Suttree realizes its wisdom, that he must look within himself for meaning and goodness.

In Suttree, McCarthy lays the ground work for self-redemption by supplying the characters with the necessary materials. One of these resources is basic human "kindness." In Outer Dark there was barely a civil basis for human community; in Suttree there is both a civil and psychological community. At one point in the novel, Suttree sarcastically compares his late night excursions with J-Bone to "serving early mass," he and his friends "the unwilling churched... filled with tales of sin and unrepentant deaths and visions of
hell and stories of levitation and possession and dogmas of Semitic damnation for the tacking up of the paraclete" (p. 254). Sutt...Bell notes, the occasions of hard-drinking in this novel become like "demystified sacraments," \(^{14}\) a form of communion which creates community. Sutt...ultimately realizes that "even the damned in hell have the community of their suffering and ... likewise for the living" (p. 464). So it is that Sutt...already has the resources surrounding him with which to achieve some sort of transcendence.

Time and time again in the novel, people—even the most grotesque ones—display the kindness which betokens community. Sutt...himself is the best example of this. Although he has turned his back on his own family, he has undertaken the care of others. He brings fish to the ragman, Ab and others. He makes sure that Gene and the ragman have warm places to go in the winter, and when Gene is missing Sutt...spends two days looking for him in the underground caverns. He buys Blind Richard drinks and he gives blind Walter money. People need Sutt...; Gene and Leonard both enlist his aid in their crazy schemes. By the same token, Sutt...needs people—the goatman recognizes Sut's "loneliness" and calls it such (p. 206). Sutt...tries to be "hard and hard" (p. 29), but in fact he, too, is defined only by his human interaction. Thus he will visit his Aunt Martha, who feeds him such good mother fare as
chocolate cake, milk, and ice tea. He can also fall in love with Wanda because of this weakness and even regret his abandonment of his wife and young son. Finally, it is telling that Suttree will ultimately be rescued from death by his friend J-Bone whose love and concern for Suttree is real. It is J-Bone who seeks the missing Suttree and takes him to the hospital; it is also J-Bone who, concerned for Sut's soul, sends a priest for Last Rites (p. 463):

Who put the priest on me?  
They said you was dyin'. I came up last week and you didn't know nothin'. I had a little drink hid away too.  
Suttree patted J-Bone's knee, his eyes shut. Old J-Bone, he said.

Even Gene Harrogate, whose conduct in the melon patch is so detesteful to critics like Sullivan, can find his measure of grace is this world. The disgusted farmer who is about to shoot Gene after he has returned to "violate" more melons (having been caught once before), thinks "Now beg God's mercy, lecher. Unnatural." But when he sees Gene lying in pain screaming "Oh God, Oh God," the man is moved to compassion. "The blood oozing from that tender puckered skin in the gray moonlight undid him...He knelt, flinging the gun away from him...Hush now, he said. Goddamn. Hush" (p. 35) The voice of moral outrage is transformed at the sight of suffering to a voice of compassion and nurturing concern. Ironically, Gene
does "beg God's mercy" as the farmer's indignation demanded. And he receives mercy, too, perhaps not directly from God, but from the farmer who attempts to comfort him and who later, as we are told, brings Gene ice cream in the hospital(p.42). And though Gene is a lecher of "botanical bent" he is part of the human community, which he proves by abandoning his racism and displaying a healthy respect for the sanctity of both life and death. When Harvey the junkman hires Gene to strip a wrecked car without telling him that some boys were killed in the collision, Gene leaves the job without comment and without pay after finding a human eyeball beneath the seat (p.96).

Sutttree's own potential for salvation unfolds slowly throughout the novel, but his self-redemption becomes inevitable when he visits Mother She. In the last moments of his hallucinations, after he has "re-experienced" his past, he lays "floating like the first germ of life adrift on the earth's cooling seas, formless macule of plasm trapped in a vapor drop and all creation yet to come"(p.430). The image here reverberates with the notion of a reconception, one which precedes Sutttree's final rebirth and its attendant exorcism of the dead twin. Like the heroes of folk legends (including his Saxon forebearer, Beowulf) Suttree must wrestle with his nemesis--death as the extreme form of dementia praecox--three times in the novel before he can prevail over it.

During his typhoid delirium, Suttree is reborn and
delivered whole back into the world of the living. He tells his nurse at one point during his delirium that "I know all souls are one and all souls are lonely" (p. 459). Becoming aware of his place in the human community is the first step toward his restoration to humanity and to himself, for when it becomes clear he will recover, the priest asks him what he has learned from his near-death experience. "I learned that there is one Suttree and one Suttree only" (p. 461). Later, he affirms his spiritual recuperation by telling the solicitous J-Bone, "Old Suttree's all right" (p. 463).

Having survived death, Suttree can reintegrate his identity. He can now face the physical existence of his dead twin, whom he has expelled from his psyche. This confrontation is dramatized when Suttree returns to his houseboat after recuperating at Mrs. Long's house. He returns to find

the houseboat door ajar and someone sleeping in his bed. He entered in a fog of putrefaction...He kicked away the covers. A snarling clot of flies rose. Suttree stepped back. Caved cheek and yellow grin. A foul deathshead bald with rot, flyblown and eyeless (p. 465)

The dead man whom Suttree finds usurping his houseboat is the dead twin, the morose part of Suttree who would wallow in his worst nature. It is now given a physical reality, but a reality only as a corpse, something no longer threatening to Suttree's identity. Suttree abandons the boat, and after he
leaves, some boys watch an ambulance leaving with the corpse: "Shit, one said, Old Suttree aint dead" (p.469). Old Suttree is now "all right," but the antisuttree is dead.

The death of the antisuttree frees Sut from the dementia praecox of his environment. His final gesture of the book is to leave Knoxville, the "vales of dementia praecox," and his former life behind. He sets out on a road entirely unlike the one Culla Holme follows into the morass, and he comes upon a labor crew, very much like the ones he worked on at the workhouse. He sees a young boy carrying water to the workers:

A boy was going along the works with a pail and he leaned to each, ladling out water in a tin dipper. Suttree saw hands come up from below the rim of the pit in parched supplication....His dusty boots left prints across the black macadam and he came up to Suttree where he stood by the roadside and swung the bucket around and brought the dipper up all bright and dripping and offered it. Suttree could see the water beading coldly on the tin and running in tiny rivulets and drops that steamed on the road where they fell. He could see the pale gold hair that lay along the sunburned arms of the waterbearer like new wheat and he beheld himself in wells of smoking cobalt, twinned and dark and deep in child's eyes, blue eyes with no bottoms like the seas. He took the dipper and drank and gave it back (pp.470-471).

