

“The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be”: The Science Fiction Myths of
Destruction in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*

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Contents:

Introduction -----	1
Chapter I: Summary and Setup of the Novels -----	7
1.1: <i>Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West</i> -----	8
1.2: <i>The Road</i> -----	14
Chapter II: Reading McCarthy with John Cant -----	19
Chapter III: Science Fiction Impulses in <i>Blood Meridian</i> and <i>The Road</i> ---	30
3.1: Reading <i>The Road</i> with an Eye to Futurity -----	32
3.2: Reading <i>Blood Meridian</i> with an Eye to Revision -----	40
Chapter IV: The Seven Beauties -----	46
4.1 Fictive Neology -----	47
4.2 The Science Fiction Novum -----	52
a. McCarthy's Judge Holden -----	55
b. "The Bomb in the Garden" -----	77
Conclusion: The Novels in an Intertextual Relationship -----	102
Works Cited -----	115

Introduction

In what has emerged as one of the most frequently cited and influential critical articles on *Blood Meridian*, Steven Shaviro writes, “Cormac McCarthy, the solitary poet of this exultation [the novel], is our greatest living author: nomadic wanderer, lucid cartographer of an inescapable delirium” (Shaviro 111). Meant in earnest, the opulent obscurity of this high praise belies a stylistic grandeur and philosophic depth endemic to the author to which it refers: McCarthy honored in a most McCarthy-like fashion. Regardless of whether or not one agrees with Shaviro’s admittedly bold remark, it cannot be denied that McCarthy is among the most important American writers of the century. Harold Bloom lists him alongside Pynchon, Roth, and DeLillo as one among the only four living American writers “who are still at work and who deserve our praise” (“Dumbing Down”); Bloom notes elsewhere that McCarthy is the “worthy disciple of both Melville and Faulkner” (*How to Read* 254). However, though McCarthy’s revered status is all but confirmed, there is little consensus with respect to the ways in which his work has been read, received, and appreciated. This is because, as Shaviro’s abstruse praise intimates, there is something both incredibly important and profoundly difficult about McCarthy’s fictional worlds. We should begin unpacking this claim by noting that McCarthy believes he writes only about “life and death,” because anything else is “not interesting” (qtd. in Kushner);¹ Kenneth Lincoln paraphrases McCarthy well when he

¹ Richard B. Woodward’s 1992 interview with McCarthy makes clear the extent to which McCarthy takes this commitment seriously: “[McCarthy’s] list of those whom he calls the ‘good writers’—Melville,

writes, “death is the axis from which a man begins to live attentively” (8).² It is this singular focus on subject matter that is universal (in the literal sense) that allows his stories, in the words of Rich Wallach, president of the Cormac McCarthy Society, to “reconstitute an ideal of human interconnectedness” (Foreword to *Holloway* xiii). The fact that McCarthy seriously examines “life and death” in richly wrought and stylized language is immediately clear upon opening any one of his works. His particular concerns are weighty, and his focus is intense. In his ambitiously titled *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye reiterates these inherent complexities by identifying two “principal challenges” faced by readers: namely, McCarthy’s emphasis on the “power of language” and his concomitant, underlying attention to “violence, human degradation, and both human and natural evil” (4-5). For Frye, as for others, these challenges inhere in a writing that must be “read, reread, and pondered, always with a playful acceptance of [...] ambiguity” (5). This means that, above all, McCarthy’s writing must be “approached with the simple anticipation of beauty” (Frye 15).

Apart from the complexities of style and the formidable content, interpreting McCarthy’s work is complicated in that his writing seems to have changed over the fifty years that he has been active. Shifting in geography, setting, style, and scope, his novels consistently break new ground. This dynamism is further compounded by the fact that McCarthy himself is famously taciturn about his own work. In a rare interview in 1992, Richard B. Woodward notes, “McCarthy would rather talk about rattlesnakes, molecular

Dostoyevsky, Faulkner—precludes anyone who doesn’t ‘deal with issues of life and death.’ Proust and Henry James don’t make the cut. ‘I don’t understand them,’ [McCarthy] says. ‘To me, that’s not literature. A lot of writers who are considered good I consider strange’” (Woodward).

² If Lincoln’s phrasing sounds overblown, one could turn to McCarthy’s more colloquial explanation: “You don’t really learn much from the good things that happen to you, but tragedy is at the core of human experience and that’s what we need to deal with” (“Connecting Science and Art: Science Friday”).

computers, country music, Wittgenstein—anything—than himself or his books. ‘Of all the subjects I’m interested in, it would be extremely difficult to find one that I wasn’t,’ [McCarthy] growls. ‘Writing is way, way down at the bottom of the list’” (Woodward emphasis original). Thus, as many critics concede, any desire to glean a systematic interpretation of his work from authorial jurisdiction or personal biography is “clearly a false hope” (Cant 26). In summation we might say that his existentially essentialist subject matter, his poignant articulation, the dynamic breadth of his oeuvre, and his authorial silence collectively coalesce in fiction that consistently leaves readers passionately engaged with narratives which provoke difficult questions. The stories insist on their importance even as they frustrate clean-cut understanding. What results is a breadth of enthusiastic and divergent conclusions.

As may be the case with any author—and particularly in this case for the reasons enumerated above—critics and academics have attempted to posit holistic strategies, or “ways,” to read and organize McCarthy’s work. Many, like Steven Fry (see *Understanding* 13), Willard P. Greenwood (see *Reading* 2), and Chris Walsh (see “The Route and Roots” 48), organize his work according to geographical transitions, usually drawing connections between McCarthy’s biography and the ensuing settings of his stories to illustrate that he is, at least to some degree, a regionalist writer.³ Others argue

³ Walsh specifically discusses *The Road* in relation to contemporary discussions of “postsouthern” place/space. His decision to view McCarthy’s text as contributing to what might be understood as postmodern regionalism is complimented by Wesley G. Morgan’s work, which meticulously explicates the “route and roots of *The Road*” within recognizable and specific Southern geography. Morgan argues, “McCarthy is fictionally returning once again to his own roots in Knoxville and the southeast, to some of the places where the author spent the earlier years of his life” (Walsh 46). Thus, Walsh and Morgan demonstrate the way in which a novel that purports to take place in an unrecognizable vacuum—“the winds had swept the ash and dust from the surface. Rich lands at one time. No sign of life anywhere. It was no country that [the father] knew” (*The Road* 202)—actually testifies to a familiar, American South locality. In this sense, McCarthy is interpreted as a regionalist writer even when his novels seemingly resist such a label.

that McCarthy's work should be seen in relation to genre forms that he is deliberately disrupting; Andrew Hoberek (see 485), Bent Sorenson (see 21), and Rune Graulund (see 58) all examine McCarthy in this distinctly postmodern light. However, considering McCarthy in either regionalist or genre terms—each approach worthwhile in itself—is only suggestive of what I take to be a more fruitful distinction within McCarthy readership. Dana Phillips identifies the way in which readers of McCarthy fall into two “camps” that can be “distinguished geographically” (434). On the one hand, those who view him as a “Southern” writer—following, that is, Faulkner and O'Connor—tend to “want to find in each of his novels something redemptive or regenerative, something affirming mysteries similar to those O'Connor's fiction is supposed to affirm (mysteries of Christian or Gnostic variety)” (435). According to Phillips, this “camp” of readers seeks to defend McCarthy against the “heinous charge of nihilism” in a way that makes him seem “more like O'Connor than he really is” (435). In contrast, some readers choose to see McCarthy as “Western” author, “addressing not just the Wild West but Western culture as a whole, especially its philosophical heritage” (435).⁴ After naming antecedents such as Melville, Hemingway, Dostoevsky, Conrad, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, Phillips writes, “McCarthy's ‘nihilism’ is not, therefore, something he must counter by crafting a symbolic redemption of the fallen world or narrating the moral regeneration of his characters. On the contrary, it is just what one would expect from a writer who has fed on such corrosive, demystifying influences” (435). Though Phillips believes that ultimately allying oneself too comfortably with either “camp” is a mistake (because McCarthy's complete “allegiance” to any classification is “doubtful”), her 1993

⁴ Though Phillips does not establish a distinction in usage, this paper will distinguish between the *West* (Euro-American civilization) and the *west* (the areas of American from around the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean).

critique of McCarthy readership continues to influence McCarthy criticism.⁵ One can track examples of both “camps” of readers through the last twenty years, and these twin “veins of interpretation”—as Benjamin Mangrum refers to them in 2013 (see 275)—continue to testify to two broad ways in which readers diverge in making sense of McCarthy.

Though there are surely numerous other methods for approaching McCarthy, many of which take into account his entire published corpus, I will propose a way of reading only two of his novels: *Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West* and *The Road*. Though I will keep several “ways” of reading McCarthy in mind (including the “camps” set forth by Phillips), my approach will follow mainly from the conceptual groundwork laid by John Cant’s *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. I take Cant’s work to be invaluable in that he portrays McCarthy in dialogue with American myth, an approach I believe explains both McCarthy’s choice of subject matter and his unusual techniques of narration and characterization. It seems to me Cant achieves a great deal regarding understanding McCarthy’s work as a whole. However, with specific respect to the two novels of my focus, I argue that he does not go far enough; thus, his premises are crucial in orienting an approach to McCarthy, but he fails to recognize the precise nature of the myths at the center of *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*. Specifically, I believe the markedly American myths in question are distinctly bound up with the effects of science and technology. Thus, I build from Cant’s

⁵ Interestingly, in his 2009 article “‘Striking the Fire out of the Rock’: Gnostic Theology in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” Petra Mundik essentially restates Phillips’s thirteen year-old distinction without mentioning her influence. Mundik writes, “Critical opinion concerning McCarthy’s work tends to divide into two camps: namely, that of the nihilists, who agree with Vereen M. Bell [...] and that of the moralists, who, like Edwin T. Arnold, argue that the novels contain ‘moral parables’ and ‘a conviction that is essentially religious’ (72). The fact that Mundik separately comes to the same conclusion that Phillips did many years before would seem to speak to the truth of their shared assertion.

methodology to argue that the two novels are science fiction in that they constitute estranging visions of the complicated (and complicating) role of science within American myth. In ascribing this genre designation, I first consider the ways in which each of the novels separately harmonizes with quintessentially science fiction impulses as defined by Csicsery-Ronay's *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. I then go into depth tracing common, desirous "aspects" of science fiction—the eponymous "beauties" of Csicsery-Ronay's book—as they manifest in each of the novels. Apart from sharpening Cant's approach, I believe this discussion of McCarthy as a science fiction writer also locates *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* in an intertextual relationship hitherto unexplored in McCarthy criticism. In this sense, a science fiction reading provides the hermeneutical key needed to further probe the suggestive possibilities of McCarthy's fictional worlds.

Chapter I: Summary & Setup of the Novels

Before taking up Cant's thesis, it is necessary to provide relevant background information regarding the two novels of my focus. In so doing I will variously examine the author's life, the plots of the novels, and critical reactions. With respect to the first item in this list, I reiterate that Cormac McCarthy does not often place himself in the public eye, either to entertain or explain. He rarely grants interviews, and, when he does speak, it is often about one of the other things he knows a great deal about besides writing: theoretical physics, venomous snakes, masonry, etc.⁶ Surely in part because of these reclusive habits, but also because of the overarching nature of criticism as it ranges between New Criticism and something closer to New Historicism, critics vary with respect to the amount of significance they attribute to McCarthy's biography. I have already touched on this issue regarding readers who link his geographical transitions to regionalist writing. Though I will occasionally take into account important factors of McCarthy's life and experiences, I will generally avoid exhaustive comparisons. As will be shown, such an approach is appropriate insofar as I am following Cant's work; as Cant himself explains, McCarthy's experiences, both as an American and an individual, necessarily inform his fictional "critique" of the "myth of American Exceptionalism." Believing that Cant sufficiently covers much of this territory in his longer, more comprehensive study of McCarthy's body of work, I will expound on elements of McCarthy's life only when they make sense with respect to either *Blood Meridian* or *The Road*. For my purposes, much of this expounding will take up the question of source: that

⁶ See, respectively, "Connecting Science and Art: Science Friday" podcast and 1992 Woodward interview.

is to say, I will look to McCarthy's life in tracing the origins of each novel. In this sense, though I will eventually focus mainly on the internal content of the two works in question, I will at no point neglect the relevancy of McCarthy's experiences. Thus, what follows is an account of each novel framed within the overlap of biography, plot summary, and critical reception.

1.1: *Blood Meridian, Or, The Evening Redness in the West*

Cormac McCarthy published his fifth novel, *Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West* (henceforth *BM*), in 1985. At the time, McCarthy was living in a Knoxville motel room under the monetary auspices of a 1981 MacArthur 'Genius Grant' bestowed upon him following recommendations from authors such as Saul Bellow, Robert Penn Warren, and Shelby Foote (Lincoln 8). As he was not a man accustomed to comfortable means and living, the money came at a critical point in his writing life. It afforded him time for extended, intense research. Cant notes that McCarthy claims to have read over three hundred books in preparation for writing *BM*; no less startling is the fact that McCarthy actually learned Spanish to expedite and enrich this research process (Woodward). Though it was McCarthy's following novel, the 1992 National Book Award winning *All the Pretty Horses*, that ushered McCarthy into popular attention, many hail *BM* as the author's masterpiece (see Cant 176).⁷ This is certainly the view of Harold Bloom, whose praise I have already mentioned but to whom I return: "*Blood Meridian* seems to me the authentic American apocalyptic novel, more relevant even in

⁷ Cant, however, does not quite share this opinion: "To my mind *Blood Meridian* is certainly a work of great intellectual power, erudition and linguistic virtuosity. But it lacks the qualities of human emotion that characterize most of McCarthy's other works" (Cant 176).

2000 than it was fifteen years ago” (*How to Read* 254). Indeed, in the preface to John Sepich’s *Notes on Blood Meridian*—a volume which in itself testifies to both the rich complexity of the novel and the attention it demands—Edwin T. Arnold recognizes that it was largely Bloom’s “proclamation” that acted as “imprimatur” in establishing *BM* within the “realm of modern classics” (Preface to Sepich xvi). Though I believe this status is warranted, it is also worth noting that some of *BM*’s most emphatic supporters have also found it an exceedingly distressing and difficult novel. Bloom admits to succeeding in reading it only after two failed attempts because of the “overwhelming carnage that McCarthy portrays” (*How To Read* 255); in a lecture published through “Open Yale University,” professor Amy Hungerford also admitted to only making it through on a third try, though she attributes this to both the novel’s violence and its intermittent periods of dense, descriptive prose. All this to say that *BM* is recognized as a great and important novel, though, like many such works, it is far from easy to approach.

