

Metaphysics

Abstract McCarthy's metaphysics includes an identifiable ontology and cosmology. To define this metaphysics, our chapter first must examine the American frontiersman and induce McCarthy's dialectical stance toward this figure, since it largely is through representations of frontiersmen that readers confront conjoined problems of Truth and Justice—or what we can term an “absent referent”—in McCarthy's thought. This chapter's first section arrives at a definition of the frontiersman, as well as McCarthy's seemingly conflicted reading of this figure, by investigating Sheriff Ed Tom Bell of *No Country for Old Men*. Section two turns to *All the Pretty Horses* and John Grady Cole. This section outlines a McCarthian ontology that posits as man's *telos* the possibility of “ontological perfection,” which man may realize through his will. Section three works through Billy Parham of *The Crossing* to clarify a disjunction in McCarthy between that *telos*, which is a kind of truth, and truth itself, or Truth; this disjunction begets a further distinction in McCarthy between justice and Justice. This chapter concludes by showing how divorcing truth and Truth—and necessarily doing the same with justice and Justice—is linked in McCarthy to a cosmology that grounds willing, which is man's essential potentiality, in a universal will, or Will, that is essence itself. The fourth section of this chapter begins to draw out the implications of this cosmology with a turn to *Cities of the Plain*.

Keywords Cormac McCarthy · Metaphysics · American frontiersman
Truth · Justice · Will · Ontological perfection · Absent referent

I

Readers meet Ed Tom Bell, the sheriff of an enormous Texas county, on the first page of McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. In many ways, Sheriff Bell, to whom we are introduced in 1980, the date of the novel's present action, is a late-twentieth-century American frontiersman. Bell also is a character who arrives later on in McCarthy's career and crystallizes much of the writer's thinking about the frontiersman—an archetypal figure in American culture through the examination of which McCarthy articulates so many of his philosophical concerns. Like fictional American men who range from Natty Bumppo to Dirty Harry—a group that includes the boys of McCarthy's Border Trilogy, as we will see—Bell is tough, loyal, dry-witted, and humble. He has served his county as sheriff for decades, continuing a family tradition that stretches back to the days of the Indian wars. In addition, Bell served his country during World War II and was awarded a Bronze Star for valorous action in combat against the German Army. By fulfilling the role of frontiersman, he occupies a position at the point of civilization's spear. A lawman who fights drug trafficking on the US-Mexico border, and formerly an infantryman on the European front, he is an agent of American civilization who works to extend its reach, encompassing and taming savagery. At the same time, his job necessitates that to effectively engage the “savage,” the sheriff must adopt some of the savage's techniques so as to turn them against him. As he notes in one of the thirteen italicized sections that punctuate the novel, “*I know when I first took office you'd have a fistfight somewheres and you'd go to break it up and they'd offer to fight you. And sometimes you had to accommodate em. They wouldnt have it no other way. And you'd better not lose, neither.*”¹

Like most frontiersman of American legend, Bell lives a masculinity ostensibly fully devoted to home and hearth, as well as a masculinity untethered to the same. As Richard Slotkin shows us in the final

¹Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (2005; repr., New York: Vintage, 2006), 38. Hereafter, I will use in-text, parenthetical references to this novel, referring to it as *NC*.

book of his landmark series on frontier mythology in American culture, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), “The compleat ‘American’ of the [frontier] Myth was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the ‘savage’ of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege.”² The American frontiersman—who for Slotkin is the archetypal American—neither is civil nor savage. Rather, as an agent of civilization, the frontiersman eliminates threats to law, order, urbanity, and domesticity. At the same time, the frontiersman’s job necessitates that he leave civilization so as to track and confront precisely these threats. Hence, he avoids a measure of social conditioning without becoming a threat to society himself. The frontiersman forges a life on the borderlands—a deeply individuated, hybrid identity. In Slotkin’s terms, this character “stands between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization, acting sometimes as mediator or interpreter between races and cultures but more often as civilization’s most effective instrument against savagery [...]”³

Traditionally, one of the frontiersman’s roles in American culture has been to justify the United States’ Manifest Destiny of geographical and cultural expansion. In part, the frontiersman, through his strange combination of artifice and guilelessness, assures Americans that unlike other great civilizations, the United States will expand the reach of its “city upon a hill” the world over, even as the country remains young, innocent, and free—in implicit or direct contrast to the European empires of old.⁴ Not surprisingly, the frontiersman’s identity in American culture traditionally is both gendered and racialized. The frontiersman is the

²Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 11.

³*Ibid.*, 16.

⁴This construction of American identity is at the heart of John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630), wherein Winthrop offers the original articulation of it. See Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 7th ed., vol. A: Beginnings to 1820, ed. Wayne Franklin, et al. (New York: Norton, 2007), 147–158. The seminal scholarly study of the “city upon a hill” and its link to the Puritans’ mission (and our own today) remains Perry Miller’s *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956).

expression of the supposed summit of all men—the Anglo-Saxon warrior, in mythic terms a member of what Slotkin calls “a particular and exclusive race whose understanding and exercise of democratic liberty are privileged by nature.”⁵ The frontiersman also is a figure who embodies a combination of righteousness and power, living a symbiosis between them. This vision of the frontiersman largely held sway in American culture from the days of James Fenimore Cooper up until the debacle that was the American War in Vietnam.⁶ In Slotkin’s words, before the Vietnam War ended in American defeat, “The world of the traditional Western, and the myth of American history it embodied, appeared to be one in which right and might were necessarily linked. That was why the opponents of ‘progress’ inevitably failed in the end.”⁷ As I have argued elsewhere, the Vietnam War forced Americans to confront a landscape in which American power and American righteousness appeared anything but symbiotic. Moreover, in the decades after US combat forces’ 1973 withdrawal from Vietnam—the decades that have been McCarthy’s most productive—neither a new nor a reconfigured national mythology has arisen with sufficient force to move Americans beyond the trauma of that war’s assault on the frontier myth, among other key constructions of American identity.⁸ For this reason, we find in the best of America’s post-Vietnam War representations of the frontiersman—for instance, Clint Eastwood’s brilliant films, *The Unforgiven* (1992) and *Gran Torino* (2008)—an open-ended questioning about the moral status of the frontiersman and his efficacy in a post-Vietnam War age.⁹

⁵Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 108. Stacey Peebles offers a number of insights about this trope’s emergence in the growing body of successful literary works penned by U.S. veterans of the Iraq War. See Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier’s Experience in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), especially Chapter 2, 49–100.

⁶Held sway, but not without any serious critical pushback. An especially significant example of critical resistance arrives with D.H. Lawrence’s notions about American “wish fulfillment,” particularly in Lawrence’s readings of Cooper. See Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Penguin Classics series (1923; repr., New York: Penguin, 1990).

⁷Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 438–439.

⁸See Ty Hawkins, *Reading Vietnam amid the War on Terror*, American Literature Readings in the 21st Century series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁹We also find during this era a host of defensive, brutal films that attempt a “remasculinization” of America. See Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

By setting *No Country for Old Men* in 1980 and including in it not only Bell, but also Llewellyn Moss, a combat veteran of the Vietnam War and nominal protagonist of its non-italicized sections, McCarthy inserts this novel into that traumatized, post-Vietnam War space in American culture, just as he does at least metaphorically or by analogy with the rest of his Southwestern works. He takes up the specific implications of that war, as well as the ongoing, more general implications of America's frontier myth in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Through this work, which has garnered a great deal of popular and academic critical attention, McCarthy points readers to crucial cultural dilemmas in American society. As we will see, though, when we move through these cultural dilemmas, we find that they are founded on philosophical matters that bear directly on our study here. As many critics have seen, then, McCarthy's frontiersmen are ideal vehicles for cultural critique. Yet these frontiersmen also are ideal vehicles for his philosophy.

Much of McCarthy's cultural and philosophical work is, in a sense, deconstructive. One of the most damning aspects of *No Country for Old Men* is how it renders both Bell and Moss small. Rather than appearing nearly invincible—like John Wayne does as Sgt. Stryker, for instance, right up until the end of *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949)—both of these frontiersmen are ineffectual. Carson Wells, also a Vietnam veteran and one of the men chasing Moss and the money he steals in the novel, characterizes Sheriff Bell as follows: "I dont think of him at all. He's a redneck sheriff in a hick town in a hick county. In a hick state" (NC 157). Wells' first line here prefigures almost exactly what Bell later admits is his greatest fear of the drug traffickers who move money and "product" across the border. As he states in one of the italicized sections, "*They dont have no respect for the law? That aint half of it. They dont even think about the law. It dont seem to even concern em*" (NC 216). He continues: "*And this may sound ignorant but I think for me the worst of it is knowin that probably the only reason I'm even still alive is that they have no respect for me. And that's very painful. Very painful*" (NC 217).

Earlier in the novel, in another of the italicized sections, Bell actually calls into question the underpinning rationales for the frontiersman's existence—the ideas that savagery can and should be tamed, and that power can operate in a fashion symbiotic with justice. This ups the stakes of McCarthy's project considerably, rendering *No Country for Old Men* a foundational challenge to American mythology. Bell states,

The opportunities for abuse are just about everywhere. There's no requirements in the Texas State Constitution for bein a sheriff. Not a one. There is no such thing as a county law. You think about a job where you have pretty much the same authority as God and there is no requirements put upon you and you are charged with preservin nonexistent laws and you tell me if that's peculiar or not. Because I say that it is. Does it work? Yes. Ninety percent of the time. It takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people cant be governed at all. (NC 64)

Here, in a Foucaultian moment, Bell suggests that what appears to be “natural” governance may be nothing more than a naturalized expression of hegemonic power—power whose effectiveness not only is coming to an end, but which may have been a mirage all along. Of course, throughout the novel’s italicized sections, Bell tells us about his fears of the future, which we may read retrospectively as his eschatological foreshadowing of *The Road*. By the end of this novel, Bell has quit his job, even at the risk of alienating his wife, Loretta, and upsetting the aged couple’s already precarious financial position. However, even more damning than all of this is his total inability to assist Moss or protect Moss’s wife, Carla Jean. Both Moss and Carla Jean die horrific, uncere-monious deaths by novel’s end.