The boy's kindness, as Bell suggests, takes on "the mysterious beauty of sacraments."15 He offers Suttree water, but here water which is symbolic of the "water of life," spiritual wholeness. Suttree has been completely regenerated and thus he sees images of "new wheat" and he can behold himself "twinned" but this time only in "child's eyes," a completely
innocent reflection which poses no threat to him in his redemption.

The narrator gives us the true message of the novel in the final paragraphs. A driver stops to pick Suttree up and he turns to look back at the scene he is leaving. The waterboy has gone and in his place stands "an enormous lank hound...sniffing at the spot where Suttree had stood." That hound, the narrator tells us, is symbolic and has implications in our own life, too. The narrator abandons the past tense of Suttree's story, which is complete, and turns to warn us, in the present tense:

Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them (p.471).

The hound represents the evils which beset men in various forms, the "hunter with hounds" is one of the many incarnations of evil which has managed to invade the pale at the beginning of the novel (p.5). The moral of Suttree, which Walter Sullivan in his despairing of McCarthy's damnation seems to have missed, is offered to us in the last line: "Fly them." As he chooses to transcend the worst part of himself (McCarthy's choice of the archaic "fly" here specifically connotes transcendence), Suttree is redeemed. His triumph
over his sense of damnation is the culmination of McCarthy's own struggle through *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, and *Child of God*. The novel ends with the present tense imperative urging all of us to follow this example and transcend the darkness within us.
NOTES


5 Bell, 101.


7 Bell, 90.

8 Bell, 83.


12 Bell, 90.


14 Bell, 106.

15 Bell, 112.
Chapter 3:

*Blood Meridian:* Language and Nothingness

Speaking is a beautiful folly: with that man dances over all things. How lovely is all talking, and all the deception of sounds!—Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*

Having said that *Suttree* represents a transcendence of the nihilistic, apocalyptic tendency of McCarthy's vision, I must now turn to McCarthy's puzzling *Blood Meridian* or *The Evening Redness in the West.* The novel represents a complete reversal of the final vision of *Suttree.* Or perhaps McCarthy has just come full circle. The possibility of the transcendence which *Suttree* experiences is rescinded for mankind in *Blood Meridian;* the apocalyptic intimations of Culla's shoeless wandering and Lester Ballard's dissection are fulfilled in "the kid's" private (in all senses of the word) apocalypse.

Cormac McCarthy's language—that is, his manipulation of language—is perhaps the most commented-upon aspect of his writing. McCarthy is always striving to make "reality"—that is the reality of his vision—palpable through his language. At the same time, he attempts to mystify that reality, to retain the suggestion of the mysterious. In *Blood Meridian* he tries to create a narrative embodying the paradox of the Grim Triune in *Outer Dark,* which is "spectral, palpable as
stone" (p.231). Vereen Bell has noted the "pressure of meaning" in McCarthy's novels, and I think that Bell's phrase captures an important issue in McCarthy's writing. His attempt to define a concrete reality (that is, create a nameable Reality) can never be reconciled with his simultaneous insistence upon the mysterious, or unnameable. The novels themselves create an undeniable yet nonetheless indefinable impression on the reader. (I for one confess my inability to "master" Blood Meridian, whose ambiguity is indecipherable to me.) McCarthy's work therefore falls short of articulating "meaning" in a transcendental sense but does in all phases exert the "pressure of meaning," suggesting some awful truth.

This particular aspect of his novels, I feel, has forced McCarthy to reevaluate the vision which he expressed so eloquently in Suttree. After finally working through three novels of near Apocalypse, McCarthy wrote one of human affirmation which incorporated but finally subsumed the struggles of his previous protagonists. Suttree cures himself of his "sickness" (dementia praecox, which becomes a self-conscious version of Culla's "plague" and Lester's "peculiar-ity") by fleeing "the ravening hounds" of evil and death. Yet, that vision of affirmation was brief, was plagued by that peculiar sense of the inexpressible, the intuitive. The poetic quality of Suttree's transcendence does not bear
explanation, and only explanation could make it believable. McCarthy's most recent novel, Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West, is an overturning of that vision in favor of one that becomes brutally imagistic. Unlike Suttree, this novel is self-conscious. In spite of its often obscene fealty to realism, Blood Meridian calls attention to itself as fiction and incorporates this awareness to further problematize meaning.

In Suttree, McCarthy shifts in the final paragraph from the past tense of Suttree's experience, to a present tense (and therefore eternal) exhortation of the reader, in the same antique voice of the prologue: "I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes craved with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them" (p.471). In a movement parallel to the one in Suttree, the narrative of Blood Meridian switches from the past to the present tense for the final paragraph, with the warning: "He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die"(p.335). These lines mock the spiritual imperative of Suttree. In Blood Meridian the effective message is that there is no point in flying the ravening hounds, we live in the abyss and sooner or later we will all be destroyed anyway. All, that is, except the Judge, the bizarre Philosopher-Barbarian.

Blood Meridian is set in the American Southwest and
Mexico in the 1840's. The novel begins as the story of "the kid"—that is his only name—and later becomes complicated by the presence of Judge Holden, or "the judge" as he is called. The judge is, along with other characters in the novel, an historical personage. The band of Indian hunters to which the kid belongs is therefore not without an historical precedent. McCarthy, it seems, is tired of critics accusing him of perversity and excessiveness. He has turned to the annals of American history to substantiate what Walter Sullivan calls his "grotesque local color."² McCarthy's use of the historical facts creates a disconcerting peripeteia, however, since the American West has been so widely mythologized in popular fiction, cinema, and television to achieve a very different effect.

The kid is another one of McCarthy's drifting pilgrims, a figure so void of grace that he makes Lester Ballard, the necrophiliac in McCarthy's acclaimed Child of God, seem enviable. While indulging with his degenerate companions in blood-curdling activities (scalping, vivisection, raping, looting, extortion), the kid still has oddly human impulses which are out of place in this world of gore. He removes the arrow from Brown's leg when every one else is afraid to. He cannot bring himself to discharge the coup de grace for the wounded Shelby even when ordered to by Glanton. Shelby is one of his confederates, and although he cannot ride and will
certainly meet a worse fate at the hands of Elias and the Mexican calvary who are pursuing the judge's band, the kid cannot kill him because he is so obviously afraid to die. His most touching and devastating moment, though, happens years after the main action of the novel when the company has long since disbanded and the kid is alone. He comes upon an "eldress" among a scene where self-flagellant, penitential pilgrims have ironically been slaughtered by unspecified perpetrators. (In this novel, McCarthy makes it clear that the Apaches cannot be blamed facilely for every atrocity.) He goes to her, talks to her gently, offering to conduct her to safety: "He reached into the little cove and touched her arm. She moved slightly, he whole body, light and rigid. She weighed nothing. She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years"(p.315). The kid's gesture of wholly humane compassion is rendered meaningless, futile; his violent context turns all attempts at kindness to dust. Yet, the kid seems compelled to such acts. There is an ironic recklessness inherent in there acts which defy the norm of violence. Thus, the judge can accuse the kid of being "mutinous," having a "flawed place in the fabric of [his] heart," of refusing to "empty out his heart into the common"(pp.299, 307).