Dipping further back in time than any previous or subsequent McCarthy novel, *BM* is set in the mid-nineteenth century amidst the brutal backdrop of the then-disputed borderlands between the United States and Mexico. The novel is historical fiction to some degree in that it takes cues and characters from a range of historical sources, and while many of these materials are conventional (journals, government reports, letters, etc.),⁸ McCarthy’s primary source is a strange, pseudo-historical narrative entitled *My Confessions: Recollections of a Rogue*. Written between 1867 and 1905, the almost four hundred page journal-style narrative recalls events that transpired years previous in the life of the author, Samuel Chamberlain, a once aspiring theology student who opted to set

⁸ John Emil Sepich assiduously identifies over a dozen major sources in *Notes for Blood Meridian*.

out into the wild west before eventually becoming a soldier in the Civil War.⁹ Given the “recollectory” nature of the work, Chamberlain’s account is considered historically problematic. Though some of the narrative is factually verifiable, the veracity of certain other aspects and details remains disputed, and scholars agree that much of what is relayed is at least tinged with Chamberlain’s own Romanticizing agenda (Goetzmann, “Intro” 1). In this sense, “history” is clouded by the possibility of both human error (misremembering) and personal error (self-aggrandizement). Nevertheless, appreciators of Chamberlain’s work, which was actually only published in 1956 when the manuscript was discovered in an antique shop, hail it as a testament to what living in the violently contested desert of the time period would have felt like for an individual. In the words of the work’s most recent editor, it delivers a “virtual history in the spirit of New Historicism, where actual truth in the past is often unobtainable but the experience described rings true to the reader” (Goetzmann, “Forward” ix). Apart from the sheer obscurity of the work (because McCarthy’s tastes are nothing if not obscure), it is, perhaps, this strength of *My Confessions* as an emotional, experiential roadmap to an otherwise intractable past and place that so attracted McCarthy in the first place.¹⁰

The latter sections of Chamberlain’s story chronicle his time spent with the notorious Glanton gang. Led by ex-soldier turned mercenary John Joel Glanton, this motley group traversed the borderlands collecting a government reward for every Apache scalp retrieved. Though this was a common enough occupation for violent entrepreneurs

⁹ Hence, the use of the word “recollections” in the subtitle as opposed to either “journal” or “diary.”

¹⁰ The editor of *My Confessions* mentions *BM* only once, in a tone that seems to grudgingly admire McCarthy for popularizing Chamberlain’s account in such a brutal realization: “The contemporary novelist Cormac McCarthy, in his savage novel *Blood Meridian*, based on an edited version of Sam’s tale, was probably the first person to see that the young Sam was dancing with the devils as he rode with the Sonoran scalp-hunters. McCarthy has plumbed the depths of this horrible experience in a way that makes Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* seem tame” (Introduction 4).

of the time, the Glanton gang is considered among the most mercilessly successful of the period. Indeed, though being employed to harvest scalps seems truly astonishing, John Sepich points out that the job was comparatively attractive for the period: “A group of Indian hunters averaging about fifty men and paid two hundred dollars a scalp would have to bring only four scalps into Chicauahua City in order to exceed the army’s rate of pay, and for work not much more hazardous than the army’s” (“What Kind of Indians” 126). Upon meeting the Glanton gang in a small town in Sonoro, Mexico, Chamberlain punched John Glanton in the face; according to Chamberlain, Glanton rose from the grass, blood streaming from his battered nose, to shake his attacker’s hand, thereby accepting the newcomer into the group with an appraising comment: “real grit, stranger! Yea’ll pass, ya strike like the kick of a burro” (Chamberlain 304). From this strangely blended altercation-cum-affinity onward, Chamberlain’s account is meshed with the deeds of the violent scalp-hunters.

From Chamberlain’s writing, McCarthy specifically siphons the loose geographical movements of the Glanton gang, as well as a number of characters. Aside from the monomaniacal leader, Glanton himself, McCarthy adopts minor gang members (Delaware Indians, men named Shelby, Tate, and Jackson, among others) and more influential personae such as the “ex-priest,” Ben Tobin (technically a failed novitiate), and, most noteworthy of all, the baffling Judge Holden. Chamberlain describes the Judge, a man of “gigantic size” (307), as both a bloodthirsty “fiend” and “by far the most educated man in Northern Mexico” (309). A multilingual polymath, master musician, natural scientist, philosopher, and rhetorician, the admittedly unsettling historical Holden is heightened to an infinitely more terrible degree in McCarthy’s fictional transmutation.

For example, though Chamberlain decries Holden for having been involved in many “terrible” crimes, including the rape and murder of a ten-year old girl (309), McCarthy’s Holden is implicated in at least four (possibly five¹¹) pedophilic slaughters, some of which actually imply cannibalistic dismemberment. More subtly, McCarthy grants his Holden omniscience and physical and intellectual mastery; whereas Chamberlain’s Holden appears disadvantaged, vulnerable, and even cowardly at times,¹² McCarthy’s Holden is consistently and wholly indomitable. He is untouchable, and his objectives unassailable. Some hail him as the most malevolent character in all of Western literature; thus, while Rich Wallach describes him as a “figure without parallel” who draws on Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, Melville’s Ahab,¹³ and Milton’s Satan (see “cormacmcCarthy.com”), William Spencer simply calls him “evil incarnate” (100). And though McCarthy’s Holden is a vastly inflated version of Chamberlain’s, the mere suggestion that the judge springs from wholly mortal origins somehow compounds his already unsettling presence.

Omitting the name and character of Samuel Chamberlain completely, McCarthy’s novel begins with the birth of unnamed child.¹⁴ At fourteen, this child, known throughout the novel only as “the kid,”¹⁵ leaves his ill-described home to play a role in a series of escalating violent incidents. At sixteen, the kid encounters Judge Holden at a spiritual

¹¹ See Russel Hillier’s “The Judge’s Molar: Infanticide and the Meteorite in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” where he explains the significance of each of Holden’s despicable pedophilic acts.

¹² See, for example, Chamberlain’s account of Holden attempting and failing to escape on horseback (327), an account that renders the judge in an almost pathetic light.

¹³ Among others, Harold Bloom has argued that, though the judge is obviously a literary relative of Ahab, he is also a reinvention of the white whale, *Moby-Dick* itself (see *How to Read* 259).

¹⁴ Some critics suggest that this boy *is* Chamberlain; that is to say, the “kid” acts as surrogate for the narrating “protagonist” of *My Confessions*. Though whether this is a helpful or wise way to read is largely irrelevant to my paper, I believe such a stance is fair.

¹⁵ Preferring to confer a measure of mythic or archetypal significance, Harold Bloom does not hesitate to refer to “the Kid,” though McCarthy himself never uses an upper-case epithet.

revival session wherein the latter swiftly slanders and debunks the orating preacher. Soon after witnessing this first nefarious deed, the kid meets, fights with, and commits arson alongside Toadvine, a man whom later becomes important as a co-member of the Glanton gang. The kid wanders alone for some time before he is enlisted to join a ragged group of army filibusters.¹⁶ Less than two weeks of armed service later, the kid is captured by Mexican nationals and imprisoned. Shortly thereafter, the kid and three other men, Toadvine included, are bought out of prison by Glanton as new members for his gang. The majority of the novel then follows as the gang moves back and forth through contested territory, sometimes as hunters, sometimes as hunted. McCarthy's narrative weaves violence into violence with occasional bouts of Dionysian revelry and Holden's philosophical lecturing to break up the otherwise steady flow of blood. Eventually, after many skirmishes and claimed scalps, the Glanton gang is routed by an Apache ambush. Though Glanton and many others are slaughtered, a small handful, including, most importantly, Holden and the kid, flee into the desert. No longer united in Glanton's greed-driven bloodlust, the survivors are at odds, and Holden is openly hostile towards the kid and his desert companion, the ex-priest. After a chase through the sand the kid escapes the pursuing Holden to wander the borderlands more-or-less alone for roughly another twenty-five years. In the year 1878, in an outhouse at the edge of a small town, he meets his demise at the hands of the judge.¹⁷ Though the body of the narrative ends

¹⁶ The kid is originally noted as a potential recruit for the group thanks to a punch he lands in bar fight (see *BM* 34-35); when this is recounted directly after mentioning his first encounter with Toadvine, it seems clear that McCarthy is playfully alluding to Chamberlain's account of his own "pugilistically" initiated friendships.

¹⁷ The choice of the word "demise" is deliberate insofar as the reader cannot be certain of the exact nature of the kid's fate. Though it seems clear that he experiences some definitive "downfall," it is unclear whether his end is in death or, as Patrick Shaw suggests, some sort of sexual violation, which is, in his mind, far worse than death (see "The Kid's Fate, and the Judge's Guilt: Ramifications of Closure in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" 103).

soon after with the echoing laughter of the dancing judge, McCarthy's novel continues in the form of an affixed, half page epilogue. Refusing any simple or clear meaning, these strange, final 210 words have caused critics to posit many and diverse conclusions; indeed, I will side decidedly with some while diverging from others to trace my own argument through the novel's opaque conclusion.

1.2: *The Road*

McCarthy's latest novel, *The Road* (*TR*), was published in 2006. Though some critics situate *TR* within a thematic progression that builds through *BM* and *The Border Trilogy*, and which is anticipated specifically by *No Country for Old Men*,¹⁸ it is, without question, a striking divergence from McCarthy's oeuvre for several obvious reasons. As the setting of *BM* reaches the furthest back in time, so too does *TR* stretch the furthest forward;¹⁹ and though critics such as Wesley Morgan and Chris Walsh argue that it does betray ties to a Southern sense of space and place (see earlier footnote 3), any "regionalism" that can be found in *TR* is less explicitly pronounced than is the case with any one of McCarthy's preceding novels.²⁰ Thus, though he seems to disagree with Walsh and Morgan, Rune Grauhund is warranted in saying, "Set in an unclear future and an unspecified region of America, *The Road* is thus immediately different" (Grauhund

¹⁸ This argument is made in Francisco Rodriguez-Colloda's "Trauma and Storytelling in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*," where he writes: "I understand *No Country for Old Men* as the novel in which McCarthy directly points to widespread human violence as the main reason for the present sociopolitical situation and *The Road* as the book that describes the effects of what might eventually happen if things remain unchanged" (45).

¹⁹ Clearly, the "time period" of the setting could also be conceived of as a parallel or alternate reality, either of which would also be new ground for McCarthy's novels.

²⁰ While McCarthy narratives usually weave through real and identifiable places (cities, mountain ranges, desert stretches, etc), the only thing named by a proper noun in *TR* is indicated by an advertisement: "See Rock City" (*TR* 21). According to Bill Hardwig, apart from "fetishiz[ing] nostalgia for commercial marketing," this sign specifically links the novel to a historical tourist campaign started near Chattanooga, Tennessee (Hardwig 46).

58). This seeming break in setting and blatant regionalist writing tradition signals McCarthy's first foray into science-fiction.²¹ However, as is evidenced by his 2011 appearance on NPR's "Science Friday" radio show, where he joined documentarian Werner Herzog and physicist Lawrence Krauss to discuss "connecting science and art," McCarthy is no stranger to science or science-oriented thinking. Indeed, fostering a longstanding interest and acumen in the sciences, he maintains posts as both a writer-in-residence and trustee at the Santa Fe Institute. According to their website, the Santa Fe Institute (SFI) is a "private, not-for-profit, independent research and education center, founded in 1984, where leading scientists grapple with some of the most compelling and complex problems of our time" ("Santa Fe Institute"). According to *Rolling Stone's* David Kushner, who interviewed McCarthy in 2007, SFI can alternately be described as a "Justice League of renegade geeks, where teams of scientists from disparate fields study the Big Questions: Why financial markets crash. How terrorist cells form. Why viruses spread. How life ends" (Kushner). Given that McCarthy numbers himself within this think tank—what Kushner glibly calls "the world's most unlikely genius club"—it is somewhat surprising that a turn towards science fiction did not occur earlier in his writing.

When asked about his motivation for writing *TR* during a rare television interview with Oprah in 2007, McCarthy suggests one explanation. He says that the spark for the book came to him one night that he spent in a motel with his son. He recalls looking out of the window and imagining the whole scene laid to waste, even mentioning the detail of fires burning in the nearby hills, an image eerily familiar to readers of *TR*. Some years later, McCarthy says, the window scene came back to him in the form of a story; he started writing soon after. Many critics take this anecdote very seriously. They believe

²¹ For reasons I will later explore, critics are not united in reading *TR* as science fiction.

McCarthy's words necessarily dictate readings of *TR* that favor the anxieties of parenting or the absolute thematic centrality of the father/son relationship. While there is certainly some sense in such readings, I (and many others) believe there is more to the novel than an extension of McCarthy's answer to Oprah. The window anecdote may be where it started, but it goes many places besides.²² I will return to this later; however, at present, it must be admitted that the notion that *TR* is, to some degree, a "love story" to McCarthy's son, as Oprah puts it, is certainly corroborated by the dedication page of the novel, which simply lists the son's full name: John Francis McCarthy.²³

If the story of *BM* may be called simplistic, then the story of *TR* is perhaps best described as non-existent. That is, things happen, of course; however, apart from scattered recollections of pre-disaster days, the whole of the novel records the journey of an unnamed father and son as they travel south along the titular road through a decimated landscape replete with hunger, sickness, and droves of roving cannibals. Though the reader is given hints and snatches suggesting the nature of the event that has reduced the continental US (and presumably the world) to little more than ash, the details are conspicuously absent. Rather than dwell on pyrotechnic destruction or the spontaneous crumbling of twenty-first century culture,²⁴ McCarthy is content to chart the arduously slow and deliberate progress of the "man/father" and "child/son," as they are known throughout the novel. This dramatic lack of causal explanation for the world disaster has

²² As a tangential aside, I urge readers to recall Faulkner's self-proclaimed eidetic inspiration for *The Sound and the Fury*. When asked where the novel started, Faulkner replied, "It began with a mental picture. I didn't realize at the time it was symbolical. The picture was of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree, where she could see through a window where her grandmother's funeral was taking place and report to her brothers on the ground below" (Faulkner). From muddy drawers came the novel we praise today, a masterpiece certainly about more than is circumscribed in any single image.

²³ In his appendix on *TR*, Cant draws attention to this "source" for the novel: "Indeed McCarthy mentions his son John in his second Woodward interview, describing him as: 'the best person I know, far better than I am'" (Cant 272).

²⁴ Think here of Roland Emmerich's 2004 film, *The Day After Tomorrow*, or his 2009 production, *2012*.

occasioned much critical disagreement. To say that McCarthy remains unconcerned about such bickering may be an understatement. Living up to Kushner's claim that he is the "the most celebrated recluse in American literature since J. D. Salinger" (Kushner), McCarthy seems largely to believe that his novel warrants no further comment.

Picking up shortly after the mother of the small family has committed suicide, the course of the novel sees the man and child encounter various other leftover humans—some murderous, some simply strange—before the father eventually dies of an unidentified consumptive illness. Three days after the father's death, in the last several pages of the novel, the persevering child is taken into a small group of civil survivors (identified by some readers as the "parka man" and woman). When viewed in light of the final, enigmatic paragraph that seems to lament the loss of a world that "would not be put back" (*TR* 287), the seemingly last-minute inclusion of the boy into a welcoming community has proved difficult for some readers to parse. From an author famous for ambiguity, this tonally jarring juxtaposition is perhaps the singularly most confounding piece within a novel otherwise ripe with mystery. Critics go so far as to variously label the book redemptive (see Kunsza, etc.), despairing (see Skrimshire 10), and everything in between, largely as a result of differing reactions to these selfsame pages.