When the novel concludes, therefore, Bell has quit his job with a legacy in tatters. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that by its conclusion, *No Country for Old Men* erases his legacy entirely? While Bell’s deputy at times appears diligent and effective in the novel, he takes orders from Bell, whom, we have learned, is not up to the task of governing his county any longer. Hence, the deputy cannot carry on Bell’s legacy as sheriff, one pre-sumes, because that legacy seems to have no future. In addition, by failing to protect Moss and Carla Jean, Bell is unable to carry his work as a soldier forward to a new generation. This aspect of the novel enables McCarthy to dramatize the terrible split many Vietnam veterans still feel in relationship to the fathers and uncles who served a generation before them.¹⁰

¹⁰A poignant announcement of this theme appears with Larry Heinemann’s interview in Christian G. Appy’s oral history of the Vietnam War. A U.S. combat veteran of the war, as well as a National Book Award-winning novelist, Heinemann recalls feeling betrayed by a “national father” after his searing combat experience, as well as his difficult readjustment to the states. See Heinemann, “We had this idea that we were king of the fucking hill,” interview by Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), 243-246.

Moreover, given that *No Country for Old Men* arrived in 2005, when the Iraq War was devolving ever more deeply into civil strife, this facet of the text points to continuing trauma in American society relative to the legacy of American combat. As Moss' father tells Bell in the third-to-last italicized section, speaking of his son's adjustment problems upon returning home from Vietnam,

People will tell you it was Vietnam brought this country to its knees. But I never believed that. It was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just the icin on the cake. We didnt have nothin to give em to take over there. If we'd sent em without rifles I dont know as they'd of been all that much worse off. You cant go to war like that. You cant go to war without God. I dont know what is goin to happen when the next one comes. I surely dont. (NC 294–295)

Here, through the voice of Moss' father, McCarthy effects a reversal of the dominant cultural memory of the Vietnam War. Rather than figuring the war as that which birthed cultural anxiety about America's legacy and future, McCarthy argues that there is something wrong with this legacy itself that may be the cause of American defeat. When we think in these terms, we see the full impact of Bell's personal narrative, as it relates to the cultural issues of American identity. Bell has no son to carry on his name, and his daughter—his only child—died in some manner he finds too painful to relate to his readers. Our modern-day frontiersman is the last of his line.

The gravity of Bell's plight would seem to support a reading such as that of John Cant relevant not only to how *No Country for Old Men*, but all of McCarthy's work, figures American identity. As Cant argues, "In classic deconstructionist mode, McCarthy writes in mythic form in order to deconstruct American mythology."¹¹ For Cant, this is cause to celebrate McCarthy. Along a different vein, James Wood's negative review of *No Country for Old Men* for *The New Yorker* turns Cant's reading on its head. Wood argues that this novel is but "an unimportant, stripped-down thriller" marked by "fake determinism" and "metaphysical cheapness." He continues:

¹¹John Cant, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, Studies in Major Literary Authors series (New York: Routledge, 2008), 10.

There is often the disquieting sense that McCarthy's fiction puts certain fond American myths under pressure merely to replace them with one vaster myth—eternal violence [...]. McCarthy's fiction seems to say, repeatedly, that this is how it has been and how it always will be. [...] His myth of eternal violence asserts, in effect, that rebellion is pointless because this is how it will always be.¹²

Readings such as those of Cant and Wood—readings that see in McCarthy a final “stance” toward American identity generally and the frontiersman specifically—are both depressingly common and wrong-headed. One thing these readings miss is that McCarthy's frontiersmen *always* are the last of their line, because that is the nature of the American frontiersman. From Natty Bumppo to Batman to Liam Neeson in *Taken* (2008), the frontiersman's function is to warn Americans that they must shift their understanding of the past so as to confront a changing present and future. Also, the frontiersman challenges male readers and viewers to see whether such a confrontation is winnable. The frontiersman always is a warning “bell,” particularly for male consumers of his representation, and as such always is threatened with his legacy's erasure should readers or viewers fail to answer the bell.¹³ In this, the frontiersman is an embodiment of what Sacvan Bercovitch identifies as the fundamental American rhetorical form: the jeremiad. Like other classic examples of the American jeremiad, representations of the frontiersman typically first allude to an edenic America of yesteryear, before examining a “fallen” American present. At that point, such representations propose a way forward that involves dramatic, usually violent action to reclaim Eden in the American future.¹⁴

Hence, critics such as Cant and Wood miss precisely this third term—what McCarthy offers in terms of hope for the future. If we drop back to the question of his legacy, we see that Sheriff Bell calls into serious doubt

¹²James Wood, “Red Planet: The Sanguinary Sublime of Cormac McCarthy,” review of *No Country for Old Men*, by Cormac McCarthy, *The New Yorker* July 25, 2005, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/07/25/red-planet.

¹³In his trailblazing work on the frontiersman and American masculinity, David Leverenz charts the historical evolution of this figure. For his seminal piece, see Leverenz, “The Last Real Man in America: From Natty Bumppo to Batman,” *American Literary History* 3, no. 4 (1991): 753–781.

¹⁴See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

his own worth as a frontiersman. He denies having earned the Bronze Star to which I alluded earlier, telling his Uncle Ellis that a commanding officer insisted that he accept the medal. Bell then says that in fact, he found himself in a last-man-standing situation in France during the Allied push to retake that nation from the Germans after D-Day. He says that he fought the Germans for a while after being wounded. The rest of the men in his unit were rapidly approaching death or already killed, and he had no way to transport any of the soldiers to safety. As night approached several hours after the bombing or shelling, Bell, facing almost certain death should he stay and fight, decided to abandon his post. As he tells his uncle,

you go into battle it's a blood oath to look after the men with you and I dont know why I didnt. I wanted to. When you're called upon like that you have to make up your mind that you'll live with the consequences. But you dont know what the consequences will be. You end up layin a lot of things at your own door that you didnt plan on. If I was supposed to die over there doin what I'd give my word to do then that's what I should of done. You can tell it any way you want but that's the way it is. I should of done it and I didnt. [...] I didnt know you could steal your own life. (NC 278)

Bell then states that he has been trying to make up for this failure the rest of his adulthood. Furthermore, he compares his actions to what he thinks his grandfather, a Texas lawman of some acclaim, would have done and believes himself to come up lacking. Bell says, "Maybe I needed to hear it myself. I'm not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I'm a man of this time" (NC 279).

When we read Bell's confession in light of his status as frontiersman, what we should see is that his survivor's guilt and his unwillingness to accept praise for his actions are par for the course—part of the humility the frontiersman is supposed to display. So, too, is Bell's clouded past: like figures such as John McClaine (Bruce Willis) of *Die Hard* (1988), who once allowed his work to overwhelm his commitment to his marriage, the frontiersman often is driven by a desire to erase the memory of some past situation in which his status as a "real man" was found wanting. Moreover, we ought to note that Bell's evaluation of himself in light of his grandfather is one in which Bell, a man of flesh and blood, compares himself to a legend in a hypothetical scenario the result of which has been decided *a priori*.

Bell's humility always would insist that he downplay his achievements, and therefore Bell always will come up short in comparison to his grandfather, given that the grandfather he "remembers" has become myth. By the same token, Llewelyn Moss, even if he had not stolen the money, would find himself lacking in comparison to Bell, because in 1980 Moss would be comparing the experiential horrors of his own "lost war" with the mythic "good war" Bell "fought"; that is, Moss would compare his war not with Bell's actual war—which we know has haunted the sheriff for many years—but rather with the cultural construction of Bell's war as perhaps the greatest of American victories. By the same token, an Iraq War veteran reading *No Country for Old Men* today likely would find him- or herself comparing the experience of that war not to Moss's actual experiences in Vietnam, which are unknowable, but rather to the cultural construction of the Vietnam War as the "tragic war." This reader might note that the killed-in-action figures for US personnel in Vietnam dwarf those of the Iraq War by tenfold. He or she might further note that civilian deaths in Vietnam dwarf those of Iraq exponentially, too. He or she likely would not note that grand figures and sweeping generalizations tell a person next to nothing about an individual experience of any event. Thinking and not-thinking along these lines, this veteran may conclude that as lost wars go, Vietnam is far more significant than the war in Iraq. Or, in the terms of Kevin Powers' solid Iraq War novel, *The Yellow Birds* (2012), this veteran-reader I have conjured might well see his or her conflict as but "our little pest of a war [that] rolled on."¹⁵ And having concluded this, our veteran-reader, should he or she refuse to succumb to melancholy, may turn to his or her present and future—and the present and future of the nation—with renewed vigor to make good.

Therefore, while Bell's confession is deconstructive in that it troubles a reading of World War II as the "good war" and the frontiersman as superman, this confession also reaffirms the still-valuable qualities that make up the frontiersman of myth: toughness, loyalty, courage, wit, humility, honesty, and patriotism, among others. As such, we may conclude that *No Country for Old Men* engages in a dialectical examination of the frontiersman specifically and American identity generally. This dialectic is at once subversive *and* affirmative. It is indispensable to McCarthy's reading of American culture; crucially for our study here, this dialectic also will reveal itself to be directly tied to McCarthy's philosophy. To better uncover this

¹⁵ Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2012), 216.

relationship, we can turn to the Border Trilogy and John Grady Cole. In doing so, we will find that the problem of defining the frontiersman's actions as worthy refer in cultural and political terms to the question of the degree of worthiness of American identity. In philosophical terms, this issue becomes one of grounding the frontiersman's actions in Truth and Justice. For McCarthy's thought, then, the cultural and political are axiological subsets of foundational epistemological and ethical questions that have their roots in his metaphysics.

