Introduction

1

STEVEN FRYE

Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy

Cormac McCarthy presents readers with an unconventional challenge. He embodies but redefines the common notion of the artist as outsider. His first book appeared in 1965, and major critics, reviewers, and artists have admired him from the beginning. But he has never spent much time in a major metropolis and has quite intentionally avoided any identification with the "art world" as it exists and is conceived in the popular imagination. Instead, he has lived as he has chosen, in homes he built himself and sometimes in the semirural places where his novels are set. He writes with singular attention to his own vision, and only in the last two decades has he risen from relative obscurity. Beginning with his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), he has been recognized by reviewers as a powerful new voice and a legitimate heir to the Faulknerian tradition. However, until the widespread popular reception of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), none of his novels sold more than five thousand copies in hardback. As late as 1980, he survived on meager advances from his publishers and generous fellowships from the William Faulkner Foundation and the Guggenheim Foundation, among others. He refused to promote his works through lectures and book tours, and popularity seemed to matter little to him. In the past twenty years, however, he has gained international attention. In 1981, he received the coveted MacArthur "Genius" Grant. A decade later, he won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award for *All the Pretty Horses*, and in 2007 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The Road*. A great admirer of McCarthy's work, Harold Bloom states: "I yield to no one in my admiration for *Blood Meridian*. I think there is no greater work by a living American."[1] After years of effort, McCarthy is now considered, along with John Updike, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and Don DeLillo, as an American author of monumental importance and value.

The author of ten novels, two plays, and three screenplays, Cormac McCarthy was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1933. He was raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, where his father took a prominent position as a

lawyer for the Tennessee Valley Authority. McCarthy was always active intellectually, although in his childhood he was not a voracious reader. As his novels suggest, however, the curiosity that emerged in youth later found ample satisfaction in an active reading life, initially when he was stationed in Alaska during a tour of duty with the U.S. Air Force. In his first interview with Richard B. Woodward in *The New York Times Magazine*, entitled "McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," McCarthy recalls his childhood and schooling: "I remember in grammar school the teacher asked if anyone had any hobbies. I was the only one with any hobbies, and I had every hobby there was.... Name anything, no matter how esoteric, I found it and dabbled in it."[2] In the same interview, McCarthy claimed to own more than seven thousand books. But his interests are by no means purely literary. At MacArthur Foundation reunions he spends his time with such notable figures as Murray Gell-Man (the Nobel Prize–winning physicist) and the whale biologist Roger Payne. Commenting on McCarthy's range of concerns, Woodward quotes film director Richard Pearce: "He has more intellectual interests than anyone I've ever met."[3] McCarthy's intense curiosity is reflected in characters whose experiences are grounded in specific historical moments as wide-ranging as westward expansion in the nineteenth century, the social transformation of the postbellum south, and the psychological and environmental traumas of the nuclear age.

These varied interests coalesce in virtually all of McCarthy's novels. In what many consider his masterpiece, *Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), the protagonist is a fictional rendering of Samuel Chamberlain, who in a memoir describes his role in the rapacious settling of the American West. Earlier, in *The Orchard Keeper*, John Wesley Rattner and Arthur Ownby are displaced as the rural modes of living change under the forces of progress and urbanization in Knoxville, Tennessee. In *Cities of the Plain* (1998), John Grady Cole and Billy Parham seek identity and place as ranch hands in Alamogordo, New Mexico, where the U.S. government is testing atomic weapons after World War II. History and historical change are at the center of his preoccupations, but his characters engage these moments only in the context of the deepest philosophical and religious questions. McCarthy explores a range of philosophical conceptions, and as such he is a "philosophical" novelist in the most profound sense. That is the essential thrust of many of the essays in this volume, all of which explore the idea content of McCarthy's works with attention to a range of aesthetic and social concerns: genre transformation, narrative form, cinematic technique, mythogenesis, gender, masculinity, and ethnicity, among others. While philosophy in McCarthy's vision is broader and perhaps more fluid than it is conceptualized in an academic context, he has demonstrated a deep interest

in Western and non-Western philosophical and theological traditions, and as a starting point it is reasonable to consider some of the various philosophical systems that inform his work.