Apart from the new setting and blatantly speculative turn, it should be noted that *TR* is also stylistically unique. Much scholarly ink has been spilled over this specific quality. Ashley Kunsza, for example, believes that *TR* eschews McCarthy's typically baroque extravagance in favor of a "pared down, elemental" style in order represent a "post-apocalyptic future in which human existence has been reduced to the basics" (58). Other critics have taken such a conclusion for granted and **intensified a similar attitude**

in claiming that examining intricacies of style is crucial for understanding *TR* as a whole. Though he agrees with Kunska that, “*The Road* seems to be exhausted at the level of style itself” (487), Andrew Hoberk maps subtle modulations that echo McCarthy’s more typically ornate prose throughout the novel; he believes these instances testify to an internal “stylistic dialectic” (492) that uses linguistic flair to signal occasional hope amidst otherwise bleak circumstances. Regardless of how far one is willing to push these or other stylistically rooted arguments, it is crucial to assume that the dramatically divergent style of *TR* is essential, rather than accidental, to an informed reading of the novel.

Chapter II: Reading McCarthy with John Cant

Imperative as groundwork, elements of the above discussion of the novels in light of the author's life, plot summaries, and critical reception will bolster the remainder of this paper. Immediately, the discussion makes possible a turn towards John Cant's *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, the book which I earlier described as the methodological orientation for my own reading of *BM* and *TR*. Thus, what follows will both summarize Cant's approach and place him in relation to other, complementary critical "ways" of reading McCarthy. While taking account of his overall project, my treatment will pinpoint the elements of Cant's work I take to be most essential for reading McCarthy's novels as science fiction.

In the opening chapter of his monograph Cant writes, "in classic deconstructionist mode, McCarthy writes in mythic form in order to deconstruct American mythology" (10). I take this statement to constitute the heart of Cant's approach. And though, as we will see, Cant augments this central kernel of his reading of McCarthy, one is initially right to note the strongly postmodern flair of the expression. Indeed, though Cant (thankfully) steers clear of heady poststructuralist scaffolding, his approach certainly frames McCarthy as a postmodern author who is resolutely opposed to naïve faith in overarching or foundational grand narratives. "Simplifying to the extreme" along with Lyotard, we might recall that postmodernism is characterized by "incredulity to metanarratives." For McCarthy, as for all in the postmodern tradition (if such a chimera

can even be said to exist), stories—even large and seemingly encompassing stories—are only stories. Every traditionalistic claim to truth is a story, and stories are all the truth we have. As Cant writes, “McCarthy is fully aware of the inescapability of myth; he realizes that language is not able to completely and unambiguously signify the world” (7).²⁵ And though Cant is certainly comfortable speaking of “myth” in ways reminiscent of Lyotard, he also narrows his use of the term to a more localized tradition of usage. He cites Roland Barthes’s 1957 *Mythologies*, a work which he believes demonstrates the “function of myth in convincing us that the ideological is the natural” (8). According to him, this text, along with Robert Graves’s *The Greek Myths*, had the effect of “accentuating the political dimensions of myth as opposed to the psychological readings that had become increasingly influential since Freud” (9). For Cant, this understanding of “myth” was given an “American face” in Richard Slotkin’s 1973 *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* (9), a book that asserts that “through mythology the values of the past are transferred to a present in which they are no longer viable, with negative results” (9). The beginning of the quote that Cant pulls from Slotkin is especially informative: “The mythology of a nation is the intelligible mask of that enigma called the ‘national character’” (Slotkin qtd. in Cant 9). This tradition, then, forms the intellectual backdrop to Cant’s understanding of “myth” as a “foundational element of any cultural matrix” (8). Myths in this sense are the subtly powerful frameworks that play

²⁵ Though he notes this postmodern aspect, Cant actually believes McCarthy chafes with postmodernism in maintaining a belief in a basically “essential” human nature, one which is rooted in violence (5). Cant specifically points to the third epigraph of *Blood Meridian*, a selection of lines from a 1982 newspaper that describe a 300,000 year old skull found with evidence of “having been scalped” (see *Blood Meridian*). While conceding that McCarthy does seem to view violence as endemic to humanity, one should nevertheless realize how far flung such a darkly “essentialist” view is from classically modern notions of human nature. Scalping, it seems, is not among the common principles often touted by modernist, humanistic thinking.

a formative role in present-day “national character” by imposing the preserved worldview of a past culture.

Because Cant so effectively describes the arc and drive of his work, rather than paraphrase him I will reproduce key sections of his explanation in whole. Recalling, then, his assertion that McCarthy is largely a postmodern author who writes mythically to deconstruct myths, consider the following passage:

It is my purpose in this book to argue that McCarthy deliberately sets out to give his texts mythic form and that he does so in such a way as to point out the destructive consequences of structuring the consciousness of individuals by means of powerful mythologies which they are not in a position to live out. (9)

In this sense, the typically postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion manifests in McCarthy such that mythic narrative is his tool for unearthing other myths, those that he believes are particularly detrimental. Reiterating the claim made by Matthew Guinn in *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South*, Cant describes McCarthy as a “mythoclast” (7) who attacks stories *with* stories. Specifically, Cant believes McCarthy is particularly interested in “recast[ing] myth to attack what he sees as the false and destructive cultural constructs of American Exceptionalism” (6). Later, Cant unpacks the titular mythic framework of “American Exceptionalism,” writing:

[McCarthy] critiques the myth of Exceptionalism in its various forms: the redeemer nation of Puritan ideology; the democratic ‘last best hope for mankind’ of the revolutionaries who created the Republic; the pioneer ‘civilizers of the wilderness’; imperialist America’s ‘manifest destiny’ to bring Christianity and capitalist vitality to ‘lesser races’ under the aegis of the expanding nation; the

provider of the ‘more abundant life’ for Europe’s ‘huddled masses, yearning to breathe free’; and the ‘champion of the free world’ against the ‘evil empire of International Communism.’ Beneath all these forms of Exceptionalism lies the pastoral conception of the New Adam. A number of critics read McCarthy’s texts as elegies for a lost American Eden. I shall attempt to refute these readings; although it is clear that McCarthy characterizes the modern world as a wasteland [sic] in both the literal and metaphorical sense it is clear that he depicts both the rural past and the wilderness as anything but paradisaical. McCarthy’s characters are consistently led astray by their search for an Adamic identity [to suggest that] the paradise they seek never existed in the first place. (9-10)

A sort of laundry list of grievances, these mythic veins range from American founding father narratives, to Romantic idealizations of the individual and Nature, all the way to more recent Cold War tropes.²⁶ What the mythic veins all have in common is a tendency to position individuals in impossible and injurious positions with respect to spurious notions of American identity. According to Cant, McCarthy crafts his narrative attack to combat these harmful consequences. Thus, as a mythoclast, McCarthy directs his mythic attack—his “critique” (17)—against the veins as they coalesce into the overarching myth of American Exceptionalism.

Though the above does treat the seminal core of Cant’s approach, it is necessary to backtrack to address two additional, important aspects of his thesis. The first aspect, which may be somewhat obvious, has to do with reading McCarthy as a writer of *mythic*

²⁶ Though I will focus on the particular articulation that Cant develops throughout his book, the concept of American Exceptionalism has a longstanding presence in socio-political discourse. For further information, see James W. Ceaser’s article entitled “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism” or Ben Zimmer’s “Did Stalin Really Coin ‘American Exceptionalism?’”

narratives. To reiterate, as a mythoclast, the *target* of his “critique” is “myth” (or rather, myriad myths as they coalesce into American Exceptionalism) and the *form* of his “critique” is mythic. His novels bear the marks of mythic tales and storytelling. For Cant, the decision to view his narratives as mythic—we might think of it as an orientation to the author’s fiction—is hugely important in that it contrasts with those who wish to read his novels in the tradition of realism or naturalism. Cant believes that either of the latter fail to make sense of McCarthy’s intractable characters. McCarthy’s “avoidance of [character] internalization,” as Cant terms it, “is consistent” with the mythic form of his writing in that “mythic characters do not exist to be repositories for psychological motivation. [Instead] they are representative of large generalized ideas, values and aspects of culture” (11). In taking this view, Cant joins other critics who similarly classify McCarthy’s treatment of character within a mythic framework. Making essentially the same distinctions as Cant, Stephen Greenwood writes:

McCarthy’s characters are often symbolic creations; they function as direct links to themes being explored in the novel. These symbolic characters reflect how McCarthy has abandoned the contemporary use of social realism as a narrative approach in favor of stylistic structures that embrace forms that are more common to classical Greek tragedies and epics and the Bible. (15).

By rendering the psychology of “symbolic creations” (Greenwood 15) as “totally opaque” (17), McCarthy distances his figures from traditional characterization; indeed, as Lydia Cooper puts it, “McCarthy’s narrative style therefore seems to almost consciously reject the twentieth-century novel’s attention to the important role of literary empathy” (*No More Heroes* 2). The reader either cannot—or does not wish to—empathize with the

fictional actor. This forestalling of the modern readers' "social realist" compulsion to identify with characters as relatable, "vicarious agents" (Greenwood 23) of individual experience occasions another sort of reading entirely.²⁷ It is this exact nexus between conspicuous absence of character internalization and eschewed relatability that Amy Hungerford identifies as *Blood Meridian's* major "revision" of *Moby Dick*; whereas Melville's Ishmael narrates with a charming degree of self-reflection and self-awareness, McCarthy's "kid" is intractable (and unattractive) from the first lines of the novel (Hungerford).²⁸ Thus, regardless of whether or not McCarthy's work may take account of "naturalistic sensibilities" (Martin 22), as identified by Michael Chabon and elucidated by Michael J. Martin, it is, as Cant rightly argues, the narrative mode of myth that most suitably **encompasses** McCarthy's use and treatment of characters.

Before addressing the second important and thus far neglected aspect of Cant's thesis, it is worthwhile to consider that, though he does not specifically use the word *myth*, Kenneth Lincoln's critical work certainly embraces a reading of McCarthy that harmonizes with that of both Cant and Greenwood. Choosing to speak of McCarthy within the purview of "hyperrealism,"²⁹ Lincoln believes that McCarthy "engages the

²⁷ It is fascinating to note that Cooper—the critic who has worked most extensively to establish that McCarthy's characters *do* actually belie an internal, "complicated ethics" (*No More Heroes* 4)—has done so only by arguing that the author's "alienating narratives" demand an "active, creative readership" (4). That is to say, though the novels do largely display an "absence of subjectivity" (6), the reader can, if pressed, identify occasional but, for Cooper, important exceptions. According to her, McCarthy allows the reader to glimpse the individualized "morality" of certain characters concomitant with complex shifts in narrative point of view (13). Thus, Cooper finds evidence of internalized characters in moments of extremely opaque prose; characterization that occurs normally for many writers occurs for McCarthy only sparingly at heights of narrative obscurity. Though I do believe Cooper is shrewd to argue for the presence of these exceptions, it is telling that she must go to a great deal of trouble to locate them.

²⁸ In the first words of the novel, we are told to, "See the child" (*BM* 3). It seems that, as opposed to knowing, recognizing, or understanding, seeing is all we *can* do.

²⁹ Lincoln is determined to distance his usage of this term from the more familiar, chronically postmodern (and specifically Baudrillardian) application. Imploring his reader to "start over with hyperreal definition" (20), he argues that hyperrealism need not mean, as postmodernists would have it, fake or the "authentic fake" (think here of Baudrillard's simulacra or of Umberto Eco). Rather, in a mathematical sense, "the term

reality that few dare to face, not the oddball or distorted variations from the norm, but a familiar weirdness at the heart of things: death as the moral touchstone, for all who live must die sooner or later” (22). Strikingly mythic in its evocation of a universal plain of experience, this dimension of the “hyperreal” undergirds McCarthy’s project as Lincoln conceptualizes it; namely, “one can regard this author’s fictional horrors as lamentational canticles of warning, not directives” (Canticles 2). Lincoln elaborates on this thesis of his work, *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*, in a list reminiscent of Cant’s aforementioned portrait of the myth of “American Exceptionalism”:

McCarthy alerts us to the disasters of history, the monstrosities of moral deviance, the absurdities of human fate, the sublime ranges of will and courage, the depths of suffering, pain, and psychopathology. He writes about old-time, frontier, and futurist America from the bottom up, portraying men from the decent and conflicted, to the raw and grimy, to the deformed and malign. (3)

Though it would seem that Lincoln wishes to grant characters slightly more psychological accessibility than Cant, Greenwood,³⁰ or Hungerford, Lincoln’s application

‘hyper’ implies dimensions of radical data beyond the supposed or given consents, and hyperspace posits a physics of time/space beyond three dimensions. Perceived distortions may reveal hidden depths, and after a second look, suspected illusion may conjure holographic truths” (19-20). Thus, in “McCarthy’s hyperreal novels a reader may assume the story fabricates reality, but on further reflection the fiction stands truer-to-life than ‘reality,’ that is, art real to the point of abruptive [sic] disbelief and breakthrough discovery” (20). Though as my argument makes clear, I do believe Lincoln’s notion of the “hyperreal” coincides with a mythic framework, I do not return extensively to his articulation (mainly because I find his explanation circuitous and mystifying).

³⁰ Because I’ve so far highlighted the similarity between Cant and Greenwood’s understanding of McCarthy’s mythically un-internalized characters, it is worth noting that they disagree wholeheartedly with respect to the way in which this same narrative technique speaks to McCarthy’s disinclination to depict women. Recognizing that “Western society remains strongly patriarchal in character,” Cant believes the dearth of women in McCarthy’s novels is “consistent” with his mythoclastic critique of American culture insofar as, “by definition, the ‘Waste Land’ lacks the female principle of fertility (16). In contrast, Greenwood writes, “McCarthy’s male characters, while they are complex, are not offset by any fully imagined female ones, and in this way, he not only departs from an important convention of modern fiction, but also limits the imaginative scope of his narratives” (19). Whereas Cant sees McCarthy’s eclipse of the feminine as intrinsic to his mythoclastic project, Greenwood chastises him for passing over vital perspectives within the collective human experience.

of the “hyperreal” in describing McCarthy’s exploration of the “range of human experience” does reinforce a decision to read the author’s work as fundamentally mythic in nature. As Lincoln puts it, “hyperrealism [...] helps to establish the author’s instinctual through-line to a calculus of culture, unsettling or no” (25). In a descriptive line too charming to pass over, Lincoln’s praise of the author of myth culminates in recognizing that McCarthy is “an olden-time epic storyteller, literate of late” (29), as if the stories themselves occasion their own writing.

It is now necessary to treat the second so far neglected aspect of Cant’s overall thesis. Maintaining his characteristically crystalline acuity, Cant writes, “‘the critique of the myth of American Exceptionalism’ and ‘the dialectic of insignificance and vitality’ are the twin themes that will structure my account of McCarthy’s output as a whole; and I read his texts as essentially mythic in themselves” (10). As I have already explored what is meant by the myth of American Exceptionalism, we need now to turn to the second ‘twin theme,’ which is the “dialectic” between the “cosmic insignificance” (5) of humanity and a countering “existential antithesis, the inherent vitality of ‘ardentheated’ man[kind]” (6). The “cosmic insignificance” half of the dialectic is not difficult to trace through the fiction; Cant explicitly refers to McCarthy’s consistent rendering of modern humanity as a “culture that will, like all others before it, become no more than ‘myth, legend, and dust’—the final words of *The Orchard Keeper*” (5).³¹ Indeed, identifying this “cosmic insignificance” harmonizes with many critics who view McCarthy’s work as somewhat nihilistic. In the terms set out by Phillips, such a reading falls essentially in line with the “Western” camp of readers, and it is perhaps best championed by one of McCarthy’s earliest, most vigorous critics, Vereen Bell, who, in the aptly named article

³¹ McCarthy’s first novel (1965).