II

Readers first meet John Grady Cole, the boy-protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses*, Volume One of McCarthy's Border Trilogy, in the following paragraph:

The candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and shut the door. He took off his hat and came slowly forward. The floorboards creaked under his boots. In his black suit he stood in the dark glass where the lilies leaned so palely from their waisted cutglass vase. Along the cold hallway behind him hung the portraits of forebears only dimly known to him all framed in glass and dimly lit above the narrow wainscoting. He looked down at the guttered candlestub. He pressed his thumbprint in the warm wax pooled on the oak veneer. Lastly he looked at the face so caved and drawn among the folds of funeral cloth, the yellowed mustache, the eyelids paper thin. That was not sleeping. That was not sleeping.¹⁶

In this passage, which opens the novel, McCarthy captures John Grady's past and prefigures the boy's future. The paragraph's first sentence functions as a metaphor for the novel itself, with John Grady as "candleflame"—the burning life force of the text—and the text as "pierglass" that will attempt to convey him to readers.¹⁷ The first sentence also

¹⁶Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, vol. 1 of The Border Trilogy (1992; repr., New York: Vintage, 1993), 3. Hereafter, I will use in-text, parenthetical references to this novel, referring to it as *APH*.

¹⁷In *The Crossing*, to which we will turn shortly, McCarthy uses this same candleflame metaphor in reference to Boyd's life force as the boy awaits medical attention, having been shot. See *The Crossing*, vol. 2 of The Border Trilogy (1994; repr., New York: Vintage, 1995), 309.

foregrounds the difficulty, or perhaps even the impossibility, of separating essence from appearance. It is for this reason that McCarthy alerts us both to the candleflame and the image thereof. In the paragraph's second sentence, John Grady removes his hat, which shows us that he is aware and respectful of the seriousness of the situation in which he finds himself. The boy then walks forward into the beginning of the journey McCarthy's novel will convey. The third sentence further signals the seriousness of John Grady—that he is a young man of force who can press himself into or onto history—before the fourth sentence, with its “black suit,” “dark glass,” and “lilies,” reminds us of the mortality of all people, including this boy. In the fifth through seventh sentences of the paragraph, McCarthy contextualizes John Grady as inheritor of the frontier and as frontiersman-in-training; he also shows us John Grady's willingness to accept this inheritance, even as McCarthy denies that one can know fully from whence he or she comes because of the vagaries and losses inherent to history's translation across time. Finally, the paragraph's concluding three sentences return John Grady's attention, as well as that of the novel's readers, to the issue of mortality. McCarthy does this to signal here what we also learn about the frontiersman in *No Country for Old Men*: only in the confrontation with death—only in deciding justly when to take a life and being willing to give his own when necessary—does a man become a real frontiersman. Therefore, we see that McCarthy ends this paragraph by foreshadowing the only fate possible for John Grady. The boy must confront mortality, and in this confrontation act justly, before he becomes a true frontiersman.

In his ambition to live up to his inheritance, John Grady faces no shortage of challenges. One challenge is that which we considered at the end of the preceding section: like all frontiersmen-to-be, John Grady must compare his actions not to reality, but rather to legend. The novel's second paragraph reads as follows: “It was dark outside and cold and no wind. In the distance a calf bawled. He stood with his hat in his hand. You never combed your hair that way in your life, he said” (*APH* 3). With this paragraph, McCarthy signals that already the memory of John Grady's grandfather is being transfigured into myth. Furthermore, McCarthy indicates just how alone John Grady will be on his journey to capture his inheritance. In addition to these problems, he faces the issue of “spatial constraint,” which, as Jay Ellis shows us, is a concept both literal—i.e., the closing or shrinking frontier—and figurative, insofar as

McCarthy's characters resist entrapment in and therefore emasculation by "society."¹⁸ On the novel's first page, McCarthy informs us that,

As he [John Grady] turned to go he heard the train. He stopped and waited for it. He could feel it under his feet. It came boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance and the long light of the headlamp running through the tangled mesquite breaks and creating out of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness [...]. (*APH* 3–4)

John Grady, to whom we are introduced in 1949, will try to become a frontiersman even as the frontier collapses around him.

Coupled with the problem of spatial restraint, to which we will return at more length later, John Grady also faces a kind of racial constraint. Like his forebears, he is caught betwixt and between racial identities. On the one hand, he identifies with the "savage." At times, this means he identifies with the American Indians of Western legend. For example, McCarthy writes,

In the evening he saddled his horse and rode out west from the house. [...] He rode where he would always choose to ride, out where the western fork of the old Comanche road coming down out of the Kiowa country to the north passed through the westernmost section of the ranch [...]. At the hour he'd always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only. When the wind was in the north you could hear them [...] nation and ghost of nation passing in soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness [...]. (*APH* 5)

¹⁸For Ellis, this problematic is ironic on an aesthetic level, given how McCarthy privileges setting and de-privileges psychologizing in his characterization. As Ellis writes, "Most of his [McCarthy's] characters are deeply ambivalent toward any form of spatial constraint, so the fact that our recognition of this depends on reading the settings in which we find them adds irony to their predicaments." In Ellis, *No Place for Home*, 16.

Here, we see that John Grady, in his desire to live closer to nature and amid a frontier that truly remains wild, has more in common with the Comanche and Kiowa than with his white ancestors who settled Texas. Hence, McCarthy further tells us that when John Grady is traveling into the sunset, “He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west” (*APH* 5). Yet for all his identification with American Indians, John Grady only ever becomes a surface-level native: that is, his face might be “coppering,” but after some time his whiteness is bound to reassert itself. By the same token, we see that John Grady, who speaks apparently fluent Spanish, feels more at ease with the people of Mexican descent who work the Grady farm than he does with his white parents. Yet at no point during his later journeys south into Mexico does John Grady get mistaken for a “native” there. His whiteness always marks him.¹⁹

The irony of John Grady’s problem with a racialization of his identity is that this problem stems directly from the Anglo society and culture the frontiersman extends and defends. John Grady’s ideal version of being a frontiersman would entail operating a cattle ranch in western Texas, imprinting “civilization” upon an otherwise “savage” landscape. Such a life is possible only in the context of American law and economic opportunity. When John Grady attempts to realize this life outside the context of American law, the results are disastrous, both in *All the Pretty Horses* and in *Cities of the Plain*, the Border Trilogy’s final volume. Moreover, the key reason John Grady feels compelled to realize his dreams outside American law is that his parents have failed him. The reasons his parents have failed him, then, include his mother’s rejection of a life as an isolated homemaker and his father’s ruin, thanks to the elder Cole’s World War II service and time as a prisoner of war brutalized by the Japanese. In short, it is the strain of the frontier life itself,

¹⁹The archetypal example in American literature of the frontiersman confronting his problematized racial identity—fixedly white and yet hybridized all the same—appears in the “Stories of the Fathers” exchange between Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). As Natty tells his interlocutors, to include his own troubled conscience, “I am not a prejudiced man, nor one who vaunts himself on his natural privileges, though the worst enemy I have on earth, and he is an Iroquois, daren’t deny that I am genuine white [...]”. Excerpted in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 8th ed., vol. B: 1820–1850, ed. Robert S. Levine and Arnold Krupat (New York: Norton, 2012), 82.

coupled with the demands placed upon the frontiersman and his family, which render John Grady's inheritance so precarious. As the boy's father states, "People dont feel safe no more [...]. We're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago" (*APH* 25–26). We may conclude, therefore, that John Grady faces the real threat of being the last of his kind. All the same, were he not facing this threat, John Grady would not be a candidate for status as a frontiersman, for the frontiersman always is the "last real man in America." This identity, the novel tells us in a passage in which we view John Grady through his father's eyes, is one into which John Grady was born and one for which he is perfect. McCarthy writes,

The boy who rode on slightly before him sat a horse not only as if he'd been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been. (*APH* 23)

As frontiersman-in-training, John Grady is both a man out of time and a man of his time—just as is Sheriff Bell. Consequently, when John Grady and his trusty sidekick, Lacey Rawlins, take off for Mexico, they enter the space of myth (note the bell that tolls). As McCarthy writes,

They rode out on the high prairie where they slowed the horses to a walk and the stars swarmed around them out of the blackness. They heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and they rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like young thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousands worlds for the choosing. (*APH* 30)

Nevertheless, after John Grady proves himself capable of taking a life when necessary—killing the cuchillero in the Saltillo prison—McCarthy tells us that, "He lay in the dark thinking of all the things he did not know about his father and he realized that the father he knew was all the

father he would ever know” (*APH* 204). Limited in his access to history and temporally bound to his present, John Grady must act as justly as he can in the now. Also, John Grady remains responsible for the effects of his actions—regardless of what he knows or does not know prior to acting. In fact, that is the burden of the mythic inheritance he strives to claim. In conversation with his teenaged hitchhiker in *No Country for Old Men*, Moss characterizes this burden succinctly, saying, “You dont start over. That’s what it’s about. Ever step you take is forever. You can’t make it go away. None of it. You understand what I’m sayin?” (*NC* 227).

Early in *All the Pretty Horses*, then, McCarthy begins to capture John Grady’s appeal. Eventually, he does nothing less than fix John Grady’s essence. He writes, “What he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise” (*APH* 6). With this passage, McCarthy commences a reading of John Grady’s nature that also stands as a reading of the nature of the frontiersman. He will posit that this boy, and the frontiersman he wishes to become, not only are attracted to the world’s lifeforce—that energy that animates the world and allows us to assert our freedom in it—but also can act in concert with that lifeforce’s “leanings.” McCarthy is suggesting that this boy can live the difference between the animate and the seemingly animate, or the difference between essence and appearance. He builds on this idea a few pages later in the novel, writing,

He [John Grady] lay on his back in his blankets and looked out where the quartermoon lay cocked over the heel of the mountains. In that false blue down the Pleiades seemed to be rising up into the darkness above the world and dragging all the stars away, the great diamond of Orion and Cepella and the signature of Casiopeia all rising up through the phosphorous dark like a sea-net. He lay a long time listening to the others breathing in their sleep while he contemplated the wildness about him, the wildness within. (*APH* 60)

At a most basic level, what makes John Grady a potential frontiersman is the prospect that he would understand the world’s wild nature—the true world, the world operative beneath and beyond man’s imprint of himself upon the world, as well as that which calls man to make his imprint in

the first place. This prospect not only asserts the solidity of the eternal in an era seemingly overrun with the temporary and the inauthentic; it further asserts man's potential to know this eternal and live a life at one with it.