The judge effects a total reversal of morality. He lives by a literalist's interpretation of Nietzschean philosophy.
"Moral law," he says at one point, "is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak" (p.250). But Holden's Dionysiac impulses find their expressions only in the extermination of every living thing for which he has no immediate purpose. Vereen Bell contends that Judge Holden and his band represent the celebration of a radical existentialism where survival--being at all costs--is the name of the game. However, the desolation of the kid's final scenes denies this novel is a celebration of mere survival. The kid's life is as barren as the desert. There is no vividness (and McCarthy can be vivid when he wants to be) in the description of the adult kid who drifts sullenly. The kid is defeated; the human cannot survive in a moral void. The text therefore surrenders to an apocalyptic nihilism. We have all the signs of such an apocalypse: profuse bloodshed and confusion, Judge Holden as the figure of the antichrist, and subverted and undermined religious imagery throughout the novel.

The judge's role as antichrist is set up carefully in the novel by the expriest Tobin's narration of the band's origins. He is literally the antichrist by being an inversion of all that is typical of Christ. Giving "the devil his due" (p.125), Tobin explains to the kid how Judge Holden saved the lives of the original group. Tellingly, after two men desert, the band is "down to twelve and the judge thirteen" (p.127). Under
Holden's leadership, the group becomes "like the disciples of a new faith," a radical apostacy or antichristianity of which the expriest is himself metaphorical (p.130). The judge makes gun powder from scratch with bat guano (nitrogen), "brimstone" (sulphur), and urine (uric acid?), the recipe itself somehow infernal. This position of antichrist posited by Tobin's narration is underscored throughout the novel, particularly when the judge informs the kid at the end of the novel "This night thy soul may be required of thee" (p.327), an echo of the Parable of the Rich Fool, in which the pride of a man self-satisfied is rebuked (Luke 12:20). The judge here is rebuking the kid for thinking he can free himself of the judge's influence. In another scene the judge "re-[de]-baptizes" the idiot James Robert Bell, whom the well-meaning Sarah Borginnis has baptized earlier in the Colorado River. The idiot, fascinated by the swirling water, returns there in the night. The judge "miraculously" intercedes, though, seizing "up the drowning idiot, snatching it aloft by the heels like a great a great midwife and slapping it on the back to let the water out. A birth scene or a baptism or some ritual not yet inaugurated into any canon....he gathered the naked and sobbing fool into his arms and carried it up into the camp and restored it among its fellows" (p.259). The judge effectively reverses the pious efforts of Sarah to "Christianize" the animal-like idiot, whom
the judge afterwards adopts as his mascot, and manages to return his lost, albeit grotesque sheep to the fold of the damned.

To reinforce the intimations of apocalypse, McCarthy has appropriated Judeo-Christian images which he subverts for his own purposes. One of these is the image of Brown as Judas. Brown, whom Bell seems to find especially representative of existential man (as noted above), is sent to San Diego to procure supplies for the company. Predictably, the first thing he does when he gets into town is go on a drunk (as they do in all good Westerns). When he wakes up to find himself incarcerated, "the first thing he consulted was the bag of coins" and he put his eye "to the judas hole" (p. 269). Brown convinces the young soldier Petit, who is guarding him, to release him for "shares" in the band's plunder. They ride out together, but Brown betrays Petit: "in the first light Brown raised the rifle and shot the boy through the back of the head" (p. 269). In the Christian story, Judas plays an important role; by betraying Christ he facilitates Christ's Martyrdom. And Judas is later filled with remorse and hangs himself. But Brown is remorseless, a Judas to no cause and those whom he betrays are no better than he is. In so far as he serves only himself and the general principle of rapine throughout the novel, he may in fact resemble, as Bell suggests, the existential hero staking all on survival. But
Brown is a disciple to the antichrist and his betrayal of Petit is not so much proof of his will to survive at all costs as it is of Brown's total lack of human scruple, his total lack of "Law" as it were. Brown has not "transcended fear," as Bell claims, but has invalidated it. To him, nothing is sacred and in that sense he is the servant of violent nihilism.

Another prime example of McCarthy's inversion of Judeo-Christian mythos is Chapter XV of the novel. Each chapter begins with an old-fashioned string of phrases which announce the action of the chapter. Chapter XV begins with "A new contract," includes "The burning tree" and ends with "The stable." The headings suggest a vague retelling of the Bible up through the birth of Christ; the "new contract" might allude to the renewal of the covenant with Noah (Genesis), the "burning tree" suggests Moses seeing God as the Burning bush and being chosen to lead his people out of bondage and suffering (Exodus 3), and "the stable," of course, could stand in for the manger of the Nativity. All of these Biblical counterparts are occasions where God has reasserted his Presence through visible signs (the last being a literal incarnation). The chapter itself tells a very different story, though, and so undermines the expectations the heading engenders in western readers who have for centuries placed these symbols in the context of salvation. We soon discover
the new contract is simply an Indian-hunting contract with a different state. They cannot return to Chihuahua because the Governor there has been informed of their raids upon his own people, so they go to Sonora, where they receive a new lease on death, as it were (p.204). The "burning tree" in the middle of the chapter is a tree which stands alone in the middle of the desert and subsequently is struck by lightning. The kid, who has been separated from the company, is a "solitary pilgrim drawn before it," who, to keep from freezing to death on the cold desert, "knelt in the hot sand and held his numb hands out"(p.215). The only transaction here, though, is that the kid is saved from death. He becomes no prophet of salvation nor does he ever deliver his tribe from the land of their suffering; they and their progeny are left to wander in the wilderness far longer than forty years. Finally, "the stable" referred to is simply that, a place where they take refuge from the elements. The only madonna and child are the mare and her foal, who are instinctively frightened of the spectacle these men create. The representation is charge with meaning:

Then one by one they began to divest themselves of their outer clothes, the hide slickers and raw wool serapes and vests, and one by one they propagated about themselves a great crackling of sparks and each man was seen to wear a shroud of palest fire. Their arms aloft pulling at their clothes were luminous and each obscure soul was enveloped in audible shapes of light as if it had always been so. The mare at the far end of the stable snorted and shied
at the luminosity in beings so endarkened and the little horse turned and hid his face in the web of his dam's flank (p.222).