“The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy,” posits that McCarthy’s only fictional paradigm is actually one of a “dead-end, paradigmless world,” a sort of “self-referential joke” (32).³² Juxtaposed to this “nihilistic” half of the dialectic, Cant articulates the “vitality” of the “ardentheated,” a word that he pulls from a truly marvelous passage of McCarthy’s sixth novel, *All the Pretty Horses*:

What he [John Grady] 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 *ardentheated* and they would always be so and never be otherwise. (*All The Pretty Horses* 6 emphasis added)

Thus, Cant sees McCarthy’s writing testifying to humanity’s existential desire to live fully despite impending death. In the face of “cosmic insignificance,” humanity has the gall and wherewithal to press forward. Cant elaborates:

References to the heart occur throughout [McCarthy’s] texts and are always of great significance. Blood is a recurring emblem in his work and signifies both life and death, each defined in relation to its inescapable other. For McCarthy one might say that optimism comprises the notion that there is no death without life!

(6)

Though this second half of the dialectic does seem to carry traces of Phillips’s camp of “Southern” McCarthy readers, Cant seems more invested in resilience than full-out redemption. Falling short of any spiritualized resolutions (whether Christian or gnostic, to refer back to Phillips), the “ardentheated” speaks to humanity’s desire to rage against the

³² Bell’s subsequent volume *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988) marks the watershed moment for McCarthy’s acceptance into serious, academic readership; throughout it, Bell expands on the material of his earlier (and above quoted) 1983 article, writing, in the introduction, “Not meaning itself but the traditional idea of meaning is made obsolete” in McCarthy’s narratives (2).

dying of the light. Cant believes that this desire takes many forms for McCarthy, even going so far as to say that the author's texts actually "stand as his own vital and ardenthearted defiance of our cosmic insignificance" (17). It is this dialectic—between cultural, cosmic demise and countering, individual striving—that Cant locates within and alongside his argument for McCarthy's critique of the myth of American Exceptionalism.

Though it is necessary to recognize Cant's identification of the above-elaborated "dialectic," I will be mainly concerned with the other of the "twin themes" that Cant puts forth. Though it may be true that the two are dynamically inter-connected, the "dialectic" in question serves, it seems to me, a somewhat obvious thematic role in McCarthy's writing. That is to say, there exists in his narratives a tension between "cosmic insignificance" and "ardenthearted vitality" because, as he has asserted, his stories are concerned with "life and death." In this way he joins many literary antecedents who similarly wrote into being figures who probe possibilities at the edge of meaninglessness, not the least of which is his own self-proclaimed favorite author, Joseph Conrad. Taking this view, it is fair to note that I locate myself somewhere nearer to the "Western" camp of readers; McCarthy is neither more nor less nihilistic than the authors who penned *Heart of Darkness* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, which is to say that he is exactly as nihilistic as a *creative* artist may allow himself or herself to be. In this sense, though important, the "dialectic" that Cant identifies is, in itself, uninteresting. It is, for me, a given—a foundation on which to build a more nuanced discussion. What *is* interesting, however, is exploring the original and new ways in which McCarthy explores and illustrates the dialectic. Not *what is* the dialectic, but, instead, *how* does he dress it up? It is the *how* that I think Cant addresses in his reading of McCarthy as a mythoclast warring

against the myth of American Exceptionalism. Thus, while I certainly admit the presence and prominence of the dialectic—and I will surely refer regularly to it and the attitudes it encompasses—it is the other “twin” of Cant’s thesis that is essential for the arc of this paper. Specifically, my discussion of the mythic “critique” identified by Cant will take into account the thematic significance of science within science fiction novels.

Chapter III: Science Fiction Impulses in *TR* and *BM*

The following section will launch my discussion of *BM* and *TR* as science fiction. After first contextualizing Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.'s *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* within the field of science fiction criticism, I will turn to the work itself, as well as other supporting critical arguments, to demonstrate the ways in which each McCarthy novel separately harmonizes with quintessentially science fiction impulses. First I will argue that Csicsery-Ronay's identification of the genre's drive to imagine "a collective future for the human species and the world" (1) characterizes *TR*, especially when the novel is read through Christopher Pizzino's article "Utopia at Last: *The Road* as Science Fiction." Second, I will argue that *BM* fulfills Csicsery-Ronay's claim that science fiction includes historical narratives insofar as "a past that is not yet known is a form of the future" (4), especially when the novel is framed within the critical arguments of both James Dorson and Sara Spurgeon. Though I believe identifying these impulses in the novels builds implicitly on the preceding chapters, I will return more explicitly to both the summary and setup and Cant's thesis in chapter IV, where I will examine several of Csicsery-Ronay's "seven beauties of science fiction." In this sense, this chapter positions the novels within science fiction, whereas the following chapter will discuss in detail the ways in which McCarthy's "critique" of the "myth of American Exceptionalism" in *BM* and *TR* is distinctly targeting the role of science and technology via common tropes of the genre.

One title among many working to combat any academic stigma regarding science fiction, Csicsery-Ronay's *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* has been well received. In a 2009 review, Adam Roberts described the 2008 volume of science fiction theory/criticism as "by far the most sustainable, most important and most thought-provoking" work in the field of the year ("Strange Horizons"). In his own review, Paul Kincaid ups the ante considerably: "This is probably one of the best and most significant works of science fiction criticism to have appeared so far this century" (*World Literature Today* 44). Though both Roberts and Kincaid do put forth various criticisms of the work, they agree in praising Csicsery-Ronay on several specific achievements. Both hail his book as a "necessary, if belated, corrective to the orthodox Marxist view of science fiction that has been the more or less default academic response to the genre since at the least the work of Darko Suvin" (Kincaid, 44). Both also appreciate Csicsery-Ronay's attentiveness to the "ludic or playful qualities of science fiction" (Kincaid 45; see also Roberts's recognition of the "ludic framework").³³ Additionally, both critics appreciate the work for its wide-reaching and inclusive breadth of consideration. By steering clear of a "dogmatic" and "monolithic overall [argumentative] line," Csicsery-Ronay's "hospitality" instead "advances a series of compelling readings of SF [science fiction]" (Roberts). Or, as Kincaid puts it, realizing that Suvin's science fiction "strictures were quite narrow," Csicsery-Ronay deliberately "relaxes" the desire for definition (*World Literature* 44). Thus, the work is touted within its field for providing a much-needed, invigorating openness to the field of science fiction criticism. In this sense, given that McCarthy is not a name one often finds in the canon of science fiction, the "inclusivity"

³³ That is to say, both believe Csicsery-Ronay is correct to stress the imaginative energy of science fiction; as Kincaid writes, "this is that most rare and wonderful thing, a work of academic criticism that insists that science fiction should be fun" (*World Literature* 44).

of *The Seven Beauties* makes it the perfect text to mediate a fruitful discussion. As I said above, I will take up this discussion by first turning to *TR* as it is mediated through Christopher Pizzino's critical argument.

3.1: Reading *The Road* with an Eye to Futurity

Pizzino begins his article "Utopia at Last: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Science Fiction" claiming that to read *TR* as science fiction is to read "against a daunting critical consensus" (358). Penned in 2010, this statement now seems outdated in that a number of critics have since written about *TR* in ways that consider it science fiction to some degree or another. Indeed, Andrew Hoberek (2011; see 485), Francisco Collado-Rodriguez (2012; see 61), Chris Barrata (2012; see 7), Bill Hardwig (2013; see 39), and Michael J. Martin (2013; see 23) all fit this pattern; likewise, Alexa Weik von Mossner takes it as a given that the film adaptation of the novel is science fiction (2012; see 47).³⁴ Considering this presence of scholarly support, it is unnecessary to revisit Pizzino's argument merely for the purpose of defending his (at the time) contentious thesis. However, what deserves close attention in Pizzino's work—and indeed, what is formative for the arc of this paper—has a great deal to do with the specific grounds on which he justifies his claim. In that sense, though I will variously refer to some of the arguments of other critics mentioned in this paragraph, I will mainly concern myself with Pizzino in

³⁴ It is also fair to note that, though Pizzino may have specifically had the academy in mind when referring to a "daunting critical consensus," his statement ignores the reactions to the novel posted on the Oprah website in the days immediately following McCarthy's 2007 television interview. Collectively titled "Themes in *The Road*: Where Fiction and Science Meet," each of the six short pieces allows one of McCarthy's SFI colleague to trace scientific theory and research through the novel. The opinions of these esteemed scientist colleagues, it seems, lends credence to Kushner's comment: "For McCarthy, the scientific life of the [Sante Fe] Institute plays a fundamental role in his life as a writer, sparking his imagination with 'what if' scenarios while grounding his fiction in a greater reality" (Kushner).

that his specific defense of *TR* as science fiction harmonizes with Csicsery-Ronay's account of the genre's unifying element.

Pizzino begins his article by calling attention to a pattern whereby critics either leave no room for science fiction in *TR*, or they merely "allocate a portion" (Pizzino 358) of science fiction within the novel. In other words, if they are even willing to grant the presence of science fiction impulses, they do so only to subjugate them within some other, larger thematic interpretation. He takes Michael Chabon's 2007 piece in the *New York Review of Books* as emblematic of this pattern. In this review, Chabon considers the relevant implications of classifying the novel under various genre designations. Though Chabon initially gives ground to the argument for science fiction (or what he recognizes as its more nominally palatable but equivalent sibling, "parable fiction"), he eventually settles elsewhere. He writes, "all the elements of the science fiction novel, of the post-apocalypse, are present or at least hinted at" in *TR*; however, it is, in the end, "neither parable nor science fiction" (Chabon). Instead, *TR* "marks not a departure but a return to McCarthy's most brilliant genre work, combined in a manner we have not seen since *Blood Meridian*: adventure and gothic horror" (Chabon). Eventually including the word "epic" alongside "adventure" and "horror," Chabon goes on to note several relevant and less frequently McCarthy-associated literary precedents: Jack London, Daniel Defoe, Edgar Allan Poe, and H.P. Lovecraft. These wide-ranging examples of possible parallels call to mind Linda Woodson's claim that *The Grapes of Wrath* (a "journey narrative") is *TR*'s closest "literary predecessor" (Woodson 88), as well as Lydia Cooper's reading of the novel as a postmodern re-telling of ancient and medieval "grail narratives" (see "*The Road as Grail Narrative*"). In this sense, within the milieu of critical opinion about what

sort of preexisting work most informs *TR*, Chabon is actually closer than many to reading the novel as science fiction. Indeed, as Pizzino recognizes, while nothing in what Chabon argues seems off base, the interpretation in his review is not mutually exclusive of a reading more attentive to the centrality of science fiction. After all, Chabon does not so much defend his refutation of science fiction as he does support his alternate designation; his final word has everything to do with where he places emphasis within the novel.³⁵ One final, lengthier quotation from his review will suffice to transition back to Pizzino's counter-argument. Chabon writes:

What emerges most powerfully as one reads *The Road* is not a prognosticatory or satirical warning about the future, or a timeless parable of a father's devotion to his son [...] *The Road* is not a record of fatherly fidelity; it is a testament to the abyss of a parent's greatest fear. The fear of leaving your child alone, of dying before your child has reached adulthood. (Chabon)

Again, Chabon is not wholly wrong in focusing on the struggle and anxiety of the father. Just as Woodson is justified in citing the "journey" elements and Cooper is keen to tease out the religious tones reminiscent of Arthurian legends, Chabon's reading touches something essential in the novel. However, as Pizzino demonstrates, this is not the *only* way to read the novel, and there is another way that makes space for science fiction as a defining force within the narrative.

Pizzino argues that Chabon's principal focus on the father "turns *The Road* into an exercise in guilt" (358). Though Pizzino recognizes the value of such a reading—

³⁵ And indeed, the interpretive emphasis which causes Chabon to eventually steer clear of designating the novel as science fiction is much more satisfying than that of reviewer Paul Kincaid, who argues that *TR* cannot be termed science fiction simply because the reader is never (in his mind) given sufficient explanation with respect to world-destroying disaster (see Kincaid, "Two Views").

namely, that the novel is “admittedly, deeply concerned with the erasure of moral significance” (358)—he states that *TR* “offers the possibility of moral and social order outside the father-son relationship” (359). He believes the nature and “possibility” of this alternative “moral and social order” is made apparent by a consideration of the novel’s distinctly science fiction elements. He writes:

Reading *The Road* as sf³⁶ [science fiction] confronts us with radically different questions about where value lies in the text, and about the dynamic ways the category of narration operates in McCarthy’s vision of apocalypse. If the critical consensus has thus far posited the novel as a tale of simple, desperate human virtue, *The Road* itself expresses Utopian impulses that complicate the framework in which virtue is defined. (359)

For Pizzino, these “Utopian impulses”—what he subsequently defines as “expectation[s] of salutary, even redemptive events” (359)—are endemic to science fiction. He cites theorist Michael Pinsky’s articulation of science fiction as a genre that portrays an “acting for the future and from the other that arrives from the future” (Pinsky qtd. in Pizzino 359). It is at this point that Pizzino’s Pinsky-mediated argument harmonizes exactly with what Csicsery-Ronay describes as the common element and impulse linking all science fiction narratives together. Indeed, though he does judiciously eschew overarching genre statements throughout most of *The Seven Beauties* (as his reviewers observe), he writes, “However much [science fiction] texts vary in artistic quality,

³⁶ Many who write about science fiction regularly abbreviate using “sf.” However, the precise meaning of this shortened form is not always clear. Sometimes “sf” means *only* science fiction, whereas other writers use “sf” to stand in for both science fiction *and* “speculative fiction.” The distinction(s) between these genres (if one believes there are any at all) are, at best, subtle. For a good discussion on this issue, see R B Gill’s “The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction.” Though mainly advocating what he calls a “fuzzy definition,” Gill does write that science fiction distinguishes itself by its “dependence on scientific method” (72). Believing that this basic distinction aligns with the genre as understood by Csicsery-Ronay, I will limit my discussion of “sf” to mean specifically “science fiction.”

intellectual sophistication, and their capacity to give pleasure, *they share a mass social energy, a desire to imagine a collective future for the human species and the world*" (1 emphasis added). Thus, the similarity between the science fiction quality that Pizzino prizes, the "Utopian impulses," and the "mass social energy" of science fiction as identified by Csicsery-Ronay is uncanny.