Put differently, John Grady specifically, and frontiersmen generally, are attractive because they live a kind of truth that they can infer because of what Slotkin termed their "privileged" nature.²⁰ This truth manifests itself as a type of bodily integrity that involves acting in concert with the world's wildness. Inherent to this truth, moreover, is freedom; in fact, freedom is the *a priori* condition that makes this truth possible. In *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Bell speaks at least obliquely to this conflation of the sensory, truth, and freedom when he tells us of his father's beliefs. Bell says,

My daddy always told me to just do the best you knew how and tell the truth. He said there was nothin to set a man's mind at ease like wakin up in the morning and not havin to decide who you were. And if you done somethin wrong just stand up and say you done it and say you're sorry and get on with it. Dont haul stuff around with you. I guess all that sounds pretty simple today. Even to me. All the more reason to think about it. (NC 249)

In more precise terms, here in *All the Pretty Horses* McCarthy elaborates on this truth by way of a conversation Rawlins, Blevins, and John Grady have about John Grady's remarkable abilities as a horseman. Rawlins has just implied that John Grady is the world's best rider when McCarthy writes,

Blevins leaned his chin toward the fire and spat. I dont see how you can say somebody is just flat out the best.

You cant, said John Grady. He's just ignorant, that's all.

There's a lot of good riders, said Blevins.

That's right, said Rawlins. There's a lot of good riders. But there's just one that's the best. And he happens to be settin right yonder. (APH 58–59)

²⁰Of course, McCarthy carefully undermines readers' ability to conflate this privilege with race. Note, for instance, John Grady's uncertain ethnic heritage, his bilingual status, his two love affairs with Mexican women, and so on.

In this passage, we see John Grady discount Rawlins' claim that he is the world's best horseman. However, we know from our earlier investigation of the frontiersman that such humility on John Grady's part actually strengthens Rawlins' claim. In fact, Rawlins recognizes as much, saying of John Grady, "He cant take my part of it without braggin on hisself, can he?" (*APH* 58). For his turn, Blevins asserts a social-constructivist stance, claiming that Rawlins' knowledge is limited by his subject-position, just as, supposedly, anyone's knowledge is so limited. Blevins says that one's sense of the best horseman, "Depends on who you seen ride" (*APH* 58). Yet Rawlins—whom, the reader should note, *never once is wrong about any other prediction or assertion in the entire novel*—rejects social constructivism and holds firm to his position.

And Rawlins is correct. Or, at the very least, the novel affirms Rawlins' position to the exclusion of Blevins' take. As another great horseman, Luis, tells John Grady and his compatriots while they are camped one evening, the horse has an essential nature. McCarthy writes that Luis, speaking of his experiences during the Mexican Revolution,

said that he had seen the souls of horses and that it was a terrible thing to see. He said that it could be seen under certain circumstances attending to the death of a horse because the horse shares a common soul and its separate life only forms it out of all the horses and makes it mortal. He said that if a person understood the soul of the horse then he would understand all horses that ever were. (*APH* 111)

If this is true—if there is a "horseness" of the horse, and this horseness somehow is knowable by man—then for a person to know the horse would not depend upon comparing oneself to another. The world's greatest horseman would be the one who knows the horse and acts entirely in concert with that knowledge. Therefore, there could exist more than one greatest horseman, just as there could exist no greatest horseman, at any given time. While Rawlins' argument still is evolving—it lacks this qualification—*All the Pretty Horses* makes abundantly clear that in 1949 there does exist at least one world's greatest horseman, whose name is John Grady Cole.

In Platonic terms, which also here are McCarthyian terms, John Grady is the living embodiment, the instantiation, of the form Horseman. In addition, Rawlins' remarkable capacity to identify and communicate the reality of what we can term John Grady's "ontological perfection"—his

living being is the Being of Horseman—is a metonym for the text’s ability to convey the same to readers. In other words, the wise person, able to apprehend the form of a thing—to discern the one from which the many are derived—can in turn recognize being’s perfection as Being. And the great storyteller can bring this formal perfection to light. As McCarthy tells us of John Grady’s relationship to the champion stallion Don Hector purchases and the boy trains,

He’d ride sometimes clear to the upper end of the laguna before the horse would even stop trembling and he spoke constantly to it in spanish in phrases almost biblical repeating again and again the strictures of a yet untabled law. Soy commandante de las yeguas, he would say, yo y yo solo. Sin la caridad de estas manos no tengas nada. Ni comida ni agua ni hijos. Soy yo que traigo las yeguas de las montañas, las yeguas jóvenes, las yeguas salvajes y ardientes.²¹ While inside the vaulting of the ribs between his knees the darkly meated heart pumped of who’s will and the blood pulsed and the bowels shifted in their massive blue convolutions of who’s will and [...] the head turning side to side and the great slaving keyboard of his teeth and the hot globes of eyes where the world burned. (APH 128)

John Grady somehow is able to infer the horseness of the horse, as well as to act on this inference: “who’s will” is his will *and* the horse’s will.²² That is, John Grady acts in a manner entirely consistent with inferred truth, here in this passage and in a number of other passages, to include those which portray him breaking 16 horses in just a few days’ work. When he lives in this manner, his reality (an instantiation) coheres with its formal perfection; being and Being align. In McCarthy’s terms, the boy is functioning “in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised” (APH 162). Therefore, we may

²¹ English translation: *I command the mares, he would say, I and I alone. Without the care of these hands, you have nothing. Not food not water not colts. It is I who bring the mares down from the mountains, the mares who are young, who are wild and ready.* All translations of McCarthy’s Spanish to English are my own.

²² Never in McCarthy do we get a clear statement of the ground of his epistemology—i.e., *how* does knowledge of a form come to a person? That said, this is a problem for realist metaphysics generally. In Plato, for instance, man can reason his way to the forms, to include knowledge of the Form of the Good, which is the form of forms (or the idea of ideas, depending upon one’s favored translation). Yet Plato never really clarifies *how* man comes to possess this potential—and especially, why some people appear favored by the gods in this respect, while others appear lacking.

conclude that the appeal of John Grady specifically, and that of the frontiersman generally, is embodied truth, which McCarthy defines as ontological perfection, or being becoming Being. The appeal of John Grady's *representation*, moreover, is that the reader stands witness to this embodied truth.²³ Furthermore, it is hard to see how this appeal ever could be extinguished from the world, no matter what challenges it faces or shortcomings it is found to manifest. Later, we will see that in McCarthy's canon, the frontiersman's appeal survives even the apocalypse, given that Papa of *The Road* is McCarthy's most integral example of the frontiersman in all his splendor.

As we already have seen, therefore, the assertion that McCarthy's representations of the frontiersman in particular, or American mythology in general, merely are deconstructive clearly is wrong. By the same token, if one were to argue that McCarthy offers readers an uncritically affirmative view of the frontiersman, and thereby of American mythology, the reader would be equally misguided. In the specific context of *All the Pretty Horses*, the reader must recognize that as attractive as John Grady is, he also is maddeningly stubborn—stubborn, in fact, to the point of being dangerous. The reason John Grady is so stubborn is that he clings to an implacable intellectual dishonesty. Out of one side of his mouth, he will assert, without reservation, that one is entirely responsible for his actions. He will affirm an unfettered faith in self-reliance that leaves little room for a person to appeal to circumstances as mitigating factors in determining his or her successes and failures. John Grady feels free to apply this harsh standard of judgment even to his closest compatriots and family members, to include the unwaveringly devoted Rawlins (not to mention John Grady's mother). On the other hand, when John Grady is found wanting in his own deeds, at times he refuses to take responsibility. Instead, he will deny that his actions fit into the framework of self-reliance by naturalizing what he has done—appealing to fate as the causal agent behind his actions. By doing this, he actualizes the danger of the determinism built

²³In an attempt to keep this project relatively manageable, I have avoided fully confronting the aesthetic implications of McCarthy's philosophy. However, I believe the leaping-off point for a proper examination of them arrives here, with the prospect of the witness to ontological perfection. This prospect is the *a priori* condition for McCarthy's assertion that the storyteller's challenge is to create the many from the one, as opposed to the reverse.

into the frontiersman's identity, the same determinism McCarthy had the boy's father voice earlier in more approving terms.

Hence, after John Grady's pursuit of Alejandra, coupled with his insistence on helping Blevins, result in he and Rawlins being imprisoned—which may have resulted in Rawlins being raped and certainly results in both boys nearly being killed—John Grady cannot bring himself to apologize. Here is the exchange between he and his friend:

John Grady sat looking down at his hands.

Would it satisfy you, he said, if I was to just go on and admit to bein a fourteen carat gold plated son of a bitch?

I never said that.

They sat. After a while John Grady looked up.

I cant back up and start over. But I dont see the point in slobberin over it. And I cant see where it would make me feel better to be able to point a finger at somebody else.

It dont make me feel better. I tried to reason with you, that's all. Tried any number of times.

I know you did. But some things aint reasonable. Be that as it may I'm the same man you crossed that river with. How I was is how I am and all I know to do is stick. I never even promised you you wouldnt die down here. Never asked your word on it either. I dont believe in signing on just till it quits suitin you. You either stick or you quit and I wouldnt quit you I dont care what you done. And that's about all I got to say.

I never quit you, Rawlins said.