The domesticated horses, unlike the half-wild horses the company ride, "shy" and "hide" in the presence of these barbarians. The foal here is totally frightened by the inversion of the right order of things: these men should be darkness itself. But mankind is given a halo of static electricity, a light which has nothing to do with the Spirit. The ironic conclusion to the chapter which seems to promise redemption is the fright engendered in the representatives of the natural world. Unlike their Biblical analogues, these events deny or disconfirm the presence of God in human affairs.

The company's wearing of "shrouds of palest fire" is surely a telling figure of damnation. This sense of being beyond redemption is underscored by the chthonic imagery of the ferry scene, where the company is finally defeated by some disgruntled Yumas. The ferry image, with its intimations of death and the underworld, is a favorite of McCarthy's; he uses it both in Outer Dark and throughout Suttree. Here, the company has taken over by questionable means a profitable operation on the Colorado River where they run "a sort of procrustean ferry where the fares were tailored to accommodate the purses of the travelers" (p.262). The ferry soon devolves
into a place of outright rapine. Glanton becomes the Charon figure with his Cerebus as he is described: "He sat his horse and looked down at the river who was keeper of the crossroads of all that world and his dog came and nuzzled his foot in the stirrup" (p. 272). When they attack, the Yumas manage to kill Glanton and most of the company, but the judge is among those who manage to escape.

The dementia which becomes metaphoric in Suttree abounds in Blood Meridian. Insanity, violence, and death in this novel succeeds in the devaluation of human life, a fate which Suttree ultimately escapes. In the end, the apocalyptic vision that Blood Meridian affirms is a nihilistic one: This is most clearly presented in Tobin's exegesis on the earth's second moon: "But certainly the wise high God in his dismay at the proliferation of lunacy on his earth must have wetted his thumb and leaned down out of the abyss and pinched it hissing into extinction" (p. 244, italics mine). The fate of the second moon seems to prefigure the fate of man himself at the final judgment. Further, the wording is peculiar for someone so versed in Catholic orthodoxy as an expriest (who is not necessarily orthodox himself, and later insists that he was "only a novitiate to the order"--p. 250). God is here ensconced in the abyss. Heaven, not hell, is the gaping void and the world is somehow a tenuous oasis outside of it. But the world is also bound for extinction in that very void.
Thus the judge can posit the apocalypse:

If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now?...The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and to die but in the affairs of men their is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once the darkening and evening of his day (pp.146-7).

It is Judge Holden's tendency to pontificate (as in the passage above) that has lead Terence Moran to label him "The Man Who Never Shuts Up. He may also be the devil." Moran is being tongue-in-cheek, he means to chastise McCarthy, whom he feels has diverged from usually admirable work into bizarreness. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of this novel is that McCarthy has failed to integrate dialogues in which the judge participates (they are really thinly disguised monologues) into the flow of the novel. And yet, believable dialogue is usually one of McCarthy's strengths. Someone with such an ear for realistic, realizable dialogue as McCarthy has, though, cannot possibly make such mistakes accidentally. He just could not be that careless after twenty years as a serious writer. The judge's bombast serves a purpose in this novel, I suspect, and that is to serve as a counterpoint to silence. Against the flow of the novel, his speeches seem to issue ex nihilo, like God's extinguishing thumb, out of a void. The Man Who Never Shuts Up is the appropriate incarnation for the antichrist of a nihilistic apocalypse, the
apocalypse which the judge himself has announced.

Silence plays an important role in this book, more so than in any of McCarthy's others. The kid, who is the ostensible focus, is a man of few words, an obvious foil to the judge's irksome loquacity. Tobin, who stands somewhere between Holden and the kid on the scale of garrulosity, puts the issue forth to the kid in a passage which bears quotation:

[Godly wisdom resides in the least of things so that the voice of the Almighty speaks most profoundly in such beings as lives in silence themselves.
He watched the kid.
For let it go how it will, he said, God speaks in the least of creatures.
The kid thought him to mean birds or things that crawl but the expriest, watching, his head slightly cocked, said: No man is give leave of that voice.
The kid spat into the fire and bent to his work. I aint heard no voice, he said.
When it stops, said Tobin, you'll know you've heard it all your life.
Is that right?
Aye.
The kid turned the leather in his lap. The expriest watched him.
At night, said Tobin, when the horses are grazing and the company is asleep, who hears them grazing?
Dont nobody hear them if they're asleep.
Aye, And if they cease grazing who is it that wakes?
Every man.
Aye, said the expriest. Every man (pp.123-4).

In the silence, suggests Tobin, is God, and ultimately in that silence is his withdrawal, his significant absence by which his former presence is confirmed. In opposition to this awesome silence is Judge Holden, who never stops attempting to mold creation after his own image in his speeches. In the same
dialogue, the kid asks Tobin if the voice speaks to Holden. The printed response is a gem of ambiguity, since McCarthy has dispensed, like a good post-modernist, with quotation marks: "The judge, he said. He didn't answer " (p.124). Does Tobin fail to complete his answer, that is "Tobin didn't answer"? Or is Tobin's answer that the judge didn't answer the voice? Either possibility is rich in implications, for if Tobin does not answer the kid, it suggests that the judge disproves his rule, that God does not speak to Holden who is somehow beyond or above Him. But if Holden willfully does not answer the voice, then his non-stop monologues, which prevent him from being a conduit of the other voice or at least prevent him from hearing it, become themselves silences. In other words, by abnegating the silence only through which the voice can speak, Holden deprives himself of the significant voice. By obliterating the medium through which the voice travels, Holden does not obliterate the voice of the Ineffable, he only confirms its existence by marking its absence, as when the horses stop grazing and the sleepers awake. Oddly, there is room for both possibilities in this novel. McCarthy is ultimately silent himself on this point.