However convergent the views of Pizzino and Csicsery-Ronay may be, positing the existence of "Utopian impulses" in *TR* is not enough without actually identifying and exploring them. Indeed, much of the remainder of Pizzino's article follows his attempt to trace the "Utopian impulses" with respect to the attitudes and characterizations of the father and son. Specifically, Pizzino demonstrates the way in which the child's consistent commitment to futurity contrasts the father's myopic, self-destructive survivalism.³⁷ By constantly revisiting and considering his father's ethically oriented stories of "courage and justice" (*TR* 41), the boy "anticipates the advent of difference, specifically the arrival of new forms of social being" (Pizzino 359-360). Whereas the father has experienced the past but is captivated by the present insofar as he is solely driven to militantly protect the child, his "warrant" (*TR* 5), the child, knowing only the present and his father's bedtime stories of the past, maintains "a commitment to broader ethical horizons and a hope, however fraught, that the future will bring new forms of care and community" (Pizzino 366). This commitment manifests in the child's desire to reach out to others on the road. For example, when the duo senses the proximity of an encroaching group, the father ignores the possibilities implied by the child's hopeful question: "They could be good guys. Couldn't they?" (*TR* 103); similarly, the child asks the father about the reasons why

³⁷ Andrew Hoberek brilliantly draws attention to the moment when the father almost shoots his reflection in a mirror; this is symbolic of "the father's defensiveness as a form of self-violence, a shutting out of the world that eventually turns its aggression inward" (494).

they could not help a group of people they recently discovered in a cellar (*TR* 127). The tension between the father's survivalist concerns and the child's wish to have fruitful encounters with others is displayed dramatically in a scene where the latter claims to spot another child, a "boy about his age, wrapped in an outsized wool coat with the sleeves turned back" (*TR* 84). After the son bolts forward to make contact with the stranger, his father reprimands him:

What are you doing? he hissed. What are you doing?

There's a little boy, Papa. There's a little boy.

There's no little boy. What are you doing?

Yes there is I saw him.

I told you to stay put. Didn't I tell you. Now we've got to go. Come on.

I just wanted to see him, Papa. I just wanted to see him.

The man took him by the arm and they went back up through the yard. The boy would not stop crying and he would not stop looking back. Come on, the man said. We've got to go.

I want to see him, Papa.

There's no one to see. Do you want to die? Is that what you want?

I don't care, the boy said, sobbing. I don't care.

The man stopped. He stopped and squatted and held him. I'm sorry, he said.

Don't say that. You mustn't say that. (*TR* 84-85)

As McCarthy provides no definitive answer as to whether or not the other boy actually exists, the reader must decide how to read the son's ambiguously phrased wish: "I just wanted to see him, Papa. I just wanted to see him." Does he mean that he went looking

for the other boy because he wanted to “see him”—that is, to speak with him and to make friends with him? Or, on the other hand, does it imply that the son only “saw” the other boy because he *wanted* to see him—that is to say, is the other boy a chimera brought about by the intensity of the child’s desire for contact with the other? Regardless of whether or not the other boy is real, the tension between the characters’ differing postures towards otherness presented in the above scene culminates in a later disagreement. The man says:

You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.

The boy said something but he couldn’t understand him. What? he said.

He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one. (*TR* 259)

Though the father is referring to their safety (read: “you’re not the one who has to worry about *keeping us alive*”), the child is thinking only of an ethical commitment to other people.³⁸ *He* has to worry about the possibilities of connecting with other humans and interpersonal goodness because his father, in his struggle for survival, has neglected them. As Pizzino and others have pointed out, the *deus ex machina* appearance of the small, familial community of survivors near the end of the novel provides physical evidence of the veracity of the boy’s hope in a persisting humanity;³⁹ their presence proves that there are other people with whom to carry on, with whom to rebuild. And though this rebuilding is far from certain, what marks the novel as science fiction is precisely that the child, unlike his father, is open to the *possibility* for a “collective future for the human species and the world,” (1) to return to Csicsery-Ronay’s phrasing. The child’s faithful

³⁸ As Cant puts it, “the father’s pragmatism in the face of potential danger is constantly challenged by the boy’s assertion of the claims of conscience” (272).

³⁹ See Jay Ellis, “Another Sense of Ending: The Keynote Address to the Knoxville Conferences” 33; Paul Kincaid, “Two Views: *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy”; and Allen Josephs, “What’s at the End of *The Road*?” 27.

receptivity resonates in the following passage, which occurs shortly before the father's death:

He'd stop and lean on the cart and the boy would go on and then stop and look back and he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle. (*TR* 273)

Though dimly aware of his son's promise, the father cannot follow, in thought or in body; in the words of Louise Squire, the "boy's future is not just unknown: it is unknowable" (218). Thus, the child's openness occasions a viable futurity all but foreclosed by the father's limiting perspective. In this way, Pizzino reads *TR* as a novel that is "prognosticatory"—to return to Chabon's words—insofar as the child animates an incredible commitment to futurity amidst otherwise dismal, dead-end circumstances.

After recognizing the child's markedly science fictional yearning for ways of life and thought that extend into futurity, Pizzino goes on to argue that *TR* is actually a novel explicitly about the generative essence of science fiction. After focusing on the disparity between the father's stories and the contrasting actions that the child desires, he calls special attention to the way in which the child eventually rejects his father's tales. The child says, "Those stories are not true [because] in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people" (*TR* 267). Pizzino believes that this transition from the father sharing stories to the child rejecting the stories allows the novel to highlight the "difference between the father's values and the son's while also tracing the connections that bind them" (363). Thus, the reader sees both the child's properly science-fictional commitment to futurity and also the source from which the commitment developed,

namely, the father's stories. *TR*, then, is a meta-science fiction because it is about the "origin of [science fiction] narratives—about where we 'get' them" (Pizzino 365). In the case of *TR*, the child 'gets' the science fictional impulse from his father, and specifically from the stories that the father tells but fails to live up to.

3.2: Reading *Blood Meridian* with an Eye to Revision

Unlike *TR*, there is no critical precedent for reading *BM* as a science fiction narrative. However, as I will argue, there is a great deal written about the novel that makes such a reading both defensible and, indeed, worthwhile. As I see it, the key to such an argument lies in understanding the way in which McCarthy's strikingly *historical* novel fits within the purview of science fiction as delineated by Csicsery-Ronay. Indeed, however much the notion of historical, old west fiction might chafe with typical preconceptions of science fiction, Csicsery-Ronay is emphatic that the term science fiction need not apply to only futuristic or parallel-time/world settings. **He writes, "sf's black box involves the past, in the hesitation that comes in anticipating the complete revision of origins. A past that is not yet known is a form of the future. So too is a present unanticipated by the past" (4).** In this sense, carefully revisionistic history that in some way traces the role of science and technology through past events in hopes of affecting the present is distinctly science fiction. This is the finely tuned understanding of science fiction that allows for tracing it as an impulse throughout *BM*.

John Emil Sepich, author of the impressive companion volume *Notes on Blood Meridian*, describes the way the novel begins in the "relatively forgotten mid-19th century some thirty years in advance of Cowboys, trail drives, and rail heads in the Southwest"

(“What Kind of Indians?” 123). Set three decades before the heroically infused American west that we might more comfortably recognize, the world of *BM* is devoid of any semblance of institutional law, land ownership, or industry. As Chamberlain writes, “there was a real enjoyment in a lawless, vagabond life on the Frontier. I liked it” (310).⁴⁰ McCarthy may have had these exact words in mind when he composed the following, corroborating description: “Here beyond men’s judgments all covenants were brittle” (*BM* 111). However, no matter how unbelievable the degree of abject lawlessness, it is crucial to appreciate the history undergirding McCarthy’s narrative; as Sepich says, McCarthy cannot be faulted for crafting an unnecessary degree of brutality insofar as *BM* is true to the time and place it portrays (*Notes* 117).⁴¹ Indeed, Sepich writes, though the chaos and fighting in *BM* upsets our “cinema-and-television-inspired notions of cowboy-and-Indian fights” (*Notes* 55), McCarthy’s description is historically accurate with respect to the attitudes of both “Anglos” and Indians of the period. As he puts it, “The Anglos’ hatred of Indians was concomitant of the westward expansion of the United States” (9), and the graphically portrayed scenes of Indian backlash are often traceable to a specific, confirming historical sources (59). With respect to this facet of McCarthy’s equal attention to both warring sides, Cant agrees with Sepich; he writes, “even the [classically] revisionist reading of history of the period is challenged by McCarthy’s depiction of the Native Mexicans as in no way morally distinct from their Anglo-Saxon or Mexican rivals, especially with regard to homicidal violence” (159). If McCarthy can be faulted in any way, it is, as Cant points out, because *BM* “expresses a mythicized

⁴⁰ Chilling as this short sentence may be, it is worth noting that Chamberlain found that he “liked” his marauding way of life less and less through time. On 315 he writes, “all were sad and guilty,” and on 325, he describes the Glanton gang’s “disgusting orgy” that leaves him “thoroughly horrified.”

⁴¹ While filtered through fiction, the horrors of *BM* do not owe nearly so much to McCarthy’s imagination as, say, Lester Ballard (*Child of God*) or the terrible, death-wielding threesome of *Outer Dark*.

version of [violent] events with the intervening periods of civilized order omitted” (Cant 164). In this sense, the events are not made-up so much as they are made more intense by McCarthy’s characteristically mythic style. Thus, the west onto which *BM* opens is a historically defensible Hobbesian plateau of war of all against all (see Cant 159).

Returning to Sepich, it is important to observe that he specifically notes how the book’s major 1848 setting is “thirty years in advance” of a more recognizable American west. In an article on historical sources in the novel, he observes that 1878 exactly corresponds to the historical end of the “Indian menace” as well as the first “barbed-wire fencing” of ranch land (“A Bloody Dark”). Given this chronology, it can be no coincidence that McCarthy’s novel ends with the kid’s downfall also occurring in 1878. As McCarthy said in his interview with Kushner, the time between the Mexican War and the westward settlement of the following century was a “turning point of American history” (McCarthy qtd. in Kushner). McCarthy matches the timeline of his narrative with the timeline of the end of the old west to compose a narrative that begins in a “relatively forgotten west” and concludes concomitant with a historical transition. Thus, the end of *BM* is the end of some version of the west.

James Dorson argues that this incorporation of a distinct historical timeline is evidenced by details as the novel develops. He meticulously charts the subtle transitions throughout that cause him to read the scalphunting Gang members as “harbingers of capitalist modernity” who use the “industrial violence of humans” to subdue a country once throbbing “with possibility” (109). Dorson draws attention to the ending of the novel proper (pre-epilogue), where a prostitute “ominously tells the crowd not once but twice that ‘it’s all over’,” thereby giving the reader the “distinct feeling that something

has ended” (109). Dorson’s findings are corroborated by reading the enigmatic epilogue of the novel as a mythic description of a solitary post-hole digger moving across the landscape (see Sepich, *Notes* 66).⁴² Symbolizing the first movements of civilized progress into the space we now recognize as the American west, the unnamed figure “strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel” in an ongoing “verification of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather” (*BM* 351). The digger mechanistically sets ordering fences in a land recently bathed in the blood of both human and animal slaughter. As Jay Ellis explains:

In the Epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy ultimately renders *space into place* through enigmatic yet historical details, describing the coterminous lies of three salient events in the [w]est: the nearly complete genocide of a people, the nearly complete extermination of an animal, and the realization (in carefully mechanical enlightenment terms) of an abstraction bringing space into the order of place.

(“What Happens to Country” 86 emphasis added)

And while much of *BM* traverses what was once the *space* of the west, the epilogue’s transition into *place* brings the close of the world of the novel into a new context. Indeed,

Dana Phillips writes:

What *is* vouchsafed [in the epilogue], however, is a vision of the more contemporary world that informs McCarthy’s next novel, *All the Pretty Horses*: a

⁴² Apart from the several critics whom I will soon discuss (Cant, Jay Ellis, Dorson, Dana Phillips, and Sara Spurgeon), this reading or a similar interpretation of the epilogue is also put forth by Philip A. Snyder (see “Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*” 133). Interestingly, in his article, “Rolling the Stone, Sisyphus, and the Epilogue of *Blood Meridian*,” Mark Busby suggests that Peter Josyph also agrees with this “historical” reading, as the former terms it (89); however, to back up this claim, Busby refers to a written dialogue between Josyph and Harold Bloom wherein Josyph actually leans away from the “historical” reading insofar as he says, “I don’t see *Blood Meridian* as being about any West that existed in the American past” (*Adventures in Reading Cormac McCarthy* 85).

world in which the [w]estern plains have been rationalized—settled, fenced, and punctured not by post-hole diggers but by oil wells, which also strike fire out of the rock in accord with the dictates of an ideology of progress. Thus the epilogue to *Blood Meridian* begins to return us (but *only* begins) to the familiar terrain of religion, ethics, psychology, and politics. (454)

As Ellis notes, the “ideology of progress” that Phillips identifies in the post-hole digger is an almost explicit fulfillment of “plats first imagined in the Land Ordinance of 1785” (“What Happens to Country” 92). And while Sepich adds that the wandering “bonepickers” who move “haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet” (BM 351) find historical precedent in industrial westward expansion, noting that buffalo bones collected for use as agricultural fertilizer constituted a “significant economic good” (*Notes* 67), Ellis believes that those “who do not gather [the bones]” (BM 351) are most likely land “surveyors” (“What Happens to Country” 91-92), thus completing a reading that unites all the figures in the scene within a collective mission.⁴³ Prefigured by McCarthy’s earlier description of marauders “bleeding westward like some heliotropic plague” (BM 82), the novel ends with both “man” and “wanderers” picking over desert scraps “in the dawn” (BM 351) of a western landscape changed from space to place.

According to Sara Spurgeon, this view of the epilogue emphasizes the way in which the novel “reorders” and “rewrites” through a “reimagining upon the palimpsest of

⁴³ Because I have referred to him elsewhere, it is worth mentioning that Harold Bloom actually holds a distinctly different and explicitly apolitical, ahistorical, and purely philosophic reading (see *How To Read and Why* 262-263). As Ellis puts it, though Bloom is correct to eschew a reading that hitches the Epilogue to a purely “political plow,” he is wrong to assume that McCarthy’s aim must be metaphorically narrow. As Ellis puts it, “we need not choose between historical and mythical readings of McCarthy: he works in both areas” (“What Happens to Country” 90-91).

the western frontier of the birth of our most pervasive national fantasies—the winning of the west and the building of the American character through frontier experiences” (75-76).

Spurgeon’s evocation of “our most pervasive national fantasies” should recall Cant’s articulation of the myth of American Exceptionalism:

Exceptionalist ideology rationalized the process of expansion, conquest and expropriation as ‘Manifest Destiny,’ thus linking imperialist ambition with the ‘divine purpose’ that had inspired the Puritans to found the ‘redeemer nation’ and the revolutionaries to establish the democratic ‘last best hope of mankind.’ Like the British ‘white man’s burden’ it legitimized the cultural and material extirpation of the indigenous population as a divine mission to civilize the savage. *It extended the myth of the pastoral onto the great plains as a domestication of the wilderness.* (Cant 157, emphasis added).

Though I, like Cant, believe the entirety of this description is pertinent to the American “myths” that *BM* subverts, I emphasize specifically the last sentence in the quote only to note its visual similarity to the epilogue: a figure setting fences—the bastion of the pastoral—in the barren “wilderness” of the “plains” (*BM* 351). Again, this is the “space becoming place” described by Ellis. And here McCarthy’s novel ends, with a historical “revision” that topples the stories we are accustomed to hearing: both the “American west” as couched within the myth of American Exceptionalism *and* the counter-myths that demonize only Anglos for the needless slaughtering of innocent native peoples. Rooted in the indiscriminate violence of the day, this “revision” charts a narrative arc that spans from a brutal “past not yet known”—to return to Csicsery-Ronay’s phrasing—to an uneasy resolution wedded to the advent of the modernized west.