McCarthy's inquiry into philosophy has been life-long and varied. Although he has been reluctant to discuss the books he has read, his novels engage a broad range of philosophical systems both ancient and modern. At times, he works to integrate them in a single novel or play. However, McCarthy encourages readers not to assume that his works simply articulate philosophy in the novel form. In *Blood Meridian*, perhaps his most overtly philosophical novel, McCarthy's narrator warns readers that even Judge Holden, who expresses his ideas at length, cannot be contained or characterized by any one system. Still, grasping the thematic importance of McCarthy's work requires that one understand the philosophical conceptions he engages, which include but are not limited to the ancient Gnosticism of the first-century Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions, Platonism and Neo-Platonism, Nietzschean materialism, and existential Christianity.

As a religious movement, Gnosticism was a highly variegated phenomenon that was widespread in the first and second centuries CE. According to Gnostic thought, human souls are imprisoned in a material realm dominated by archons, lesser and malevolent deities who created man to trap elements of the divine within the physical world. These archons owe their origin to a larger force of evil known as the demiurge. Apprehension of the immaterial cause of the universe, the divine good, which exists outside the material, is achieved only through *gnosis*, the experience or knowledge of God. Evil, then, is the dominant force in the world.

In *Suttree* (1979), this Gnostic conception appears in the horrific figure of the huntsman at the novel's conclusion. The huntsman and his tireless hounds are otherworldly and mysterious, existing "[s]omewhere in the gray woods by the river … in the brimming corn and in the constellated press of cities." The hounds are omnipresent, "slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world."[4] They suggest a form of evil that is simultaneously physical and transcendent, and their purpose is to consume or imprison human beings, both body and spirit. This same evil is reflected in the murderous triune in *Outer Dark* (1968), who appear as spectral characters, seemingly not of this world, inexplicably aware of Culla Holme's past and the fact that he has abandoned his incestuously begotten child. They track him and eventually murder the infant before his eyes. In their elliptical and suggestive conversation with Culla toward the end of the novel, the triune are oddly clairvoyant, as they toy with his guilt and emotional distress. Archon-like, they are an embodied form of evil preoccupied with the state of his soul. In both novels, mysterious figures of

spiritual import, consistent with Gnosticism, are incarnations of malevolence and brutality.

But Gnostic figurations are most fully observable in *Blood Meridian* through the character of Judge Holden.[5] The protagonist, known as the kid, has joined a band of scalp hunters led by John Joel Glanton and Judge Holden. The narrator presents Holden as highly intelligent, erudite, and utterly dedicated to a philosophy that defines war as divinely ordained. The judge sees himself as immortal, and other characters concur. After the kid ponders the judge's ideas, he has a dream in which he sees a mysterious forger who casts a false coin, with the judge standing behind as the forger does his work. An important question emerges in this scene. Who might the judge be in Gnostic conception? On the one hand, he may be one of the lesser archons. But in the kid's dream, the judge is a monumental and mysterious figure, evocative and horrifying, more so even in the dream than in reality. He presides over what appears to be a primordial act of creation, and from a Gnostic perspective the coins may in fact represent the lesser deities of malevolent intent. In this sense the judge, standing behind and directing the forger, is perhaps the demiurge itself. In McCarthy's terms: "Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system to divide him back to his origins for he would not go."[6] In either case, through Judge Holden, McCarthy integrates Gnostic philosophy with the specific historical situation recounted in Chamberlain's memoir of the American western frontier.

In *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*, Dianne C. Luce explores the influence of various systems of thought, including Gnosticism and Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas. She notes that McCarthy's reading of Plato was established biographically by Garry Wallace in 1992. On a trip to El Paso, Wallace met McCarthy and a professor of philosophy named Irving Brown, and they all discussed Plato extensively. McCarthy's use of Platonic ideas in his novels emerges from various myths built into Plato's dialogues, particularly those related to the soul's journey in a series of incarnations back toward the Truth and Light that exists in the transcendent realm of the Ideal. Neo-Platonic notions appear as McCarthy works with the Narcissus myth expressed by Plotinus. This myth suggests that the pursuit of material beauty and desire involves a failed attempt to capture an ideal of which beautiful forms are mere shadow. This appears in *Child of God* (1974), as Lester's voyeurism and necrophilia involve the mistake of Narcissus, who follows desire and drowns in the vortex of the material world. Luce notes the use of Plato's *Giorgias* myth in *Outer Dark*. In this myth of the judgment day, only those imperfect souls capable of cure are permitted purification in Tartarus. At one point in the novel, Culla Holme

dreams of a prophet who tells him he will be cured of his guilt and culpability, thus suggesting that his soul may progress toward the Platonic realm of the Ideal. But these ideas appear elsewhere. They are present in *Blood Meridian*, the Border Trilogy, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*, all novels that reflect the Dantean adaptation of Platonic and Neo-Platonic concepts in *The Divine Comedy*. In McCarthy's novels and in Dante's poems, the world is rendered as a kind of purgatory, in which human beings struggle for a time but do so with the overwhelming sense that material existence shrouds a transcendent mystery.