The silences in this text are as meaningful as the words. They become like the whiteness of the whale in Moby Dick or the darkness itself in Heart of Darkness: ambiguous, something onto which we project meaning. Richard Gray suggests that
McCarthy's treatment of the obscenely violent and grotesque is done in the service of the "belief in something--force, fate, environment, or whatever--that lies beyond the human capacity to know and control."\(^6\) And something beyond the human capacity to express, I would add, for language is in essence the attempt to know and to control. In truth, McCarthy belongs to a line of writers--Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner--who James Guetti says "create a sense of disparity between language in general and something that appears to be inexpressible, which we might call 'life' or 'truth' or 'reality.' Above all, however, this 'reality' is defined as something beyond the powers of imagination ... I have termed it, for this reason, the 'ineffable'."\(^7\) The "ineffable" is precisely what lurks in the silences in Blood Meridian, where McCarthy strives to make the vague and inexpressible palpable through his depiction of graphic scenes of violence with unmerciful exactitude. This effort creates what Bell calls "the pressure of meaning" in McCarthy's work.\(^8\) When Tobin and the kid are staked out at a water hole, attempting to hide from the judge whom is a menacing threat now that the company's enterprise has fallen apart, the judge and his idiot appear on the horizon "like things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed" (p.281). The novel itself with its ambiguous message is like the judge and the idiot as they loom over the horizon blurred in the desert heat, vague and
with undefined boundaries yet a presence to be reckoned with nonetheless.

In the service of the attempt to express the ineffable, language takes on a kind of preeminence. When language as such takes on this kind of role, there is the danger of it becoming a toy, empty of meaning (or, as the deconstructionists contend all language is, merely self-referential with no origin). In a self-conscious novel such as this, "meaning" is trapped by the play of language itself at the surface level of the text; the text does not try to be symbolic in the way Suttree or Outer Dark does. This creates a disturbing ambivalence in Blood Meridian, where the silences may mean nothing just as they might mean everything. This dilemma is illustrated by the kid's encounter with the eldress among the rocks. Her shape is visibly human, and she wears an air of suffering to which something in the kid responds instinctively. Her presence seems to mean something to the kid until he actually touches her and discovers that she is nothing but a shell, an empty signifier. (Her very "emptiness" questions the meaning of his life, as it were. This moment determines the kid's fate since the eldress's "emptiness" seems to invalidate all the alternatives to the judge's philosophy.) The vagueness and the ambiguity of McCarthy's high-flown prose is not specific enough—-is McCarthy of the judge's slightly Nietzschean school of
thought, or does he side with Tobin in maintaining that there is something beyond us and language, something with meaning after all? F.R. Leavis denounced Conrad for trying to impose on his readers and on himself, for thrilled response, a 'significance' that is merely an emotional insistence on the presence of what he can't produce...He is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means. The vague and unrealizable, he asserts with a strained impressiveness, is the profoundly and tremendously significant.9

Sometimes, McCarthy, too, might be accused of this sort writing, but all-in-all he remains so ambivalent toward "the vague and unrealizable," what Guetti called the "ineffable," that we are never sure if he is taking it seriously or if he is poking fun at his own writing. In fact, his novel makes a virtue out of our not knowing what he means. Consequently, Blood Meridian is filled with discrete moments of interpretable silences.

One of these ambivalent moments involves an episode where the kid is wrongly accused of an atrocity. The kid and one Sproule have survived the Apache attack which has wiped out Captain White's infantry. Captain White, dissatisfied with the terms of the American treaty with the Mexicans, plans to ride into Chihuahua with his renegades and take over the whole country. Unfortunately, before they can make a stand, the Apaches attack. Sproule's arm has been wounded and is becoming gangrened, and neither he nor the kid have had water for a few days. They lay down among some rocks to sleep when
a vampire bat lights on Sproule. In his fright, Sproule thinks that the kid has turned blood-thirsty for lack of water:

he held out to him his bloodied hands as if in accusation and then clapped them over his ears and cried out what it seemed he himself could not hear, a howl of such outrage as to stitch a caesura in the pulsebeat of the world. But the kid only spat into the darkness of the space between them. I know your kind, he said. What's wrong with you is wrong all the way through you (p.66, italics mine).

Sproule's cry would "stitch a caesura," that is, create a significant pause or silence in which God would recognize and condemn the accused. The silence which Sproule would create is the meaningful kind, the kind through which, according to Tobin, God speaks. The moral "outrage" is caused by what Sproule interprets as the breaching of the "Law." But the kid, who really has not committed a crime here, interprets no presence of God or moral force, and his relationship to the "Law" is already deeply problematized by his "taste for mindless violence" and his childhood under the tutelage of drunken, ineffectual father (p.3). When he spits "into the darkness of the space between them," he indicates his utter indifference to the accusation. He views the caesura only as empty space, a nullity, meaningless, absurd. The silence he recognizes is something Sproule can impose only on himself by shutting his hands over his ears. But Sproule's verbal accusation attempts to stitch the caesura through the kid's
soul anyway, by suggesting the kid's "wrongness" is "all the way through" him.

Another moment of pertinent silence occurs when one of the characters effectively "stitches a caesura" in McCarthy's effusive narration. The moment is macabrely funny one of self-irony for McCarthy. His narrative is describing the appearance of the Apaches who are bearing down on Captain White's troops. From a paragraph which stretches over three pages, I will offer a few illustrative pieces:

The first of the herd began to swing past them in a pall of yellow dust, rangy slatripped cattle with horns that grew agog...Already you could see through the dust on the ponies' hides the painted chevrons and the hands and rising suns and birds and fish of every device like the shade of old work through sizing on a canvas and now too you could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made of human bones. ...there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpierced suns against the eyes of their enemies. A legion of horribles...and all the horseman's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious...(pp.51-53).

This paragraph ends and the sergeant is quoted (the only dialogue in several pages), "Oh my god, said the sergeant" (p.53). This exclamation is a caesura in the narrative since the sergeant silences the narrative and literally interjects God. This single line of dialogue is followed by a two-sentence paragraph which briefly announces the arrival of the arrows anticipated in the expansive paragraph. The
narrative voice then picks up steam again describing the company's treatment at the hands of the "legion of horribles":

The company was now come to a halt... Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws... then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them ... and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping ... gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera ... and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming (pp.53-4).