All right. (*APH* 155–156)

In this passage, John Grady begins by displacing Rawlins' anger and foregrounding his own—the first move the former makes toward denying his responsibility for what has happened. Once he does that, he caricatures Rawlins' critique of him, in an attempt to make Rawlins feel guilty for desiring justice. Then he challenges Rawlins' manhood—the "slobberin" comment suggesting that Rawlins' argument consists merely of feelings, which in turn suggests that he is being effeminate—before implying that Rawlins is the one suffering a lack of self-control in

wanting to “point a finger at somebody else.” Finally, John Grady denies that he could have acted any differently than he has—saying, “some things aint reasonable”—before affirming how good a friend he is and how Rawlins’ status as a good friend now is in question. The passage concludes with Rawlins having to assert his commitment to the partnership, as if that ever were in question. In short, John Grady indeed has behaved like “a fourteen carat gold plated son of a bitch.”

The nature of his stubbornness involves his insistence on his own innocence. Having said that, there are times in *All the Pretty Horses* when John Grady will insist on his own guilt, applying too rigid a standard of right behavior to himself. The crucial example of this involves his inability to come to terms with killing the cuchillero. Both Rawlins and the judge who appears at the end of the novel assure John Grady that he had to kill the cuchillero—the act that seemingly cements John Grady’s status as a frontiersman, especially when coupled with how he spares the captain’s life. However, John Grady refuses to avoid or reason away the gravity of what he has done. These moments do not necessarily contradict one another. Rather, McCarthy is pointing to a fundamental problem of American mythology, which involves the notion that America’s creation of the “city upon a hill” is a mission sanctioned by God. Embedded in this city-upon-a-hill ideal—an ideal the frontiersman is tasked with realizing—is the belief that America either acts justly or acts wrongly on the way to acting justly. In other words, embedded in the city-upon-a-hill concept is a circular logic of faith in American innocence that can paper over American wrongdoing. Therefore, at times John Grady will assert that he is but an innocent in the sway of something larger than himself (the power of young love, for example). At other times, John Grady, even when he tries to take responsibility for his actions—and even when he tries too hard to do so—will find that characters under the sway of America’s frontier mythology will insist on his innocence for him. These matters are two sides of a single coin. In *All the Pretty Horses* and throughout his canon, McCarthy shows us that belief in American innocence is a particularly dangerous aspect of American mythology. He further shows us that this belief is inseparable from the frontiersman’s identity. Just as Graham Greene did

in his skewering of American innocence, *The Quiet American* (1955), McCarthy is claiming that, “Innocence is a kind of insanity.”²⁴

In philosophical terms, McCarthy is pointing here to the need for a referent or ground for the frontiersman’s actions. This referent would anchor the frontiersman’s embodied truth, rendering this truth stable and solidifying the prospect of ontological perfection’s use as a catalyst for justice. In McCarthy, this problem achieves its own instantiation of a sort in Billy Parham.

III

If innocence is dangerous in McCarthy, it also is beautiful, which he is quick to assert when we meet the Parham brothers, Billy and Boyd, of *The Crossing*. When we first encounter Billy, it is innocence, or perhaps better said, purity that we find Billy attracted to and which attracts readers to him. We watch as he sneaks out of his new home at night to spy on wolves hunting in freshly fallen New Mexico snow. We are drawn through him to the integrity of these creatures—to the wolf-ness of the wolf, to its essence, an integral truth McCarthy later calls the wolf being “always corroborate to itself.”²⁵ Here, he describes the wolves “[l]oping and twisting. Tunneling their noses in the snow. Loping and running and rising by twos in a standing dance and running on again” (*TC* 4). In his attraction, Billy functions as a double for John Grady. However, even at this early stage of the novel, *The Crossing* insists on a difference between the boys. McCarthy writes,

There were seven of them [wolves] and they passed within twenty feet of where he [Billy] lay. He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air. They bunched and nuzzled and licked one another. Then they stopped. They stood with their ears cocked. Some with one forefoot raised to their chest. They were looking at him. He did not breathe. They did not breathe. They stood. Then they turned and quietly trotted on. When he got back to the house Boyd was awake but he didnt

²⁴Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (1955; repr., New York: Penguin, 2004), 155.

²⁵McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 79. Hereafter, I will use in-text, parenthetical references to this novel, referring to it as *TC*.

tell him where he'd been nor what he'd seen. He never told anybody. (*TC* 4–5)

While John Grady merges his will with that of the horse, Billy will not prove so able with the wolf, a natural antagonist of man, rather than a creature that serves man. For this among other reasons, Billy is and will remain an observer to the world's essence. As observer, he suffers profound loss—the loss of the embodied truth John Grady lives, as does Billy's brother, Boyd. At the same time, Billy, cut off from this truth, accesses his own truth. He sees precisely how the frontiersman, in the process of living truth, can naturalize his own wrongdoing and is available for others as they naturalize theirs. Because he sees this, Billy cannot be the frontiersman. However, he becomes McCarthy's most-lucid witness thereto and leads us to a major revelation in McCarthy's metaphysics: the truth that is the lived conjunction of being and Being, ontological perfection, is not universal truth. That is, the frontiersman's truth is not Truth, which in turn obviates the prospect of a universal justice, or Justice.

In becoming our witness, Billy undertakes a series of heroic and tragic quests, his "crossings," in pursuit of the integral truth John Grady manifests. As McCarthy tells us, the bell tolls for both Parham brothers, just as it did for John Grady and Lacey:

The winter that Boyd turned fourteen the trees inhabiting the dry river bed were bare from early on and the sky was gray day after day and the trees were pale against it. A cold wind had come down from the north with the earth running under bare poles toward a reckoning whose ledgers would be drawn up and dated only long after all due claims had passed, such is this history. (*TC* 5)

Billy is called to account for his frontier inheritance, and precisely because he rejects the intellectual dishonesty John Grady embraces—rejects appeals to "fate" exactly when such appeals might serve him well or even be accurate—he never can live his inheritance. That is, he refuses to conflate his will with the world's will as a matter of course. In refusing to do this—in refusing to naturalize the act by which the ardenthearted make the world anew—he becomes vulnerable. Moreover, in becoming vulnerable, he renders those he loves vulnerable, too. This is what McCarthy dramatizes through the story of the Indian man whose hunt Billy inadvertently ruins early in the novel and who will take advantage of

the boy's kindness before apparently robbing and murdering his parents. Of Billy meeting the Indian's gaze, McCarthy tells us,

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

When confronted with evidence of injustice, lies, or suffering—here, the legacy of affronts to human dignity of earlier American attempts at a Manifest Destiny have left behind—Billy wants to pursue the Good. Yet when confronted with the wild heart of the world, Billy wants to live that wildness. His crossings are attempts to conjoin these desires. Billy seeks the merger of integrity and Justice, which demands the elevation of truth-as-ontological perfection to Truth.

Shortly after we learn that a she-wolf is killing calves on their ranch, the Parham boys accompany their father to a neighbor's ranch. This neighbor, named Sanders, has employed a man named Echols, a renowned trapper of wolves who has left the area for a time. The Parhams visit Echols' cabin, where they come across his supplies. McCarthy describes these supplies as follows:

There in the dusty light from the one small window on the shelves of roughsawed pine stood a collection of fruitjars and bottles [...] upon which in Echols' neat script were listed contents and dates. In the jars [...] the inward parts of the beast who dreams of man and has so dreamt in running dreams a hundred thousand years and more. Dreams of that malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and kin and rout them from their house. A god insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood. The jars stood webbed in dust and the light among them made of the little room with its chemic glass a strange basilica dedicated to a practice as soon to be extinct among the trades of men as the beast to whom it owed its being. (*TC* 17)

Here, McCarthy asserts that wolf and man are natural antagonists, the desires of humans to control land, reproduce, and imprint their world

upon the natural one incompatible with the wolf's predatory, wild, ranging Being. Echols' cabin is a site invested with the power to communicate this revelation—a "strange basilica" that sacralizes the war between wolf and man. Incidentally, to secure victories in this war, Echols—a frontiersman, of course, who is the last real (wolf-trapping) man in America—had to become "about half wolf himself," as Sanders says (*TC* 19), so in tune with his antagonist that Echols supposedly can set a trap from horseback. When McCarthy describes Billy's father setting the first trap in the novel's present action, and in doing so reanimating the war for a conclusive battle—the wolf's last stand—he links the elder Parham to nothing less than the history of man opposing the trajectory of his reason, and with it his being, to the trajectory of the world as man finds it. He writes that Billy's father

held the trap up and eyed the notch in the pan while he backed off one screw and adjusted the trigger. Crouched in the broken shadow with the sun at his back and holding the trap at eyelevel against the morning sky he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. Like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord that space between his being and the world that was. If there be such space. If it be knowable. (*TC* 22)

To the degree that this is how man defines himself in the world, *The Crossing* affirms such efforts, to include the hunt. Consider, for instance, this deeply romantic portrait of Billy riding out alone to check the trap-sets:

He turned the horse and went out through the stockgate and into the road south. The dog had come to the gate and stood looking after him. He rode out a little way on the road and then stopped and dismounted and strapped the scabbard alongside the saddle and levered the breech of the rifle partly open to see that there was a shell in the chamber and then slid the rifle into the scabbard and buckled it and mounted up and rode on again. Before him the mountains were blinding white in the sun. They looked new born out of the hand of some improvident god who'd perhaps not even puzzled out a use for them. That kind of new. The rider rode with his heart outsized in his chest and the horse who was also young tossed its head and took a sidestep in the road and shot out one hind heel and then they went on. (*TC* 30–31)

As hunter, Billy sheds civilization's trappings and exists more intensely and more honestly, openly living and thereby taking some responsibility for man's predation.