Although McCarthy engages with sympathy philosophies that posit transcendent realms of being, in his fiction he also considers worldviews that oppose this idealism. Ancient Gnosticism preserves the divine but forcefully divides human beings from the transcendent as they are imprisoned in bodies ruled by archons and the demiurge. But the later ideas of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche assert a firm materialism, and although Nietzsche's thinking cannot be conflated entirely with existentialism or even nihilism, it nevertheless reflects similar assumptions. McCarthy is often fascinated with the metaphysical, but he explores philosophical materialism in detail, in his choice of setting, in physical descriptions, and in the monologues of various characters. Nietzsche's philosophy is complex and varied, but among his many related ideas, Nietzsche posits a material universe in which values are created by human beings and evolve over time as mechanisms that (among other things) help ensure the survival and success of the species. Moral precepts may serve a pragmatic purpose, but they are not derived from the absolute or the divine. When human values no longer effectively sustain individuals or societies, they are abandoned. In the context of this ethical relativism, Nietzsche posits the notion of the *Übermensch* or, as translated by Thomas Common in 1909, "superman," and McCarthy makes use of this well-known concept.[7]

The Nietzschean *Übermensch* rejects external notions of value and through a process of self-discovery defines morality through the force of will. Judge Holden is in many ways a superman figure. This becomes clear when he claims that "war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will within the larger will.... War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence."[8] Given that the judge is destructive and malevolent, it may appear that McCarthy is critical of Nietzschean ideas, but he allows the judge to speak at length in a distinct blend of philosophical argument and poetic expression. Readers are forced to consider the legitimacy of his claims regardless of how he chooses to apply them. These same notions of amoral relativism and the will to power are expressed by the captain in *All the Pretty Horses*, as he encourages John Grady Cole to save

himself by lying about the stolen horse. They appear as well in the murderous pimp Eduardo's monologue in *Cities of the Plain*, when he points to the illusions and adornment of Mexican Catholicism, claiming that the world is "plain indeed," devoid of God or any system of absolute value. In *No Country for Old Men*, these relativist ideas emerge in the words and actions of the psychopathic killer Anton Chigurh, who denies any responsibility for events in a world governed by the deterministic chance of the coin toss. Again, even though aspects of Nietzschean philosophy appear most often through unsympathetic characters, in the Woodward interview McCarthy claims that "[t]here is no such thing as life without bloodshed.... I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way ... is a really dangerous idea."[9] Regardless of the negative implications of these concepts (which seem more interesting to McCarthy than the positive), they are presented in his fiction as potentially accurate descriptions of the world.

Although McCarthy considers philosophical perspectives from a number of eras and traditions, he was raised as a Catholic in the American South. In virtually all of his works, nature and the wilderness play a central role. However, his use of nature frequently involves the use of biblical typology, as a wilderness in which individuals and communities undergo a spiritual test. Much like the Israelites who wander in the wilderness for forty years before being delivered to the Promised Land, or Christ who is tempted by Satan for forty days, McCarthy's characters often find themselves in a wilderness of spiritual trial and transformation. In *Outer Dark*, Culla Holme's journey culminates in a realization, albeit a weak one, of his own error and a muted attempt to correct it. In *Blood Meridian*, the kid travels through the American west, perpetually tempted to acts of violence, and in the end he resists the judge's ethic of war. Especially in *The Road*, the blighted earth is, upon a close and historically grounded reading, without doubt this same typological wilderness. The post-apocalyptic and wasted world has often been misread as simple metaphor, as an existential void in which father and son can only find meaning in the brief and contingent love that binds them, in a universe devoid of hope or God. Read carefully in the context of the tradition that informs McCarthy, a new and more informed reading emerges. Father and son wander a typological wilderness, vividly reminiscent of the Old and New Testaments, where they ponder the existence of God, the role of goodness and decency, and, similar to Christ, encounter a Satan figure Ely who tempts them to abandon all hope and faith. Clearly, theirs is a spiritual trail prefigured in the Bible, and father and son must decide whether human kindness is worth preserving, with the question of God emerging frequently in discussion.