The present participles which are strewn throughout the passage create an urgency and momentum which literally carry McCarthy away. These two paragraphs, which sandwich the sergeant's more modest speech, are two virtuoso performances; McCarthy is showing off his incredible flair for almost cinematic, poetic description. But in spite of his propensity to get carried away, McCarthy remains aware of the fact that the sergeant's response is somehow more authentic than a three-page verbal grand-standing. In an attempt to present this moment of "death hilarious," McCarthy has had to take a position obviously removed from the experience of the victims, whose horror is more accurately portrayed in the deadpan half-prayer, half-oath "Oh my god." In fact, in his attempt to make the moment palpable he has merely pointed out its fictiveness, its ultimate place in art rather than life.
The sergeant's rather heart-felt cry is analogous to the passage in *Suttree*, where Sut sees a man lying across an overturned table in the midst of a fight and realizes "with a faint surge of that fairyland feeling from childhood wonders that the face he passed wide eyed...was a dead man" (*Sut*, p.187). The language of his realization is poetic with all its alliterated f's and fairy language. But Suttree's companion puts the matter to us in the authentic language, "That's fucking awful" (p.187). Somehow, the staccato of both the sergeant's cry and the unknown companion's comment are a little closer to the essence of the experience. The few words contain an imaginable reality. These two moments also resemble Kurtz's infamous cry in *Heart of Darkness*, "The horror, the horror." However variously interpretable, the words still seem to convey the point which Marlow's narration keeps approaching but, through literariness, fails to capture.

The problem of "authenticity" is one that I would say plagues all authors who attempt to express Guetti's "ineffable." Moran's indictment of *Blood Meridian* centers on this problem, for he feels that the novel is less authentic, less near McCarthy's experience, than his four earlier, Appalachian works. But in fact, McCarthy himself is aware of the problem before he even wrote his latest novel. In a hilarious though unlikely scene from *Suttree*, the protagonist has been lost in the woods for weeks and has been suffering
from hallucinations induced by hunger. He encounters a hunter in the woods, whom he takes for yet another mirage, but converses with nonetheless. The hunter is disturbed by Sut's ramblings and pronounces that Sut is "lost or crazy or both." Suttree concurs with this but retorts: "At least I exist, said the wanderer. He wafted up the hem of his blanket and gestured at the hunter with it. Begone, he said" (p.288). Angered by this gesture, the hunter responds to Sut's archaic invocation with:

Why you dipshit idjit if anybody begones anywhere it'll be you with a arrowbolt up your skinny ass. 
Suttree batted his eyes. Are you real? he said (p.289).

The hunter's rather authentic vernacular snaps Suttree out of his delusions and endows the hunter with the unquestionable authority of reality. The hunter is tangible, and his use of the vernacular acts as a demystification of the "fairy" language with all its suggestions of the ineffable. His bare-bones language seems to suggest that there is nothing, but nothing, that cannot be named (circumscribed) by language.

McCarty's novels are filled with these "vernacular" moments which insist upon concreteness and palpability, but these are always in equipoise with moments of mystification, those moments whose effusive rhetoric tries to locate the ineffable and proclaim its metareality. There is always something which eludes naming, such as the Bearded one in
*Outer Dark,* who like the God of the Israelites has an "ineffable name," or all those moments in *Suttree* when the narrator insists variously on things beyond language. Sut notices a dead man's watch "with a feeling he could not name," *(Sut. p.10)*, carnivals hold for him "visions of unspeakable loveliness from a world lost" *(p.50)*, Gene and Sut at one point exchange meaningful glances "but you couldn't say it in words" *(p.62)*, Suttree suffers with "a sorrow for which there is neither name nor help" *(p.294)*, and he and other "solitaries" go about "seeking a thing they could not name" *(p.409)*.

In *Blood Meridian,* there are occasions of overt insistence upon the ineffable, as when the "aborigines" who aid Tobin and the kid await the thing which has driven the two across the desert: "whether it be armies or plague or pestilence or something altogether unspeakable they waited with strange equanimity" *(BM, p.301)*. The mystification process in *Blood Meridian,* however, takes on a larger scope than mere allusions to the ineffable. Frequently throughout the novel McCarthy has significant passages written in Spanish (not entirely unusual for a Western), but also resorts to French, German, and Latin to complicate the reading process (and for many readers, no doubt, these instances constitute moments of the indecipherable, a mirror image of the ineffable). Thus, a fortune teller tells the kid's fortune
entirely in Spanish, but to the kid himself, who does not yet speak Spanish, the vision is indecipherable. When Tobin and the kid have a showdown with the judge at a waterhole, the expriest begins invoking God in what the reader can surmise is Latin (here, his speeches are not quoted), but to the kid he is simply "calling out in a tongue both alien and extinct" (p. 290). Ultimately, though, the novel depends on those inscrutable silences (of which lapses into other languages may in fact be a subset since they are a form of inscrutable mystification of narrative for all non-polyglots) to intimate the ineffable. Chapter XXIII, the final chapter in the book, is an exercise in just such a mystification.

The chapter begins with the obligatory heading whose last two phrases involve twin mystification processes: both silence and the inscrutable tongue. "—The jakes and what was encountered there —Sie müssen schlafen aber Ich muss tanzen" (p. 316). The last phrase refers to the final paragraph where the judge is depicted dancing: "He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (p. 335). The phrasing of this heading in German suggests that it is an allusion to Nietzsche. The translation of the phrase, "You (or they) must sleep but I must dance," indicates McCarthy may be thinking of Thus Spoke Zarathustra where Nietzsche distinguishes between the ascetic "sleepers" and the
dionysiac "dancers." At any rate, it seems to represent an 
obsfucated clue to the meaning of the last lines. The judge 
must dance eternally because he has "seen the horror in the 
round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost 
heart" (p.331). The others must sleep, as in dreaming or 
death, because they have attempted to deny the abyss and have 
been subsumed by it in their weakness. The judge's dancing is 
alogous to Kurtz's utterance of "The horror, the horror," in 
Heart of Darkness. Both actions bespeak a recognition, but 
the recognition of something which remains ambiguous. The 
"horror" might, on one hand, be constituted by the nothingness 
attested to by Holden's and Brown's nihilism. On the other 
hand, it might be constituted by evil, as the expriest Tobin 
contends. The German tag in the heading does not clarify this 
ambiguity, but mystifies it by endowing the incident with the 
vague "pressure of meaning."

The penultimate phrase in the chapter heading, however, 
uses silences to assert the ineffable. The phrase "The jakes 
and what was encountered there" is simple enough, but in fact 
it announces an intention that the chapter itself never 
fulfills. In the jakes, the kid meets his fate, but like the 
murder of Joanna Burden in Faulkner's Light in August, 
"between paragraphs," the "what was encountered there" is the 
"withheld event in the center" of Blood Meridian. The text 
keeps this secret, and we can only patch together a
hypothesis. The kid enters the "jakes" (the outhouse):

The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden bariatch home behind him (p.333).