In a sense, only in the hunt does man shed pretense and reveal himself in McCarthy. Man's will announces itself in the raw, and by doing so—by setting itself against nature—man's will can confront and subordinate the world's various wills, given that none of the world's other creatures is capable of pretense, circumspection, or premeditation to the degree man is. All the same, in the hunt, man also becomes most like the world, which is to say that mastering the wild requires becoming-wild. Of Billy on the hunt, McCarthy tells us further,

He stood down into the snow and dropped the reins and squatted and thumbed back the brim of his hat. In the floors of the little wells she'd stoven in the snow lay her perfect prints. [...] He closed his eyes and tried to see her. Her and others of her kind, wolves and ghosts of wolves running in the whiteness of that high world as perfect to their use as if their counsel had been sought in the devising of it. (TC 31)

In asserting his will, man is unique among creation in the degree to which he is able to use his consciousness to fundamentally alter the world. As Don Arnulfo tells Billy, the wolf, unlike man, "is a being of great order" that lives in harmony with the world's fundamental truth: "there is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (TC 45). By contrast, man, singularly able to extinguish nature as we currently experience it, frequently refuses this truth. As Don Arnulfo says,

El lobo es una cosa incognoscible, he said. Lo que se tiene en la trampa no es mas que dientes y forro. El lobo propio no se puede conocer. Lobo o lo que sabe el lobo. Tan como preguntar lo que saben las piedras. Los arboles. El mundo. [...] Es cazador, el lobo, he said. Cazador. Me entiendes? [...] ²⁶ The old man went on to say that the hunter was a different thing than men supposed. He said that men believe the blood of the slain to be of no consequence but the wolf knows better. [...] Finally he said that if men drink the blood of God yet they do not understand the seriousness of

²⁶English translation: *The wolf is a thing unknowable, he said. What you have in the trap is nothing more than teeth and fur. The wolf proper you cannot know. The wolf or what the wolf knows. You might as well ask what the rocks know. The trees. The world. [...] The wolf is a hunter, he said. Hunter. Do you understand me?* The reader should note that the first use of

what they do. He said that men wish to be serious but they do not understand how to be so. Between their acts and their ceremonies lies the world [...] but this world is invisible to them. (TC 45–46)

Put differently, as Don Arnulfo further states, “If you could breathe a breath so strong you could blow out the wolf. [...] The wolf is made the way the world is made. You cannot touch the world [...] for it is made of breath only” (TC 46). Don Arnulfo then counsels Billy to find places in the world where God and man act in concert, or, “lugares donde el fierro ya está en la tierra” (TC 47).²⁷ He concludes by telling Billy that in such places, God works with man to destroy His own creation, and he further states—correctly—that this belief makes him a heretic.

Here, Don Arnulfo has rendered man God’s agent in destruction as much as creation. According to Don Arnulfo, God has a special covenant with man such that God will allow man access to the forms of things, not just to their instantiations—hence the reference to the Eucharist, which in the Catholic tradition allows man to internalize the Form of God Himself and therefore is the most important of the sacraments. Don Arnulfo also has conflated human nature, the will, and destruction, rendering man made in God’s image insofar as man can create, while universalizing creation to be a kind of destruction. Man is the ultimate instantiated *cazador*, or hunter; God is the very Form *Cazador*. McCarthy returns to these ideas just a few pages later, writing of Billy’s first night journeying south with the she-wolf,

He woke all night with the cold. He’d rise and mend back the fire and she was always watching him. When the flames came up her eyes burned out there like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of an unknowable void. A world construed out of blood and blood’s alcahest and blood in its core and in its integument because it was that nothing save blood had power to resonate against that void which threatened hourly to devour it. [...] When those eyes and the nation to which they stood witness were gone at last with their dignity back into their origins

Footnote 26 (continued)

“know” here implies relational knowledge (as in, “I know Bob, because we met at Sally’s Christmas party”). The other uses of “know” imply essential knowledge (as in, to “know oneself”).

²⁷ English translation: *places where the iron yet remains in the land.*

there would perhaps be other fires and other witnesses and other worlds otherwise beheld. But they would not be this one. (*TC* 73–74)

Over the course of *The Crossing*, as well as *Cities of the Plain*, Billy will learn these lessons, often at great cost to himself and others. What Billy refuses to do, however, is naturalize what appear to be unnecessary acts of destruction or acts of selfishness, which makes him superior to John Grady as a moral agent even as it affects Billy's marginalization.

Billy's heart—and arguably his head, too—is in the right place. For example, take his promise to the she-wolf after her capture, which McCarthy describes thusly:

He made her promises that he swore to keep in the making. That he would take her to the mountains where she would find others of her kind. She watched him with her yellow eyes and in them was no despair but only that same recklessness deep of loneliness that cored the world to its heart. (*TC* 105)

Billy has taken it upon himself to do right by the she-wolf, which is to say that he has taken upon himself the burden of turning his inheritance as a potential frontiersman to the Good. In doing so, Billy confronts what we have termed a problem of referentiality. He must find a stable referent whereby his becoming a frontiersman coheres with a vision of goodness not tied to his particular will, but rather tied to justice independent of the same.²⁸ As McCarthy has shown us in *All the Pretty Horses*, and as he will show us again in *Cities of the Plain*, John Grady's typical response to this problem is to ignore that it exists. Moreover, even when he attempts an address of this problem, various forces will conspire to assure John Grady that he need not worry himself. However, Billy will grow ever more cognizant of the frontiersman's problem of reference—the frontiersman's Truth problem, which also is a problem of Justice.

²⁸In a sense, I am concurring with David Holloway's groundbreaking work here, for, as Holloway correctly argues, the "one central theme of *The Crossing*" in political terms is what he calls "the collapse of referentiality." I further concur that this is an aesthetic problem McCarthy's fiction stages. Yet I believe this aesthetic problem to be embedded in a metaphysical problem Holloway fails to fully articulate. In Holloway, *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, 30.

In advance of the fair wherein the she-wolf is reduced to a horrifying spectacle, Billy has a dream. In relating this dream, McCarthy figures Billy's problem of reference, which we now see is foundational to his inheritance, in existential terms as a confrontation with the void. The dream also serves to mark the death of Billy's father. McCarthy writes,

He slept and as he slept he dreamt and the dream was of his father and in the dream his father was afoot and lost in the desert. In the dying light of that day he could see his father's eyes. His father stood looking toward the west where the sun had gone and where the wind was rising out of the darkness. The small sands in that waste was all there was for the wind to move and it moved with a constant migratory seething upon itself. As if in its ultimate granulation the world sought some stay against its own eternal wheeling. His father's eyes searched the coming of the night in the deepening redness beyond the rim of the world and those eyes seemed to contemplate with a terrible equanimity the cold and the dark and the silence that moved upon him and then all was dark and all was swallowed up and in the silence he heard somewhere a solitary bell that tolled and ceased and then he woke. (*TC* 112)

By turn, when Billy attempts to rescue the she-wolf, McCarthy, through the son of the local hacendado, figures Billy's problem in political terms. Here is the key portion of the exchange between Billy and his antagonist, the latter of whom speaks first:

You think that this country is some country you can come here and do what you like.

I never thought that. I never thought about this country one way or the other.

Yes, said the hacendado.

We was just passin through, the boy said. We wasnt botherin nobody. Queríamos pasar, no más.

Pasar or traspasar?²⁹

²⁹ English translation:

We wish to pass, nothing more.

Pass or trespass?

The boy turned and spat into the dirt. [...] He said the wolf knew nothing of boundaries. The young don nodded in agreement but what he said was that whatever the wolf knew or did not know was irrelevant and that if the wolf had crossed that boundary it was perhaps so much worse for the wolf but the boundary stood without regard. [...] When the boy said that he had not known that he would be required to pay in order to pass through the country the hacendado said that then he was in much the same situation as the wolf. (*TC* 119)

These two assessments of Billy's situation do not resolve into one another, nor does one supersede the other. Billy's attempt to locate meaning, and thereby realize a justice that transcends the particular, is a metaphysical, epistemological, *and* an ethical problem. As we have started and will continue to see, even when McCarthy seems to arrive at tentative solutions on the metaphysical and epistemological fronts, he appears to offer much less hope for an ethics.

Here, when the hacendado's son orders Billy to leave the wolf and allow the horror that will be her death to proceed, McCarthy writes that Billy "looked like a man standing on a scaffold seeking in the crowd some likeness to his own heart. Nothing to come of the looking even though all might arrive at their own such standing soon or late" (*TC* 120). No solidarity emerges that would represent an alternative to the authority of the hacendado's son. Power trumps goodness, because cowardly self-interest trumps justice. Billy's only option is to kill the wolf to end the spectacle. In doing this, Billy becomes an agent of destruction—*cazador* superior supplanting *cazador* inferior—just as Don Arnulfo explained. Moreover, the reader is hard-pressed to explain how Billy escapes even this act of defiance unscathed without appealing to divine protection as an explanation and thereby further cementing Don Arnulfo's theories. Surely it is with exactly such an appeal—or better said, such an assertion—that McCarthy closes Part I of *The Crossing*, writing of how Billy is granted a vision of "all the nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she [the she-wolf] was one and not separate from"—a vision that assures him that the vitality that is the wolf and that is in Billy, too, is such that "the world cannot lose it" (*TC* 127).