But McCarthy's engagement of Christian themes moves well beyond typological motifs. He deals directly with the existential Christianity of Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, and John Macquarrie. McCarthy's most direct encounter with this theology was in the works of one of his favorite authors, Fyodor Dostoevsky, who expresses existential Christianity through the character of Alyosha at the conclusion of *The Brothers Karamazov*. In Kierkegaard's initial formulation, existential Christianity emphasizes the personal relationship each individual must establish with God. This is a relationship governed by choice rather than social conventions or rituals. People make an independent "leap of faith" to initiate this connection. Further (and especially important for McCarthy), Kierkegaard aggressively reasserts the notion that God should not be seen primarily as an otherworldly being who exists separate from his creation. God *is* love, quite literally, and in the act of loving, human beings directly experience the divine within. In McCarthy's work, human interaction is often informed by intimations of the transcendent. Especially in his later novels, sympathetic discussions of God inform the relationships of characters such as John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins and John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, as well as Ed Tom Bell and Uncle Ellis. But this existential Christianity is directly expressed in the character of Black in *The Sunset Limited*, and the play itself is an expression of McCarthy's own claim that books are made of other books. It is a creative and thinly veiled rearticulation of the debate between Ivan and Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which is one of McCarthy's favorite novels.[10] Though devout and committed to living out the message of Christ, Black acknowledges that he is somewhat unorthodox, and his Christianity finds Christ's presence literally embodied in the committed relationship of the fellow commuter on the train. This same idea appears at the conclusion of *The Road*. The boy has emerged in the novel as a messianic figure, unselfishly concerned with others in a wasted world. His father has died, but before his death he encourages his son to talk to him when he is gone. After being taken in by a family, the mother encourages the boy to pray, but he has difficulty doing so by speaking to God directly. His prayers resolve themselves in conversations with his father. The woman does not admonish him for this as one might expect from a more conventional Christianity, nor does she encourage him to try again to pray. Instead, she says, "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time."[11] From her point of view – from the perspective of existential Christianity – speaking to the father who loved the boy unconditionally is a powerful form of prayer, because God was present in the relationship that bound them. In this way, in addition to

other philosophical and theological perspectives, existential Christianity is a worldview that emerges throughout his works.

As the essays in this volume attest, Cormac McCarthy explores a range of themes, philosophical and otherwise, always with a focused attention on what makes the world beautiful, in spite of its brutality, indifference, and violence. His works are imbued with the nuances of language, genre, and an artful reconfiguration of tradition. A review of his manuscripts reveals his own careful attention to craft, as single sentences are written, rewritten, placed side by side, and written again until they are all he can make them.[12] Those same manuscripts and the notes display an author rooted in the past, with references to histories, travel narratives, philosophers, and other writers. In his work and in the various sources that inform them, Cormac McCarthy emerges as a consummate aesthetic alchemist, combining the raw material of human experience, identifiable history, and philosophy in works that will likely inspire readers and scholars for generations to come.

NOTES

1. Peter Josyph. "Tragic Ecstasy: A Conversation about McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy* Vol. 2, eds. Wade Hall and Rick Wallach (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002), p. 205.
2. Richard B. Woodward, "McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," *New York Times Magazine* (19 April 1992), p. 3.
3. *Ibid*, p. 2.
4. Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 471.
5. See Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," *Southern Quarterly* 30.4 (Summer 1992), pp. 122–33.
6. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Vintage, 1985), p. 309.
7. Some later translators take exception to the word "superman," arguing that it misses certain subtleties in the actual meaning of the German *Über*, thus preferring "overman."
8. *BM* 249. In his notes to the first draft of the novel, McCarthy records a quote from Heraclitus and indicates that this quote is rewritten and articulated by the judge as his statement on the primacy of war. Thus, Heraclitus is the first source of this concept. But given the influence of Nietzsche on twentieth-century philosophy, it is likely that McCarthy's judge reflects Nietzschean concepts as well. See Box 35, Folder 1, Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writer's Collection, Wittliff Collections, Alkek Library, Texas State University, San Marcos.
9. Woodward, p. 4.
10. One might also note on close reading that White's final monologue seems to be a deliberate echo of Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in Act III, Scene I of the play. Hamlet embraces the idea of nothingness and sleep, finally to conclude that it is only the fear of death that prevents human beings from suicide. White