That moment constitutes the last mention of the kid in the text (As Hamlet would say, "The rest is silence"). The narrative "camera" cuts to some men looking for a lost little girl (and here McCarthy probably expects the alert reader to experience a chill, for all other disappearances of "lost" children in the text, including "the kid," are connected with the judge), some whores cavorting in a dancehall, and finally to some men about to enter the jakes:

In the muddled dogyard behind the premises two men went down the boards toward the jakes. A third man was standing there urinating into the mud.
   Is someone in there? the first man said.
   The man who was relieving himself did not look up.
I wouldn't go in there if I was you, he said.
   Is there somebody in there?
   I wouldn't go in.
He hitched himself up and buttoned his trousers and stepped past them and went up the walk toward the lights. The first man watched him go and then opened the door of the jakes.
   Good God almighty, he said.
   What is it?
   He didn't answer. He stepped past the other and went back up the walk. The other man stood looking after him. Then he opened the door and looked in (p.334, italics mine).

Here, to borrow from F.R. Leavis's summation of Conrad, "the vague and unrealizable" is "the profoundly and tremendously
significant." The kid's fate is inscribed in the jakes, but the jakes themselves are shrouded in silence. The text stops short of telling us what the judge does to the kid; the first man won't tell the second man and the second man won't tell the third "What it is." The text reiterates the phrase which problematized Tobin's speech on "silences": "He didn't answer." But here the ambivalence engendered is external to the phrase. That is, the phrase obviously means that the second man did not answer the third man. Yet, the refusal to answer still creates a mystification of the text since only through language can we the readers know what happens. This mystification is compounded by the pattern of three silences suggesting a mythic or mystical significance--such as Peter's denial of Christ three times or Beowulf's three monsters or even Suttree's three struggles with death--which (Catch-22) cannot be discerned because it remains in silence[s]. The characters can look inside the jakes and see the kid's fate, but they cannot, or will not, express it. What happens to the kid, therefore, becomes part of the realm of the ineffable.

The second man's exclamation "Good God almighty" recalls the sergeant's "Oh my god" during the Apache attack. The two are the vernacular moments which seek to inscribe the ineffable by naming God, and, in a more direct sense, by cutting across the narrative's tendency toward effusive rhetoric to the "realistic" response to the situation.
The silence which enshrouds the kid's fate is necessary by the end of the novel in order to maintain the significance of his fate. By the final page, the reader has been exposed to so much death and violence that he is virtually numb. All taboos have somehow always already been broken in this text so that any sort of grand significance requires the reverenced silence, the stamp of "ineffability" like Yahweh Himself. In his attempt to make the acts of violence and the suffering palpable, McCarthy has played all his trump cards and now must "bluff," as it were. One cannot imagine any fate worse than the ones already described throughout the novel: disembowelment, decapitation, scalping, castration, vampirization, amputation, desole-ing of feet, boiling brains while they're still in the live skull, and so on. All of these atrocities are portrayed graphically, and as I mentioned before, after three hundred pages one becomes numbed to the realism. Only the ineffable could retain significance after these.

Thus, the kid's fate--his private apocalypse--is, like Tobin's God, only to be found in silence. This mystification, however, adds to the ambiguity of the text. For although the text as a whole, with its no-holds-barred presentation of the breaking of taboos, is nihilistic and suggests an abyss yawning open before us all, the horror of the kid's death, wrapped in McCarthy's ambiguous silence, remains
interpretable. There remains the possibility, after all, of the other Apocalypse, the God-directed one which Tobin ultimately champions. The reality of Evil would necessitate the reality of Goodness. But even that would be too little, too late for this text, the re-revisionist story of the West, where the extinction of the buffalo, the "millennial herds" (p. 316), merely prefigures our own.

The ending of Blood Meridian oddly brings McCarthy's work full-circle. McCarthy's first novel, The Orchard Keeper, ends with a tableau of John Wesley exiting the cemetery where his mother has recently been buried. The cemetery becomes a catalyst for narrative free association, for, seemingly ex nihilo, the narrator is suddenly talking about the fate of the American Indian:

They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost undone. Over the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses. No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust (OK, p. 246).

The final paragraph of The Orchard Keeper, McCarthy's first novel, announces the theme of Blood Meridian, his last. The relentless diminution "myth, legend, dust" is the fate of the Indians, the buffalo, and ultimately the kid, as well. In both, McCarthy gives voice to an apocalyptic anxiety, the fear that the ineffable may only be the meaningless, that all
myths—whether pagan or Judeo-Christian—may only amount to dust.
NOTES


4Bell, 117-18.


8Bell, 108.


11Leavis, 180.
Conclusion:

History and Apocalypse: Other Fathers, Other Sons

The truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulare with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a muddied field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning (BM., p.245).

Thus spoke Judge Holden in McCarthy's Blood Meridian. The horrors he speaks of here are those of the Apocalypse, the destination which is "unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning." Holden uses in this passage the terms which insist upon the ineffable somewhere at the "End" beyond man's very power to comprehend. The novel ends with the kid's inscrutable absence, his arrival at a destination which is likewise "unspeakable" and "calamitous beyond reckoning." The novel, McCarthy's last thus far, ends unlike his others with the formulaic "The End," thus positing at least a fictive apocalypse.

In his influential The Sense of the Ending, Frank Kermode notes that the "deep need for intelligible Ends" is reflected in the trans-historical interest in the Apocalypse. Narrative fiction itself, he notes, is really a projection of the self
"past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle."¹ In Blood Meridian, the kid's end becomes the end of the narrative, a sort of fulfillment of the judge's prophecy of the "calamitous" end. But even the judge recognizes that the apocalypse he posits is not the permanent End, but a series of endings which constitute the ebb and flow of history, the cyclical building and destruction of civilizations. "This you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons" (BM, p.147). As Kermode notes, predictions of the apocalypse always "assume that the End is pretty near." (Think, for example, of Francis Ford Coppola's contemporary version of Conrad's Heart of Darkness: Apocalypse Now.) Time ultimately discredits every historical allegory of the Apocalypse, but "Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited."²

The pronouncement of "The End" in Blood Meridian is discredited by the addition of an Epilogue. As Caryn James notes, the epilogue denies the judge "the last word."³ The epilogue is written ostensibly from the place beyond the end, the eternal present. Although the epilogue here represents a dismal scene of people gathering bones in the desert, at least there are people going on as before: "Then they all move on
again" (p. 337). There is no redemption here as there is in Suttree, but there is the suggestion of historical sequence, continuity. The judge's subscription to the decline of civilizations is itself embodied in his subscription to Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence; the Apocalypse is thereby disconfirmed, but the apocalypses (what Kermode would call "crises") are affirmed, are shown to be happening at "every moment." Thus, while the judge may still be dancing at the end of Blood Meridian, the kid is a figure for our own end. The threatful presence which is exorcized in Suttree remains in Blood Meridian.