Early in the novel's second part, Billy comes across Indians in the mountains of Mexico who tend to him. One Indian man, a shaman or elder of some kind, counsels Billy to cease his travels and find community. McCarthy tells us of the Indian man

speaking with great earnestness into the boy's eyes and holding his saddle fore and aft so that the boy sat almost in his arms. [...] He told the boy that although he was huérfano³⁰ still he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself. He said that the world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts. For while it seemed a place which contained men it was in reality a place contained within them and therefore to know it one must look there [...]. He said that while the huérfano might feel that he no longer belonged among men he must set this feeling aside for he contained within him a largeness of spirit which men could see and that men would wish to know him and that the world would need him even as he needed the world for they were one. (TC 133–134)

The novel lends support to this character's assertions, for later we learn that the man's characterization of Billy's status as an orphan is correct—something the man only could know if he were gifted with extraordinary perception. Also early in Part II, we hear the story of the anchorite, as told by the former priest. This story ends with an assertion that the sole way to resolve Billy's problem of reference—which is at root the same problem as that of the anchorite, and in the solving of which Billy may indeed find community—is to assert the reality of God and His unfettered dominion. Only in that assertion are particular wills subsumed before a universal will, or Will, and possible worlds made part of the world entire. In this assertion, though, lies a corollary: free will may become illusory, at least insofar as salvation becomes identical to grace, with grace understood as the Will's intervention or intercession on the side of a particular will. Such an intercession cannot be earned or anticipated, without collapsing Will itself into particularity. As the priest states of his own lesson learned,

To God every man is a heretic. The heretic's first act is to name his brother. So that he may step free of him. Every word we speak is a vanity. Every breath taken that does not bless is an affront. Bear closely with me now. There is another who will hear what you never spoke. Stones themselves are made of air. What they have power to crush never lived. In the

³⁰English translation: *an orphan*.

end we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his grace. (*TC* 158)

Clearly, this resolution—the clearest articulation of McCarthy’s cosmology to appear in his entire corpus—comes at a tremendous cost. Destroyed here is the prospect of truth independent of power, or Truth. The priest’s assertion that all is God’s Will, an assertion toward which McCarthy had been working and which crystalizes his cosmology, is a version of divine command theory: we do what we do, and we are what we are, because God says so. Hence, God Himself becomes a circular argument of a sort: God is God because He is God—not because he actualizes Truth, but rather because He makes it.³¹

In this configuration, man’s ardentheartedness in the world—man’s ability to will ontological perfection—becomes True only insofar as Will has elected to make it so. Put differently, McCarthy asserts the truth of the ardenthearted to be True in the sense that ardentheartedness pleases Will. Another approach to this would say that in McCarthy’s cosmology, Will wills that man will. In willing, moreover, man may become Man. Such assertions allow McCarthy to valorize the ardenthearted throughout his canon, even as this canon bemoans instances, institutions, and ideologies that lead to the betrayal, destruction, or cooptation of ardentheartedness—to include the excesses of American mythology. However, in forwarding a universal will (Will) in place of a universal truth (Truth) that might supersede, subordinate, or even just stand outside that Will, McCarthy renders the fate of *all* of man’s institutions precarious. In fact, his take on man’s institutions seems not far removed from what he tells us of the Tarahumara, with whom Billy and Boyd break bread. As he writes,

³¹In his reading of the anchorite’s tale, Kirk Essary captures this point brilliantly and concisely. Essary writes, “In the end, God cannot be reckoned as unjust or capricious; the moral of the story is not that God ought to be faulted for his designs. In fact, it’s precisely that he *cannot* be faulted, and not that he cannot be faulted because his designs are so obviously just; he cannot be faulted because his designs are *God’s*, and, as such, are beyond the scope of human judgment.” In an earlier passage, Essary further cautions us that where God’s providence is concerned, “Fathomlessness and inscrutability—even neglect—do not entail powerlessness.” In “‘We Languish in Obscurity’: The Silence of God as Atavistic Calvinism in Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction,” *Soundings* 97, no. 3 (2014), 287, 267, emphasis in original.

The Tarahumara had watered here a thousand years and a good deal of what could be seen in the world had passed this way. Armored Spaniards and hunters and trappers and grandees and their women and slaves and fugitives and armies and revolutions and the dead and the dying. And all that was seen was told and all that was told was remembered. Two pale and wasted orphans from the north in outsized hats were easily accommodated. [... The Indians] had about them a wary absorption, as if they observed some hazardous truce. They seemed in a state of improvident and hopeless vigilance. Like men committed upon uncertain ice. (TC 192–193)

Moreover, in recognizing the precariousness of man's institutions, McCarthy necessarily leaves the ardenthearted in a state of precariousness. As he tells us of the figure Billy cuts on leaving the office of the sheriff who discusses the fates of Billy's parents with the boy,

When he walked out into the sun and untied the horse from the parking meter people passing in the street turned to look at him. Something in off the wild mesas, something out of the past. Ragged, dirty, hungry in eye and belly. Totally unspoken for. In that outlandish figure they beheld what they envied most and what they most reviled. If their hearts went out to him it was yet true that for very small cause they might also have killed him. (TC 170)

For Billy, *The Crossing* becomes a quixotic journey in which he tries to uncover and marry his ideals to his commitment to ardentheartedness. What he discovers instead is that “El secreto [...] es que en este mundo la mascara es la que es verdadera” (TC 229).³² The primadonna elaborates on this point, explaining to Billy, “The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other road that wears that shape but only the one. And every voyage upon it will be completed. Whether horses are found or not” (230). And later, Billy learns from the *ciego*, “The world

³² English translation: *The secret [...] is that in this world the mask is that which is truth.*

was new each day for God so made it daily. Yet it contained within it all the evils as before, no more, no less" (*TC* 278).³³

The upshot of this is that the ardenthearted set their wills against the world, conspiring with God (or Will) in acts of creative destruction, but always remaining subject in the end to their own limits and the limitlessness of God (Will). In the *corrido*, for instance, we learn that for the ardenthearted, "theirs was a bloodfilled road and the deeds of their lives were writ in that blood which was the world's heart's blood" (375). In addition, the idealist—he who wishes to conjoin a vision of justice to a valorization of ardentheartedness—is bound to see his best intentions unravel. Furthermore, *The Crossing* asserts that in the act of aestheticizing the ardenthearted, one finds himself distanced from the world, for the tragic is a sensibility man imposes upon the world, not one of the world itself. Billy's irregular heart—a condition that leaves him unable to participate in World War II, the supreme ardenthearted triumph of his time, likely because he never could explain away its horrors as necessary for the greater good—is a perfect metaphor for this. So, too, is the manner in which *All the Pretty Horses* casts Rawlins aside with little fanfare. In the end, Billy appears to heed the advice the sepulturero³⁴ offers the ciego's³⁵ future wife—at least in part. The sepulturero says,

while it was true that time heals bereavement it does so only at the cost of the slow extinction of those loved ones from the heart's memory which is the sole place of their abode then or now. Faces fade, voices dim. Seize them back, whispered the sepulturero. Speak with them. Call their names. Do this and do not let sorrow die for it is the sweetening of every gift. (*TC* 288)

³³Embedded in a fine reading of Cervantes' influence on the Border Trilogy, Manuel Broncano contends that like Quixote's journeys, Billy's crossings manifest "the Nietzschean collapse of the Platonic ideals that had provided the foundation of Western thought and aesthetics, the ruination of the edifice of immutable meaning that those ideals had sustained for centuries. Both Don Quixote and Billy Parham desperately try to hold such an edifice together, by attempting to close the gap between the ideal of a world of justice and equity [...] and the evanescent reality of an absurd world ordained by chaos [...]." Where I strongly differ from Broncano is in his sense that McCarthy opposes justice and chaos. As we are seeing, McCarthy opposes justice, a false ideal, to the hunter's reality. In Broncano, *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands*, Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature series (New York: Routledge, 2014), 76.

³⁴English translation: *gravedigger*.

³⁵English translation: *blind man*.

When we readers encounter a wizened Billy in *Cities of the Plain*, we find him calling John Grady back from the dead even as the latter remains nominally alive. Nevertheless, Billy does not appear to fully heed the advice of the *ciego*—and perhaps, as the *ciego* argues, this advice stands as an irreconcilable contradiction to that of the *sepulturero*.

The *ciego* tells Billy that while evil is real and possesses a *telos*—destruction for destruction's sake, which we will consider at much greater length in Chapter Three's reading of *Blood Meridian*—goodness has no such ground. He says,

true evil has power to sober the smalldoer against his own deeds and in the contemplation of that evil he may even find the path of righteousness which has been foreign to his feet and may have no power but to go upon it. Even this man may be appalled at what is revealed to him and seek some order to stand against it. Yet in all of this there are two things which perhaps he will not know. He will not know that while the order which the righteous seek is never righteousness itself but is only order, the disorder of evil is in fact the thing itself. Nor will he know that while the righteous are hampered at every turn by their ignorance of evil to the evil all is plain, light and dark alike. This man of which we speak will seek to impose order and lineage upon things which rightly have none. (TC 292–293)

As we have seen, if there is no universal truth outside of Will, no Truth, then evil finds its opposite only in Will, which by definition must transcend the limits of man's knowledge. Hence, while man may refuse to participate in evil—man may, in fact, even rise up against it—man cannot create a stable vision of justice, no Justice, to oppose it: knowledge of Justice is beyond man's epistemological limits. The answer to Billy's crucial question—"Y [...] de la justicia?" (TC 292)³⁶—would therefore be, "No." As the *ciego* tells Billy, "Somos dolientes en la oscuridad" (TC 293).³⁷ As if to cement this idea as firmly as possible, McCarthy relates the following details of another of Billy's dreams:

In the dream he was in another country that was not this country and the girl who knelt by him was not this girl. They knelt in the rain in a darkened city and he held his dying brother in his arms but he could not see his face

³⁶ English translation: *And [...] what of justice?*

³⁷ English translation: *We are but sufferers in the darkness.*

and he could not say his name. Somewhere among the black and dripping streets a dog howled. That was all. [...] He crouched in the sedge by the lake and he knew he feared the world to come for in it were already written certainties no man would wish for. (*TC* 325)

Here, McCarthy foreshadows John Grady's death in *Cities of the Plain*, as well as Billy's inability to prevent it. It is the nature of the ardent-hearted to experience what we call "tragedy" in a world in which evil is real, but Truth is not—a world that circumscribes the ardenthearted, where justice is concerned, to oppositional moves in a game whose deck is stacked. This world also may reduce the idealist to a pragmatist, such as we find with Billy, who says the following late in *The Crossing*: "whether a man's life was writ in a book someplace or whether it took its form day by day was one and the same for it had but one reality and that was the living of it. He said that while it was true that men shape their own lives it was also true that they could have no shape other for what then would that shape be?" (*TC* 379–380).