Chapter IV: *The Seven Beauties*

Having demonstrated the way in which both *TR* and *BM* animate core impulses of science fiction as characterized by Csicsery-Ronay, it is appropriate to begin exploring the “seven beauties.” As I noted, Csicsery-Ronay’s Marxist-inflected⁴⁴ study seeks less to provide neat, closed genre definitions than it does to enable a constructive discussion of patterns within the genre. As he puts it:

I believe that [science fiction] can be treated as a particular, recognizable mode of thought and art. But rather than a programlike set of exclusive rules and required devices, this mode is a constellation of diverse intellectual and emotional interests and responses that are particularly active in an age of restless technological transformation. (5)

Csicsery-Ronay parses this “constellation” into seven “aspect[s] of [science fiction] that audiences desire from the genre” (5). The seven “beauties”—which he believes may appear and coalesce in any possible combination⁴⁵—are as follows: fictive neology (the way science fiction invents new words), fictive novums (the way it imagines new things), future history (the way it anticipates the future), imaginary science (the way it fabulates alternative science), science-fictional sublime (the way it invokes awe and dread), science-fictional grotesque (the way it violates conceptual boundaries), and the

⁴⁴ Kincaid treats it as an updated and renewed Marxism-made-relevant, or, at the end of his review, as an “essential corrective to Suvin’s previously dominant view” (see *World Literature* 45-46).

⁴⁵ This felicitous amount of flexibility presumably being part of what makes the aspects so beautiful to begin with.

technologiade (the way it adapts and transforms materials from popular culture to its own ends).⁴⁶ Though I believe many of these beauties are evident in both *BM* and *TR*, I will discuss the four that I take to be the most prominent and constructive in informing a reading of the novels as they interact with Cant's reading of McCarthy: namely, fictional neology, fictional novums, the science-fictional grotesque, and the science-fictional sublime. While I will go into significant detail with respect to the first two, I will refer to the second two only briefly as supporting points. This approach to Csicsery-Ronay's "beauties" will allow me to demonstrate the ways in which reading the novels as science fiction compliments, enriches, and supersedes the "mythoclastic critique" that Cant identifies. Furthermore, it will lay the groundwork for the argument that I will take up in my final chapter: namely, that the two science fiction novels exist in a revealing, intertextual relationship.

4.1: Fictive Neology

Technically speaking, neology refers to either the use of new, invented words or the use of existing words imparted with new or invented meaning. Csicsery-Ronay's science fiction terminology parses this dual definition into neologisms in the "strong sense, [meaning] the invention of new words that have no histories" and, alternately, "neosemes, [which refer to] semantic shifts of words and sentences that remain familiar in structure and appearance, but have been appropriated by imaginary new social conditions to mean something new" (19). Though the presence of this first "beauty" is

⁴⁶ Each of the parenthetical asides comes verbatim from David M. Higgins's book review of *The Seven Beauties* in the journal, *American Literature*, September 2012. Csicsery-Ronay's own, longer descriptive summaries of the beauties can be found in pages 5-7 of his introduction.

relatively negligible in McCarthy, it is worth discussing both the presence and effect of neology within both novels. Consider, for example, the following passage from *TR*:

The blackness he [the father] woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. (*TR* 15)

Typical of scenes where the father awakes to various degrees of nothingness, this particular description includes two blatant examples of Csicsery-Ronay's latter iteration of neology, the neoseme. First, note the strange cross wiring between the sound of nothing and the sight of nothing in the second sentence. Though one would expect the sentence to read: "A blackness to hurt your *eyes* with *looking*," McCarthy inexplicably fuses two separate (lacks of) sensory inputs. Though this unusual pairing is conspicuous when reproduced in isolation as it has been above, this **synesthetic hybridity** of sensation is more subtly powerful in context, for it is only the culmination of many instances wherein McCarthy litters description with recurring words such as *gray*, *cold*, *silence* or *silent*, and *dark* or *darkness*.⁴⁷ This repetition and layering allows the meanings of these words to collapse and coalesce into one another. As is explicitly clear in this passage, what results from such reiteration is a sensory conflation that functions as a neoseme by subverting our expectations for specific words; in this case, the words we

⁴⁷ Chris Danta notes that the word "*gray* occurs 81 times in this short novel, with the additional permutations *graying*, *grayness*, and *grayblue* each occurring once" (9). For Danta, this repetition is part of the way McCarthy "radically reorients Platonic thought by graying out the sun and the world in *The Road*" (16). While Danta draws on both Plato and Wittgenstein in making this argument for the moral, philosophical significant of the word "gray," I would simply add that Nietzsche named "gray" as the color most central to his genealogy of morality (Nietzsche 6).

associate with hearing and seeing. This neoseme intensifies the atmosphere in the novel. It is as if the dark, cold, and silence within the world of *TR* so far surpass any conditions we would recognize that new language is necessary to attempt successful description. The state of the world is, as the book later reads, “a darkness without depth or dimension” (*TR* 67). Like the father who wakes shivering again and again to black and gray hellscapes, the reader begins to hear the nothingness of darkness, see the color of silence.

Apart from the “sensual conflation,” this specific passage includes a more concise neoseme. Consider McCarthy’s use of the word “autistic.” To my finding, there is no precedent for the use of this word in any other context than to refer to a person with developmental challenges within the autistic spectrum. This, then, is an example of McCarthy appropriating an existing word for a new and somewhat inscrutable meaning. In this case, “autistic” makes no denotative sense; however, the use of the word does, inexplicably, imbue the setting with an enigmatic intensity. McCarthy achieves a similar effect on the first page of *TR*, where he writes, “Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of *some cold glaucoma* dimming away the world” (*TR* 3 emphasis added). Like “autistic,” the word “glaucoma” is whisked from the vocabulary of human afflictions to serve as a descriptor for dire physical surroundings. More so than “autistic,” the use of “glaucoma” does sensibly fit a world where an ashen sheen is clouding across the sun; however, McCarthy’s use of the word is still strikingly original. As with the “sensual conflation,” these innovative neosemes suggest that the planet is suffering something more widespread and overwhelming than anything a reader would recognize in her or his lived world.

Moving from neosemes back to the first category within Csiscery-Ronay's understanding of neology, Philip A. Snyder and Delys W. Snyder chronicle a range of prominent neologisms in *BM*:

[McCarthy] makes new compounds by combining already existing words, such as 'rawhidecovered'; he creates new words from already existing morphemes, such as 'bepopulate' or 'enhearsed'; he makes nouns into verbs, such as 'skylight'; he blends parts of two words to make a new word, such as 'scurvid' from 'scurvy' and 'rabid'; and he outrightly coins new words, such as 'sleared' or 'awap.' (36)

To the first category, one might add "harnessmaker," a moniker marking a character in an important story shared by the judge midway through the novel, as well as the disgusting description of the sun as "urinecolored" (*BM* 49). One might also recall *TR*'s striking use of the term "bloodcult" (*TR* 16) to refer to a pack of cannibals. To the latter categories in P. Snyder and D. Snyder's enumeration, one should add *TR*'s striking word at the center of the phrase, "the cold illucid world" (*TR* 116), as well as his use of the inexplicable word "parsible" (88).⁴⁸ As noted by P. Snyder and D. Snyder, these and other instances of neology enhance McCarthy's status as a "postmodern artistic *bricoleur*, one who cobbles together his texts from the multiple and varied language resources available to him" (36).

While what has so far been discussed refers to "fictive neology" in the strictest sense, it is worth noting that McCarthy's writing includes a wealth of other examples that fall into a somewhat fuzzier category. For instance, looking back at the above passage

⁴⁸ Dawn A. Saliba wrongly implies that McCarthy's use of "salitter" (appearing on page 261 of *TR*) also constitutes a neologism proper. Though you will not find this word in a dictionary, it is, as Bill Hardwig notes, a word used "rather exclusively" by the 17th century Lutheran mystic, Jacob Boehm (Hardwig 26). Boehm uses the word to mean "the essence of God." As the second epigraph of *Blood Meridian* comes from Boehm, it is obvious that McCarthy is familiar with his writing. Saliba is right to mark the word as unusual, though it is not one of McCarthy's true creations (see Saliba 147).

from *TR*, consider the use of the word “outheld.” Though of obvious, literal meaning, it is striking for its reversed syntax. Rather than describe the man’s arms as “held out” for balance, McCarthy deliberately favors an archaic, less familiar but equivalent form of the verb. Also notice the word “vestibular,” a scientific/medical term that refers to the collection of inner ear mechanisms that contribute to both balance and spatial orientation.⁴⁹ Though when this definition is explained the word makes sense in context, it is noteworthy for its obscurity, and specifically for its characteristically scientific flavor. Though, as I said, these two words are not neologisms properly speaking, they testify to what many critics describe as a built-in linguistic speed bump in McCarthy’s writing. According to Nancy Kreml, McCarthy’s word choices cause the reader to “draw heavily on memory, inference, or a dictionary [...] these words themselves, like the syntax, constrain the reader to spend more time and effort on interpreting the text and thereby to feel the weight of the meaning more heavily” (qtd. in Snyder 35). When the reader does put in the “effort” to demystify these speed bumps, it is often possible to trace McCarthy’s usage back to a specific source, whether with respect to a historical account (the use of “attic” in *BM* 55), a regional dialect (“thrapple” in *BM* 286), or a distinctly specific niche term (“spanceled” in *BM* 157). Whether neology in the technical sense or not, the “speed-bumps” combine with McCarthy’s true neosemes and “word-creation” (Snyder and Snyder 36) to collectively contribute to what one of his foreign language translators calls a “fundamental re-thinking of language, a re-Englishing” (Michael Scott Doyle qtd. in Snyder and Snyder 36). Such a masterful re-thinking of language is one obvious way in which McCarthy profoundly estranges the fictional world from the

⁴⁹ Interestingly, the father later threatens a “bloodcult” member with language that also refers to a medically savvy understanding of brain functions (see *TR* 64). Is McCarthy suggesting that the father was once a doctor—a surgeon, perhaps?

experience of the reader. According to Csicsery-Ronay, this is the core function of neology in science fiction. He writes:

If sf is a quintessentially estranging genre, it is in imaginary neologies that this estrangement is most economically condensed. Imaginary neologies stand out from other words as knots of estrangement, drawing together the threads of imaginary reference with those of known language. (Csicsery-Ronay 19)

The words McCarthy chooses, whether made up or simply gathered from any number of unlikely, obscure places, achieve this essentially science fictional estrangement; therefore, neology plays a supportive and, as Csicsery-Ronay puts it, “condensed” role in allowing readers to view both *TR* and *BM* as science fiction.

4.2: Fictive Novums

The most singularly pervasive and crucial science fiction “beauty” that Csicsery-Ronay discusses is the “fictive novum.” Csicsery-Ronay begins by summarizing the roots of the upper-case “Novum” as it originated in Ernest Bloch’s Marxist theory. He then explores the implications of Darko Suvin’s specifically science fiction oriented (and lower case) appropriation and articulation of the “novum” that first appeared in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). Following Suvin’s model, Csicsery-Ronay’s introduces the term by saying:

[a novum is] a historically unprecedented and unpredicted ‘new thing’ that intervenes in the routine course of social life and changes the trajectory of history.

The novum is usually a rationally explicable material phenomenon, the result of

an invention or discovery, whose unexpected appearance elicits a wholesale change in the perception of reality. (Csicsery-Ronay 5-6)

Acting as a “narratorial kernel” (50), the novum is the point of departure between the reader’s known, empirical world and the world of the fiction. Thus, “the novum establishes a distance from which reality can be seen with fresh eyes [so that] the sf reader shuttles back and forth over this gap, comparing the imaginary model with the ideological [real] one” (50). Much in line with Suvin, Csicsery-Ronay emphasizes that a novum must be “immanent, scientifically apprehendable, and ‘*validated by cognitive logic.*’ It must produce effects in the diegetic world that can be reasonably derived from the novum’s causes, and these effects cannot contradict the logic of real social and natural history” (47 emphasis original). That is to say, a novum must be explained and explored within the narrative in ways that are both internally coherent and rationally explicable with respect to the reader’s lived world. This necessary link between the fictional conditions of the novum and the existing science and knowledge of the real world is in large part what distinguishes science fiction from other speculative genres, such as fantasy or surrealism. As Csicsery-Ronay puts it, “The novum-event and its ripples can incite readers to believe in the possibility of something truly different coming about, but only if the novum is able to prompt them to imagine true difference” (52). Thus, in order to be science fiction, the narrative must present an alternate world that nevertheless correlates to the reader’s lived experience with science and technology; the novum is the science fiction “beauty” which most often encapsulates this precarious “gap,” as Csicsery-Ronay calls it. Understood this way, a novum walks a fine line of

paradox between the wholly new and the familiar; it generates change from within an enduring measure of consistency.

Throughout his work, Csicsery-Ronay discusses common characteristics of all science fiction novums. He writes:

Each sf novum is a compound of at least two different kinds of radical change.

The change usually first appears as a physical-material novelty: change in the material organization of existence. This form is complemented by an ethical novelty: a change in values and mores. The genre does not dictate how the two dimensions will be related in a given text, only that they will be. (56)

While the novum must correspond to a material newness (indeed, a “physical novum is absolutely required” (56)) it also necessarily initiates social and ethical newness. In this sense, the responses *to* and *within* the conditioned repercussions of a given novum are critical to understanding a science fiction narrative. Apart from recognizing the necessity of ethical implications, Csicsery-Ronay makes several taxonomical distinctions that are worth mentioning. The first is the split he makes between novums involving “discovery [the introjection of an unknown phenomenon]” and novums involving “invention [the emergence of new things through evolutionary mutations and leaps from the familiar world]” (60). He parses a similar division in slightly different words when he later describes various science fiction novum archetypes, which he defines as “dramatic abstractions of philosophical problems raised historically by theorist and practical inventors alike” (61). He believes these recurring archetypes divide into two “classes”: there are novums that are “plausible extensions of what is known” and there are, alternatively, novums that “would require new concepts of both scientific understanding

and material laws to be taken seriously” (61). **This understanding of the novum as a physical advent that brings about social and relational development because of newness either tenuously extended *from* or divergent *to* the known world sets the outlying parameters for the “beauty.”**

Because it is, as Csicsery-Ronay identifies, the most common and essential “beauty” of science fiction (see 6, 47), my discussion of the “fictive novum” in the novels will take up the bulk of the discussion within this chapter. Within this bulk, my argument for discernable “novums” will make reference to preceding chapters, especially with respect to my understanding of Cant’s *Myth of American Exceptionalism*. I will first make the case that the oddly ahistorical character of the judge in *BM* acts as novum insofar as “he” forefronts the mechanistic, scientific subordination of the west. In this way he brings to light the horrific, megalomaniacal nature of the American myths identified by Cant. In the second sub-section, I will argue that the “unidentified” disaster of *TR* is a bomb; in my reading, this epicenter of destruction links the disintegration of the natural world to reckless human agency.

a. The Novum of *BM*: “The Vast Abhorrence of the Judge”

Recall for a moment Csicsery-Ronay’s definition of the “fictive novum,” but this time imagine small breaks that separate the overall statement into three specific units.