McCarthys novels exhibit the influence of the Southwestern humor which, as Richard Gray notes, was born of the anxiety engendered in the "civilized" Easterners by the "unmitigated rowdyism" of their frontier brethren. The humor attempted to encode the southwestern "barbarians," to transform "viciousness...into play." The world of violence was depicted in the "comic dialect," while the frame narration, the voice of sanity, was always in Standard English. In McCarthy's rendering of Southwestern humor, however, the fear and anxiety is not exorcised by the humor, only ameliorated; the wild beast is still there, and what is more, he is one of us. Moreover, the neat linguistic distinctions are no longer in place, for the vernacular in McCarthy, as I have noted in
the previous chapter, often represents the voice of reality, the recognition of what is "fucking awful." The hog drovers in *Outer Dark* and the multiple allusions to Sut Lovingood in *Suttree* meet their fruition in the loosing of the "rough beast" in *Blood Meridian*. In this novel, Sut Lovingood is set loose from his rustic trappings, unrestrained by law or language—and he is often allowed to speak the Queen's English, German, Spanish, French and Latin. The judge is the rough beast, the licentious frontiersman who, as Caryn James points out, is one of our fathers. Our historical fathers have pushed the frontier to its "manifest destiny," but they have also pushed man and animal—Indian and buffalo—to extinction.

Moreover, McCarthy becomes progressively more insistent upon the existence of the "horror". In *Outer Dark*, it was allegorical; in *Suttree*, it was presented as dream visions; but in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy insists upon it as historical fact. The unreflective Culla can choose to ignore the intimations of it, Suttree can "wake up" from the nightmare world to actively "flee" the evil, but the kid stands no chance at all since his fate is determined by historical imperative. Evil is ineluctable in *Blood Meridian*. Moreover, the evil becomes the Zeitgeist.

In *Blood Meridian* the judge points to the ancient Indian
ruins as proof of the "dead fathers." The savages who inhabit the land now, the judge feels, have humbled themselves before the dead fathers and failed to build their own monuments. The judge tells a parable of son whose father is killed before his birth:

All his life he carried before him the idol of perfection to which he can never attain. The father dead has eucharred the son out of his patrimony. For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and is heir (BM, p.145).

Our history is full of dead fathers, particularly Southern history where the Lost Cause has created many martyrs. The dead fathers of Southern history have had an ambivalent effect of Southern literature, for the fact of defeat in the South is often pointed to as the impetus behind the Southern Renaissance. But then there are those critics, like Walter Sullivan, who feel that the Lost War is the only inspiration, the only impetus behind excellence in Southern writing. In *A Requiem for the Renascence*, Sullivan laments the distancing from this historical event which he believes accounts for the end of the Southern Renaissance in letters.7

Walter Sullivan finds Cormac McCarthy a confirmation of his suspicion of "sensationalism and decadence" among the younger generation of Southern writers: "I should not think of him as simply an extreme instance of evil that has always
existed in the world. Instead one should see him as a portent of the barbarism that even now begins to engulf the world.\textsuperscript{8} These are strong words, and oddly synecdochal since they extend the contents of his novels to McCarthy himself. They were written in 1976, almost ten years before \textit{Blood Meridian}, the very apex of this trend, was published. Sullivan tempers every discussion of McCarthy with a reminder that, alas, McCarthy is no Faulkner, he is not lamenting the lost south, the lost cause. Instead, McCarthy has a broader vision of human evil and universal defeat. He would not be like the son of the dead father, who is "broken before a frozen god and...will never find his way" (\textit{BM}, p.145). His world is not that of Faulkner, and thus, as Louis Rubin points out, "it will not suffice for the writers of this generation to try and describe their experience by relying exclusively on the language and insights of Faulkner and his contemporaries."\textsuperscript{9}

McCarthy's fiction contains an apocalyptic vision, a look into the darkness of the human heart. But McCarthy's fiction itself assures us, \textit{contra} Sullivan, that Southern Fiction did not die with Faulkner, that it is alive and well. McCarthy has heeded the advice of Allen Tate and has left the dead to the dead; he has not "set up the grave/ In the house."\textsuperscript{10} Instead, he is a son who would build his own monuments rather that fall in awe before the "ravenous grave" of the dead
fathers.

While McCarthy is not immune to the anxiety of influence (to use Harold Bloom's phrase) that troubles all writers as they enter into the literary discourse of their cultures, the vision he articulates is uniquely his own. That vision, however, is not constant but has developed over the course of his career, as I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters. The first three novels are ambivalent about the presence of redemptive forces in the world. This ambivalence results in what one might call a bleak optimism. For instance, John Wesley Rattner is freed by his mother's death in The Orchard Keeper from the oppressiveness of her false image of his dead father. The novel ends, however, with the diminution of the vanishing tribes, who like John Wesley's father, become "myth, legend, dust"(246). In Outer Dark, Culla's succession of moral failures lead him into the "landscape of the damned" while his child is reduced through reification and then literal violence to bones and ashes, an analogue to the "dust" which ends The Orchard Keeper. Yet, Rinty also inhabits this world. The narrative responds to her innate goodness with a gentleness that allows her to exit the text through "sleep." In Suttree, McCarthy reveals a vision of human redemption as the hero triumphs over the split in his own nature (a split which incorporates the ambivalence of the previous texts) and
capitalizes on his inherent goodness to prevail against
degeneration. *Blood Meridian* finds McCarthy's vision
achieving just the opposite effect; the ambivalence of the
first three novels is resolved in this novel as it is in
*Suttree*, but a sense of doom prevails. McCarthy suggests both
the kid's private apocalypse and the broader apocalypse
connoted in the Epilogue by the bone gathersons who scour the
prairie collecting the last traces of the vanishing buffalo
and the rapidly disappearing Indian culture. McCarthy is
still writing and he may yet produce a novel countermanding
the apocalypse he posits in his latest novel. But for now,
*Blood Meridian* represents his last word on the subject. In
this novel, McCarthy forecloses on the possibility of grace
ventured in the other novels as he leaves us poised at our
blood meridian, the height from which we fall through "myth,
legend, dust."
NOTES


2 Kermode, 8.


4 Kermode, 25.


6 James, 31.


8 Sullivan, 72.


10 Allen Tate, "Ode to the Confederate Dead."

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