To frame this a bit differently, the world, as McCarthy describes it, either reduces the idealist to a pragmatist, or the idealist becomes a liar. As Quijada tells Billy,

The corrido is the poor man's history. It does not owe its allegiance to the truths of history but to the truths of men. It tells the tale of that solitary man who is all men. It believes that where two men meet one of two things can occur and nothing else. In the one case a lie is born and in the other death. (*TC* 386)

The world remains opposed to the ardenthearted, even as he is at one with it. The world also remains forever one step ahead of the idealist, whose visions of justice enjoy no stable ground and are "lies." As the gypsy tells Billy near the end of the novel, "God will not permit that we shall know what is to come. He is bound to no one that the world unfold just so upon its course" (*TC* 407).

IV

These are lessons Billy largely has internalized by the time we meet him in *Cities of the Plain*. In one of the more intriguing moments of self-referentiality in McCarthy's oeuvre, Billy responds to John Grady's friendly

prompting to head off to work one morning. He says with an ironic flare, “Daybreak to backbreak for a godgiven dollar.”³⁸ This line repeats word-for-word the refrain of the squire of *Outer Dark*, a brutal character who appears in McCarthy’s second novel and whom we will examine in Chap. 4. In that early novel, the squire embodies the worst of the modern project, as McCarthy figures it—domesticating nature, ossifying the social order, and reducing people to their labor- and exchange-values; all the while, the squire believes in progress and cloaks his misdeeds by appealing to the tenets of organized religion. When the squire delivers this line, McCarthy is pointing us toward precisely his brutality and the means by which he justifies it. In other words, McCarthy is deadly serious. Here, though, Billy is jaunty. He continues to josh John Grady, saying, “You love this life, son? I love this life. You do love this life don’t you. Cause by god I love it. Just love it” (*COP* 10). In this repartee, a gendered ritual through which the two young men express their affection for one another throughout the novel, Billy can speak of the pain both share—the pain of the imminent collapse of their frontier inheritance—while holding the core of himself at a remove. That is not to say that Billy always refuses to commit fully to others in *Cities of the Plain*, for he does so repeatedly. For instance, when Troy questions why Billy stops to help several stranded Mexicans change a tire, Billy alludes to the men who saved him and his brother in *The Crossing* and affirms an unwavering commitment to the Golden Rule. Likewise, when it comes to partaking of a doomed effort to save John Grady from tragedy late in the novel, Billy tries with all his might to reverse fate. Yet our question is whether Billy believes any longer that his efforts have a referent outside of themselves, and the answer is “no.” He now sees his acts of love as good in themselves, regardless of whether they are likely to work. He seems to have given up, at least for now, the pursuit of a stable referent for these acts, the pursuit of Truth, which is identical with Justice, insofar as both are founded on the Good.

For his part, John Grady, in *Cities of the Plain*, remains the same John Grady from *All the Pretty Horses*. An example of the degree to which he has not changed arrives when he and Billy discuss the windshield of Mac’s truck. Billy borrowed the truck from Mac and ran into an owl,

³⁸Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain*, vol. 3 of The Border Trilogy (1998; repr., New York: Vintage, 1999), 10. Hereafter, I will use in-text, parenthetical references to this novel, referring to it as *COP*.

which shattered the glass. John Grady comes upon Billy, who is working feverishly early the next morning to fix the truck before Mac sees it. John Grady does not understand why Billy is so preoccupied with whether Mac will be angry with him, and says, "Hell, anybody could run into a owl" (COP 43). Billy responds, "But anybody didnt" (COP 43). Here, John Grady naturalizes what has happened, arguing that because Billy could not help the fact that an owl broke the windshield, he therefore is not responsible for the same. By turn, Billy argues that he *is* responsible for the windshield, because whatever happens while the truck is in his care is his responsibility. We see that John Grady continues with his appeals to fate when one's actions produce results he does not care to consider too deeply, while Billy remains a principled witness. Yet even so, this Billy is different from the boy who pushed so hard to return the she-wolf to Mexico's mountains. Rather than pursue an argument with his friend about Mac's windshield, which would imply the hope that he could change John Grady's mind, Billy lets him off the hook. John Grady says, "I dont know what that means," and Billy reduces the exchange to a joke, saying, "I dont either [...]. I dont know why I said it" (COP 43). Yet Billy does know why he said this; what he also knows is that there is no chance of breaking through to John Grady so that the latter would know, too.³⁹

The John Grady of *Cities of the Plain* still manifests both the beauty and the danger of the ardenthearted's ontological perfection. He still can merge his will with the world's will in acts of creative destruction, as McCarthy is at pains to remind us with his continual references to just how remarkable a horseman the young man has become. At the same time, John Grady still conflates this embodied truth with Truth, making Truth identical to subjective integrity. This is what is both appealing and troubling in John Grady's understanding of the nature of a horse. As he tells Oren, "A good horse has justice in his heart. I've seen it" (COP 53). He evidences this claim in the following monologue:

³⁹Here we can see fully my affinity for Phillip A. Snyder's argument that while McCarthy's Border Trilogy "consistently undercuts the ideological and pragmatic function of the *bildungsroman*," the novels also evidence "a hard-edged nostalgia for the cowboy past tinged with a present avocation of cowboy virtues [...]." In Snyder, "Cowboy Codes in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*, ed. Edwin T. Jackson and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 201, 199.

There's a way to train a horse where when you get done you've got the horse. On his own ground. A good horse will figure things out on his own. You can see what's in his heart. He won't do one thing while you're watchin' him and another when you ain't. He's all of a piece. When you've got a horse to that place you can't hardly get him to do somethin' he knows is wrong. He'll fight you over it. And if you mistreat him it just about kills him. (*COP* 53)

First, John Grady conflates his own "ground" with that of the horse. That is, he naturalizes the notion that it is the horse's *telos* to be trained by and serve man. Even if this is true—and perhaps it is—there remains a severe problem for John Grady's reading. He defines "justice" as identical to subjective integrity and reciprocity. Justice here means the horse living in accordance with its nature, and man and horse keeping their "word" to one another. Yet those issues—integrity, trust, and reciprocity—are *not synonymous with Justice*. To have Justice, one would need an independent arbiter, a standard against which particular acts can be measured—a standard not just of coherence, but also of morality. In the absence of that standard, a distinction emerges between justice and Justice; in turn, this distinction leaves us only with particular wills and moralities (provided we resist accepting McCarthy's affirmation of Will in place of Justice). In lieu of Justice, particulars are precisely what John Grady gives us—particular wills that he elevates to the position of being "natural" and therefore True. Moreover, John Grady thinks this way not just about horses—and maybe, as we have seen, his reading of horses is solid—but *also about man*.

Hence, in *Cities of the Plain* John Grady will repeat exactly the process by which he nearly got himself killed in *All the Pretty Horses*, indulging in an impossible, star-crossed love affair whose formal tenets he elevates to the status of fate. That is, he insists on playing out the affair and making such acts synonymous with "destiny": the pursuit of Magdalena must end either in a wedding or in death, because for their love to be "natural" and foreordained, it must play out as a proper romance (never mind that John Grady is collapsing issues of aesthetics and ontology). Yet even when the affair does end in death—Magdalena's death—John Grady will by a typical sleight of the mind still justify embarking on a quest to kill Eduardo. One sees that even when the love affair *does* adhere to a "form" of love—John Grady will convince himself that that's not good enough. He will

naturalize his desire for revenge, and this time, John Grady will be killed. Moreover, because John Grady is killed, those men who love him—Billy, Mac, Oren, and so on—suffer irrevocable and unnecessary harm. So where is the reciprocity here? Where is John Grady’s “word” to these friends who, implicitly or explicitly, are pledged in blood to him? Where is justice? By his actions, John Grady subordinates the very real claims of these men to that of a story he insists is real—a tragic story the “knowledge” of which he shares with a stranger he passes on the street after his first night with Magdalena in the White Lake: “Above all a knowing deep in the bone that beauty and loss are one” (COP 71). But as we have seen, beauty and loss are one only in the grandest sense. However, in this particular instance, John Grady is indulging in nonsense. Yet in McCarthy, this nonsense *becomes true* because it insists on itself. That is the danger of the ardenthearted and their acts of willing.

I believe that the Billy of *Cities of the Plain* sees this. It is Billy, in fact, who belts out the first *corrido* about John Grady even before his friend’s death, intoning, “John Grady was a rugged old soul [...w]ith a buckskin belly and a rubber asshole” (COP 76). Again, Billy shields himself with irony when he sings this, likely to stave off the psychic collapse he fears when he ponders the fate John Grady wills and therefore the rapidly advancing loss of his best friend. Of course, this loss will function for Billy as a repetition of the trauma he incurs when Boyd dies in *The Crossing*. Billy has become a pragmatist in *Cities of the Plain*: it is not that he is absent ideals, but rather that he simply cannot trace a line between the world as it is, and Truth and Justice. Absent a stable referent for his actions in the world, Billy says, he no longer is sure about the “notions” he used to have “about how things are goin to be.” He continues: “I think you get a little older and you pull back some on that. I think you wind up just tryin to minimize the pain.” He then generalizes his condition to at least the United States as a whole, and maybe the West itself, telling us, “The war changed everything” (COP 78).⁴⁰

⁴⁰If we, in turn, generalize Billy’s specific reference from World War II to modern war in general, we see just how Fussellian Billy’s new sensibility is by the end of *Cities of the Plain*. As Paul Fussell argued relevant to World War I, the war “was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the Idea of Progress.” In Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 8. In my next chapter, I will hone in on McCarthy’s own unmerciful antipathy toward the Idea of Progress, an idea, as we will see, that is surprisingly resilient.

The problem of an absent referent makes the fate of the ardenthearted precarious, and in so doing renders the position of the frontiersman, the city upon a hill, and modernity itself unstable, too. As Billy says, “There’s a lot of things look better at a distance” (*COP* 156). As we see in the next chapter, though, neither Billy nor McCarthy truly gives up the quest for Justice. This chapter examines pragmatism’s emergence in McCarthy’s thought as a possible answer to the problem of the absent referent. Moreover, once it shows how and why McCarthy debunks this possibility, the chapter will turn to another, more radical possible answer: utopian thought’s promise of changing the nature of possibility itself.



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