The definition would read as follows:

[a novum is] [1.] a historically unprecedented and unpredicted ‘new thing’ that
 [2.] intervenes in the routine course of social life and changes the trajectory of
 history. [3.] The novum is usually a rationally explicable material phenomenon,

the result of an invention or discovery, whose unexpected appearance elicits a wholesale change in the perception of reality. (Csicsery-Ronay 5-6)

With this recasting of the definition in mind, determining the novum of *BM* is incredibly easy if one focuses solely on the first part: a novum is an “unprecedented and unpredicted ‘new thing.’” Insofar as *BM* is largely based on historical account, much of the narrative is, by definition “precedented and predicted” in one pre-existing account or another. This is more-or-less true with one glaringly obvious exception: Judge Holden.⁵⁰ Of course, as was previously explained, Holden is at least partly “historical” in that he comes to McCarthy via Chamberlain’s writings. However, unlike many of the other prominent *BM* names that McCarthy took from *My Confession*, Holden *only* appears in Chamberlain’s account. According to Sepich, there are two other contemporary accounts of men that might possibly refer to the man Chamberlain knew as Holden, though neither can be confirmed or linked to the name “Holden” (*Notes* 19). This lack of historical corroboration of a man who by Chamberlain’s description would seem memorable for his anomalous characteristics (massive, intellectual, multilingual, well-connected, notorious for past crimes, etc.) is odd, at the very least. It is possible that Holden’s historical scarcity is at least partly attributable to his practice of using pseudonyms, for this is certainly suggested when Chamberlain writes about hearing of crimes committed while Holden was “bearing another name in the Cherokee nation and Texas” (309). While there may be other logical reasons why Holden seems largely missing from accessible record, the reasons for his scantiness are better left to true historians. What is more important here is considering McCarthy’s specific treatment of the historically problematic figure;

⁵⁰ As I mentioned in an earlier footnote, “the kid” does not seem to have a direct forerunner in history. However, as will become clear, he does not differ from the *possibilities* of reality—whether historical or not—in the same surprising ways as the judge.

rather than coax Chamberlain's Holden into a believable, historically (and realistically) acceptable role, McCarthy instead chooses to turn the least "precedented" figure in the novel into an almost supernatural character.

In some ways McCarthy simply exaggerates Chamberlain's report. For example, McCarthy takes Holden's reputation of being "by far the most educated man in northern Mexico" (Chamberlain 309) to an extreme degree in granting his character esoteric knowledge that stretches from Tarot divination cards, to wilderness alchemy, to classical Latin, to judicial regulations. Also, though both Holdens manage to survive the final rout of the Glanton gang, the details that McCarthy provides differ dramatically from Chamberlain's considerably less heroic explanation. With respect to physical descriptions, McCarthy adds six inches to the measurements Chamberlain provides, making the Judge an even seven feet tall. He also transforms Chamberlain's beardless man into a completely hairless man, a change that would seem to swap a regular habit of shaving with full-body alopecia. In all of these ways McCarthy's Holden takes after but supersedes Chamberlain's account; thus, however incredible the *real* Holden was, McCarthy's fictionalized version is always more so.⁵¹ And though the preceding characteristics are all conceivable (intelligence, agency, size, appearance, etc.), McCarthy's Holden proves incredible in additional ways that are harder to square with a realistic schema.

Firstly, McCarthy's Holden is omniscient. In the scene where the kid first encounters him, Holden interrupts a preacher at a revival meeting. He slanders the holy man, accusing him of violating a girl of eleven and "having congress with a goat" (*BM* 7).

⁵¹ As Cant puts it: "If Chamberlain's account of Holden should be taken 'with a pinch of salt,' how much more so should McCarthy's own?" (Cant 167).

The mob riots against the preacher, and, shortly thereafter, members of the mob laugh and drink with Holden after he casually admits that he had never heard of the preacher before seeing him in the revival tent (*BM* 9). William C. Spencer adeptly points out that, just as Judge Holden steals the show from the preacher, so too does he take center stage in the novel from this point onward (100). Spencer explicitly recognizes McCarthy's achievement in rendering the "seductive" judge. This point is apt insofar as Holden proves to be seductive to many characters within the novel, as well as to numerous critics who have focused their writings on his enigmatic role. As Tobin, the ex-priest, says to the kid, "he's a thing to study" (*BM* 141). However, putting aside Holden's mysteriously "seductive" pull to return to the revival-tent scene, Sepich notes that the historical Reverend Green (that preacher in question) was dismissed from the Baptist Church for drunkenness nine years before the setting of the altercation in *BM*. Thus, "the judge was not entirely amiss in his attack on Green, then, though his particular charges appear to be exaggerated" (Sepich, *Notes* 13). Far from fabricating slander, the judge knows more about Green than he possibly should; he accuses the guilty preacher in chosen terms that sound to the *BM* reader much closer to his own pedophilic misdeeds (Sepich suggests that the nature of the crimes are "projected" from Holden's own nefarious predilections). It is, then, in Holden's first appearance that McCarthy grants him an omniscience that will persist throughout the novel.

Perhaps more distressing than the Judge's possession of impossible knowledge is the way in which he uses that impossible knowledge. When a lieutenant arrives to chastise the Glanton gang, the judge takes him aside to "go over points of law with him [...] He cited cases civil and martial. He quoted Coke and Blackstone, Anaximander,

Thales” (*BM* 250). At a glance this interchange seems but one more instance of the judge foisting his intelligence on an unsuspecting (and probably illiterate) victim; however, according to one forum poster on the Cormac McCarthy website, this scene is revealing insofar as it further characterizes Holden’s unbelievable acumen. As “efscerbo” points out, depending on how one chooses to interpret certain details, the names that the judge mentions may be suggestive; though Coke and Blackstone are both relevant and believable (two legal “philosophers” dating from the 17th and 18th centuries, respectively), the names Anaximander and Thales are significantly more problematic. Firstly, as “efscerbo” notes, neither of these figures has anything specific to do with legal terms. As he puts it, the two ancient Greeks are barely even “philosophers” by modern standards. So why does the Judge bring them up? However, apart from this question, the real issue stems from the fact that there exist no writings attributed to either Thales or Anaximander (with the exception of one possible, brief work sometimes accredited to the latter).

Considering that McCarthy tells us that the Judge has *quoted* both men (rather than, say, *referenced them*), the reader of *BM* is left with a choice: either the Judge is knowingly brandishing specious information and sources in order to confound the lieutenant, *or*, the Judge is reciting from memory. That is to say, either he is performing or he is remembering. There are certainly reasons to suspect that the Judge possesses a persuasive rhetorical ability. At one point Holden diffuses the tension between the gang and an arms dealer by speaking “warmly and gestur[ing] with a great expansiveness of spirit” (*BM* 88), covering topics ranging from the Old Testament, to Greek poets, to modern notions of geology (*BM* 89). Similarly, Holden speaks in Spanish to assuage the rage of a man whose horse has been attacked by Glanton’s (*BM* 239). Holden has a “way with words”

that seems to transcend the natural aptitude usually implied by the cliché; as he puts it, “Words are things. The words [a man] is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning” (*BM* 89). It is possible, then, to read the mentioning of Thales and Anaximander in line with this series of persuasive, performative speeches. But just because he is using the names for his own rhetorical ends, it does not mean that his “quotations” are false. He could very well be honest in his direct references, which means that the reader should take seriously his claims to immortality. It is the Judge, after all, who is alive and dancing at the end of the novel, announcing that “he will never die” (*BM* 349). Though attributing neither the power of universally persuasive rhetorical genius nor eternal life (and thus eternal memory) to the judge is particularly humanizing, taken as individual characteristics, they at least testify to varying degrees of what specifically may be so “unprecedented” about Holden.

In addition to these incredible aspects of his impossible knowledge, forceful communication, and claims to eternal life, Holden is also problematic with respect to his arrivals throughout the novel. Tobin describes the gang coming across Holden sitting on a rock in the middle of the desert, smiling, as if “he’d been expecting [the gang]” (*BM* 131). Upon meeting the judge in this way, Glanton immediately falls into talking privately with him, forging what Tobin calls “some terrible covenant” (132) that establishes Holden as second-in-command and leads immediately to providing the gang with strangely wrought gunpowder. Sepich reads this bizarre encounter as the sealing of a Faustian compact for which the kid—not Glanton, the man “willing to promise his soul for more [gun]powder”—will eventually die (“A Bloody Dark”). And while the kid is not present at this first appearance of the Judge, it is *only* the kid who must face his re-appearance at

the close of the novel. Twenty-seven years after the Glanton gang is attacked and split up⁵² the kid still “heard rumor [of the judge] everywhere” (*BM* 325). Soon after this chilling hint at the judge’s notoriety, the kid kills a boy in the desert. The boy, Elrod, begins the trouble by impugning the authenticity of the scapular of ears that the kid wears around his neck. Heated by argument, the boy returns in the night to the kid’s fire, rifle in hand. The kid shoots Elrod, and the next day, in a bar in the nearest town, he finds the judge, sitting apart from others as if he were “some other sort of man entire” and looking “little changed or none in all these years” (*BM* 338). Sepich suggests that Holden appears in this bar at this moment because he is drawn to both Elrod’s blasphemy of history and the kid’s violent reprisal, as if the “ears like a fox” that Tobin has warned about (*BM* 141) have heard the sound of the bloody destruction of ignorance from across the desert. These two ominous appearances, troubling for suggesting the judge’s ubiquitous potency,⁵³ resonate in Tobin’s words to the kid: “Every man in the company [the Glanton gang] claims to have encountered that sootysouled rascal in some other place” (*BM* 130). Adding spatial ubiquity to temporal dominion, this detail cements an image of Holden that fits Csicsery-Ronay’s articulation of the novum as an “unprecedented new thing.” This image of the exceptional judge likewise complements Cant’s reading of the novel: “too many critics have misread *Blood Meridian*, regarding it a realist text when it is nothing of the kind. McCarthy is a creator of myth” (Cant 161). I will return specifically to the way in which Holden-as-novum abuts Cant’s view of the “mythic nature of the

⁵² Sepich notes that this gap is three years longer than the traditional length of a Faustian contract, which suggests that reading the epilogue conclusion of *BM* in historical terms (i.e., the end of the Indian menace in the west and a post-hole digger) is perhaps more applicable than associating the kid’s demise with purely literary, metaphoric, or philosophical implications.

⁵³ With respect once more to the revival tent scene, Spencer believes, “McCarthy hints at the supernatural powers for Judge Holden when he narrates that amazingly the judge somehow beat everyone else to the bar [in the saloon]” (101).

judge” throughout the remainder of my discussion; first, however, I will return to the remaining two units within Csicsery-Ronay’s “novum” definition.

In a sense, the fulfillment of both sections two and three of Csicsery-Ronay’s definition has already been suggested. What is needed here is a focused reiteration of the way in which the ‘new thing’ of the judge meets the latter two conditions of the novum definition, namely, that he “[2.] intervenes in the routine course of social life and changes the trajectory of history” and that he is a “[3.] rationally explicable material phenomenon, the result of an invention or discovery, whose unexpected appearance elicits a wholesale change in the perception of reality” (Csicsery-Ronay 5-6). Indeed, the judge fulfills these terms when he is viewed as both the extension and embodiment of the forces that initiate the end of the west as it is epitomized by the epilogue—what James Dorson calls the novel’s “gradual transition from magical thinking to instrumental rationality; from superstition to the cold economic logic that marks the modern world; a transition in which the past is extirpated and the new law of the secular American nation-state expands its rule” (110). When viewed as the animating personification of this “transition,” the judge’s brutal and scientifically framed rationalizations can be seen to truly change the world he inhabits.

After first calling attention to the dizzyingly diverse critical readings of Holden, Dorson opts to “see the judge for what the judge by definition represents: *the law*” (108). Of course, Dorson is quick to make the point that was made earlier in this paper—namely, that much of *BM* seems to be strikingly *lawless*, what with the free reign and terror of the warring factions of Indians and Anglos. Counter-intuitively, it is precisely this measure of bloody chaos that drives Dorson to argue for “law” as a hermeneutical key. Indeed, a

desire to make critical sense of the overwhelming violence prompts Dorson to articulate his view of the judge as “law” in language borrowed from Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (1921). Within the purview of this theoretical framework, Dorson writes, “we may see the judge’s paradoxical incorporation of both rule and misrule as a sign of the law at the time when it is first established, at the very moment before the link between the law and violence is covered over” (108). Because, as Dorson puts it, there is no “moral or legal foundation prior to the law that first legitimates it, that [same] law only institutes itself by” legitimating the violence that founded it “ex post facto” (108). After this move from violence to law occurs, the law perpetuates itself irrespective of its bloody origins. As a result, Benjamin writes, “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin qtd. in Dorson 110). Thus, systemized (and systemizing) law is intrinsically dependent on sublimated violence.⁵⁴ In *BM*, law originates from the vacuum of the western war of all against all in the specific form of the mercilessly arbitrating judge.

Dorson makes a convincing case that the judge is allowed his authority as lawmaker in *BM* because he provides a stay against the “unreckonable silence against which we continue to thrash and flail to no avail” (115). Dorson subsequently describes this “silence” in terms of the Kierkegaardian “Real,” which refers to that unfathomable and inhumane void that persists in the substratum beneath and between every human

⁵⁴ Though Dorson does not indulge the connection, this attention to the fulcrum between violence and law evokes Rene Girard’s understanding of a scapegoat mechanism by which culture and society are established on the basis of an inaugural, sacrificial bloodletting. This affinity between Girard’s “scapegoat” theorization and the judge’s understanding of the sanctioning force of blood is recognized at least cursorily in Robert Hamilton’s analyses of liturgical patterns in *BM*, where he asserts that both can be shown to reveal the “founding violence at the core” of ritual (Hamilton 142). Similarly, in his essay, “Demystification of the Martial Code,” Rich Wallach follows a thoroughly Girardian reading of the warrior values within *BM*.

construction of meaning. According to Dorson, rather than face this untenable silence of “our inevitable demise” (115), we inevitably “conjure up” something to shelter us, even something as terrible as the judge. Recalling the “cosmic insignificance” half of the “dialectic” elaborated in Chapter I, Dorson’s reading here harmonizes with Cant’s; as the latter writes, “What motivates the judge is terror, the terror of human insignificance, the terror that stalks the pages of every McCarthy text” (Cant 170). The danger implied by the terms of this shared critical view comes to light in Dorson’s culminating passage:

Blood Meridian’s violence [is the] product of a chronic yearning for narrative meaning to make sense of the world. Once constructed and widely accepted, however, such narratives are likely to become rigid and oppressive, at once our lodestar and straightjacket, coaxing us toward a future *telos* as inescapable as Judge Holden’s all-encompassing embrace. Because this desire for certainty against the ever-baffling mystery of the world has a strong tendency to preclude critical reflection on where our beliefs and self-imposed laws are leading us, *Blood Meridian* leaves us with the uneasy feeling that we are trapped within an endless cycle of fear and mythical violence. (116 emphasis original)

Here Dorson effectively points to the way in which a human engineered system of understanding—the “narrative meaning” for which we yearn—can both envelop and supersede the desires that initiated it. Our “self-imposed laws,” as he puts it, began to oppose us. We give the lawmaking judge the power to “keep the abyss at bay” (Dorson 116), and he proceeds to a height from which we cannot summon him back.

While Dorson consistently discusses the judge in terms of “law,” his use of this specific word harbors considerably wide implications. As is evident in the above-quoted

passage, for him, “law” is equivalent to human generated “narrative meaning.” Similarly, he writes, “the word of law does not only create order out of chaos, but also breaks the implacable silence of the world. If it works to constrain those subjected to its rule, it also functions to limit the limitless expanse of the universe itself” (116). “Law,” then, is Dorson’s Benjamin-infused word to describe the way in which we strive to make sense of the world as it appears to us. At the pinnacle of this striving, the judge stands as the ultimate inflation of a human-initiated desire to understand and order, to know. And where Dorson speaks about “law,” Cant simply chooses a different word to describe the same concept. For example, he writes, Holden “may be read as a metaphor for culture” (Cant 170). As “culture,” the judge testifies to an aspect of McCarthy’s mythoclastic “critique”:

What McCarthy attacks in *BM* is gnosis, the faith in systems of knowledge and belief that claim a validity that cannot ever exist. This is another of his consistent themes, the notion that the intellectual grids, including language itself, that we deploy in order to mediate our experiences of the world are incomplete, provisional, mythic, distinct from the world that they purport to define.” (Cant 171)

Given the articulations of “law” and “culture” respectively put forth by Dorson and Cant, surely one would not be remiss in adding the word “science.” The latter certainly also functions to create a “narrative meaning” to “limit the limitless expanse of the universe itself.” Though Dorson does not explicitly anticipate this interpretative move, it lies dormant in the final passage of his article: “*Blood Meridian* thus finally works as a cultural spur to[wards] the emergence of new values to challenge the blind thrust of

formal rationality into an increasingly bleak-looking future” (119). Whereas Dorson’s words only point towards an interpretation framed within “science,” Cant specifically characterizes the dominating judge as a “man of science” (169). And though Cant begins to explore the implications of this characterization, my argument will go further in emphasizing the primacy of science and scientific thinking with respect to both McCarthy’s treatment of the myth of American Exceptionalism and the judge’s function as novum.

Apart from mirroring one another, the above quoted readings of Dorson and Cant also parallel the more overtly mytho-centric argument that Sarah Spurgeon makes in “The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness: Mythic Reconstructions in *Blood Meridian*.” Seeing it in dialogue with the “lone male” in the American wilderness trope, Spurgeon believes *BM* is a “countermemory, a sort of antimyth of the [w]est, illuminating especially the roots of the modern relationship between humans and the natural world” (Spurgeon 76). Within this “antimyth” Spurgeon believes the judge distorts the role of the “sacred hunter,” because, though it is traditionally meant to communicate “regeneration through violence enacted upon the body of the earth” (77), Holden’s version subdues nature with unrelenting rapacity. This American “antimyth” of *BM* as parsed by Spurgeon is an exact corollary to Cant’s overall thesis regarding the myth of American Exceptionalism. Indeed, like Cant, Spurgeon also cites Richard Slotkin’s book *Regeneration Through Violence* as foundational to understanding McCarthy’s treatment of national-character informing myths. Whereas Spurgeon appeals to Davy Crockett and Paul Bunyan as the literary precedents that McCarthy’s judge is darkly perverting (77-78), Cant writes that Fennimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo is an

example of a “mythic hero [who represents] the fusion of idealized white hunter and pristine American nature” that McCarthy “invert[s]” (168). Given this precise overlap in critical readings, it is hard to believe that Cant makes no mention of Spurgeon’s article in question, which was written six years previous to his monograph’s publication. In any case, whether one turns to Cant or Spurgeon, *BM*’s treatment of specific aspects of the myth of American Exceptionalism is clear.

However similar her approach to *BM*, Spurgeon diverges from Cant in characterizing the distinct *way* in which Holden subverts (or “inverts”) a national myth. Thus, in due reverence to the markedly religious tones in the novel, Spurgeon recognizes the centrality of Holden’s specific methodology of dominance in a way that Cant does not:

Throughout *Blood Meridian* the judge both exalts the natural world and strives to contain and destroy it, to usurp its power for his own ends. He is priest here not only of men’s souls but also of their minds, and he often appears as the spokesman of what is presented as a sort of new religion—science. (78).

Spurgeon is surely thinking of the strange scenes where Holden records the world around him only to subsequently destroy the things he has observed (see *BM* 146, 180). She also explicitly draws attention to an oft-quoted passage of *BM* in which the judge claims to “read news of the earth’s origins, holding an extemporary lecture in geology to a small gathering who nodded and spat” (*BM* 122).⁵⁵ Typical of scenes where the judge’s espousals of intimate knowledge about the world leave his listeners baffled, this “lecture”

⁵⁵ Chamberlain describes this exact scene in his account, complete with an illustrative watercolor of the lecturing judge.

demonstrates the judge's inclination to organize meaning in scientific terms. As Spurgeon puts it:

The judge alone among the scalphunters claims the power to solve the mysteries of the natural world, and he does so through science and a skewed rationality cloaked in the rhetoric of religion. The myth of science, with the judge as its sacred high priest, is now opposed to the earlier myth of nature served by the sacred hunter. (82)

Thus, much like the role of "law" in Dorson's reading, here "science" constitutes the judge's systematized "narrative meaning" (Dorson 116) that only ostensibly stands to explicate the mysteries of the world. And just as law necessarily carries with it an establishing bloodletting, so too does the judge's impulse to science in *BM* bespeak a foundation in violence, whether with respect to destroyed artifacts, rationally motivated slaughter, or anthropocentric speciesism; indeed, as Spurgeon writes of *BM*, "if only nature can enslave man, only man can enslave nature, even if by doing so he leaves a sky as empty of birds as the plains are of buffalo" (91). As the rationalizing avatar of the scientific impulse, the judge illustrates the costs of the extreme degrees to which we as humans pursue understanding.

Though all do not share her particular approach to *BM* via archetypal wilderness myths, it is important to note that Spurgeon is certainly not alone in asserting the thematic importance of science and rampant rationalism in either the judge or in *BM* as a whole. In his landmark volume of McCarthy criticism, Vereen Bell suggests:

What the judge says and he and his confederates act out eventually seems like an only slightly demented revival of Enlightenment philosophy, and the judge's

intellectual imperialism may be read finally as an instance of what happens if Enlightenment doctrine is pressed to its logical conclusion. (*Achievement* 124). Similarly, Steven Shaviro describes the way in which the judge acts within the “self-transcending project of Enlightenment” by killing out of “will and conviction and a deep commitment to the cause and the canons of Western rationality” (114). Though he does not, as I have said, go into depth regarding the extremism of the judge’s scientific stance, Cant’s words are equally supportive:

The judge personifies the extreme of anthropocentrism, of Enlightenment hubris. He writes his *ledger* and makes his *claim*. This is the language of the accountant; it expresses the notion of knowledge as power, of the earth as commodity. It is the language of quantity rather than value. It holds out the false promise of progress through empirical investigation and the use of reason alone. (171)

And still another influential McCarthy critic, Sepich, charts the origins of the judge in the Jungian archetype of the “Great Father,” whose divergence from his erstwhile partner, the “Great Mother,” hinges on a “development of science” as an attempt to “emancipate itself from the power of the unconsciousness” (Neumann qtd. in Sepich, *Notes* 142).

Subsequently, Sepich plainly says, “the judge’s scientific consciousness abhors projections” (143). Russell Hillier illustrates this last point in an analysis of the scene in which Holden tosses a meteor through the air (see *BM* 251), writing that, “the very presence of the meteorite, a palpable marvel originating from a place beyond human ken, imagination, or reckoning, constitutes an offense to [the judge]” (77). Indeed, “so great is the Judge’s drive for absolute dominion that the very idea of mystery is anathema to him”

(77). As a force of science who abhors that which does not fit his schema, his reaction to the “anathema” of mystery is to prove himself more powerful.

In light of the above enumerated critical support, it is reasonable to take seriously Spurgeon’s claim that, “Human will clothed in the sacred rhetoric of science, far from being insignificant, is the most powerful force in the novel” (Spurgeon 91). And when viewed alongside Dorson’s explication of the mechanistic origins and perpetuation of an articulation of “law” which bears strong resemblance to the role of science, Spurgeon’s argument reveals the way in which the judge is both projection of and animating impulse behind an intractable scientific consciousness. He appears at the moment when the desire to know becomes the drive to conquer and control. As Cant’s above quoted comment anticipates, the judge himself makes this facet of identity clear when, after recording bits of the world in his notebook (butterflies, leaves), he speaks to Toadvine:

[The judge] looked about at the dark forest in which they were bivouacked. He nodded toward the specimens he’d collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men’s knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain⁵⁶ of the earth. (*BM* 207)

Abhorring the mysteries implied by the “dark forest,” the judge preaches fear of the unordered world. His will to “route out” in the name of knowledge is immediately

⁵⁶ The judge explains to Toadvine that “suzerain” means “a keeper or overlord” who “rules even where there are other rules,” someone whose “authority countermands local judgments” (*BM* 207).

identified as a means of domination.⁵⁷ In the words of David Holloway, he “embodies McCarthy’s modernist attempt to retrieve a sense of relatively fixed meaning in the world, just as surely as he stands for a decidedly postmodern warning against where such a search might eventually lead” (197). He is both the impulse to know via a scientifically framed “narrative meaning” (to recall Dorson’s language), and he is the tyranny that such an absolutizing drive produces.

In tandem with recognizing the factors behind the figure of the judge, it is also crucial to note the way in which the novel’s treatment of the natural world shifts dramatically by the narrative conclusion. Though he is careful not to describe McCarthy’s treatment of nature in Romantic sublime terms, Jay Twombly notes the way in which “things in the world” of *BM* have dual character insofar as they are both “utterly devoid of intelligence on the one hand and yet intentional if not conscious on the other” (258). Precisely this dual dimension of a natural setting both active and seemingly uncaring reverberates through the following description that appears a third of the way through the novel:

Far out on the desert to the north dustspouts rose wobbling and augered the earth and some said they’d heard of pilgrims borne aloft like dervishes in those mindless coils to be dropped broken and bleeding upon the desert again and there perhaps to watch the thing that had destroyed them lurch onward like some drunken djin and resolve itself once more into the elements from which it sprang. Out of that whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones

⁵⁷ Joshua Master’s adeptly describes the judge’s imperialistic, “textual enterprise”: “the judge’s textualization of the other is depicted as a concurrent erasure of the other. Throughout the novel we see the efficacy of the judge’s text, for it is often the final document of an artifact’s existence. In the judge’s book we find the ultimate form of textual control in that the very referent has been expunged” (31).

may cry out and in his anguish he may rage, but rage at what? And if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin? (*BM* 117)⁵⁸

What we see here is an active, aggressive nature, but one that cares little for humanity one way or another. McCarthy alludes to God speaking to Job “out of the whirlwind” (see Job 38:1) only to insist that here, in *BM*, there is no such voice. Thus, like Job, humanity may rage, but unlike Job, he will “rage at what?” Indeed, I believe McCarthy alludes to this vicious sense of place through the bloody failure of the army filibusters; parroting the messianic ethos embedded in the myth of American Exceptionalism, the captain originally promises that the group “will be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land” (*BM* 37). However, early into their divinely-ordered purge of the wilderness they encounter an awful slaughter at the hands of “a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more terrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning” (*BM* 55). Thus, whether by way of a conspicuously ahuman power or murderous forces “clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing,” (55) *BM* imprints the sense of the “harsh landscape as a ‘character itself,’ a character clearly and cruelly anti-anthropocentric (Cant 158).

However, as powerfully as nature initially manifests as both active and hostile, both Spurgeon and Dorson argue that, by the end of the novel, nature has resolutely kowtowed to humanity. In Spurgeon’s words, “The balance of power, which may be

⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that this last sentence of the passage echoes some of Chamberlain’s words. After attempting and failing to ascertain the story behind a grouping of dead bodies in the desert, the gang moves on without answers. As Chamberlain puts it, “There was none left to tell the tale, the Mystery of the Desert, could not be solved” (310).

perceived as resting on the side of nature at the start of the novel, has by the final scenes shifted to the side of man” (90). Dorson makes almost exactly the same point while specifically referencing textual descriptions from pages late in the novel:

Throughout most of *Blood Meridian*, the environment is sublimely hostile to human endeavors, but in the end those endeavors themselves prove hostile to the environment. It has become a dismal rather than dangerous landscape, where hunters have ‘ransacked the country’ and left the plains ‘sere and burntlooking and the small black trees black and misshapen and haunted by ravens.’ (Dorson 109 with references to *BM* 317)

This, of course, is the vision of the “prairie” presented in the epilogue; in this sense, we may return to the filibuster captain to note that, though the effect has not been the idealized “liberation of a dark and troubled land,” the “instrument” of expansion as laid out in the myth of American Exceptionalism and animated by the judge has nevertheless exhausted the once wild place. Thus, the novel’s initially vital natural world is destabilized by an advancement specifically epitomized by the knowledge-as-power of the judge, the self-proclaimed “suzerain of the earth” (*BM* 207). Again, as Ellis puts it, space becomes place.

At this point it is appropriate to reiterate the judge as a match for Csicsery-Ronay’s definition of the novum. Holden’s status as the result of the human drive to know via science marks him as a “[3.] rationally explicable material phenomenon, the result of an invention or discovery, whose unexpected appearance elicits a wholesale change in the perception of reality” (Csicsery-Ronay 6). Indeed, this “wholesale change in the perception of reality” comes about as Holden’s presence overwhelms and denudes

the natural world, a subjugation that culminates in the mechanistic fencing of the epilogue. Standing behind the “near extinction of the buffalo and massive deforestation as symbols of triumph and mastery” (Spurgeon 98), the judge as runaway scientific consciousness truly “[2.] intervenes in the routine course of social life and changes the trajectory of history.” As a novum, the judge is the terrifying ‘new thing’ that sets the world of *BM* apart as a narrative indebted to science fiction.

Having established that Holden is the novum of *BM*, it is worth briefly noting the way in which his character intersects with another of Csicsery-Ronay’s beauties of science fiction: “What we might call the *science fictional grotesque* comes with the recognition of an embodied, physical anomaly, a being or an event whose existence or behavior cannot be explained by the currently accepted universal system of rationalization” (191). As I have already argued, McCarthy’s judge far outstrips Chamberlain’s in physical attributes to the point where he is a distinctly ahistorical figure. And apart from simply proving a “physical anomaly,” Holden specifically harmonizes with Csicsery-Ronay’s presentation of grotesque “interstitial beings,” things in which “two distinct, sometimes even contradictory, conditions of existence overlap” (195). This measure of “co-presence” (185) is made explicit as the judge is consistently described as both a powerful man and a child or infant. Upon his first appearance we are told that he is “enormous,” but that “His face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small” (*BM* 7). Later, when the gang is bathing, the judge is “testing the waters with one toe, surprisingly petite. He shone like the moon so pale he was and not a hair to be seen anywhere upon that vast corpus” (*BM* 174). Similarly, seen from a distance in the desert, the judge appears as “a pale pink beneath his talc of dust, like something newly born”

(*BM* 294). And indeed, in the final passage of the plotted novel, we read the following, baffling words: “Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he’ll never die” (*BM* 348). Thus, McCarthy codes the judge as man and child, eternal and newborn, murderous and innocent. Though seemingly contradictory, the unholy merger of these characteristics speaks to Csiscery-Ronay’s point that, “At the heart of the grotesque is the vertiginous destabilization of the sense of natural balance” (211). Thus, even in material being, the “outsized and childish” (*BM* 83) novum of the novel is a disruptive force.

Because no one is able to capture the judge as grotesque novum as powerfully as McCarthy himself, it is certainly worth considering a *BM* passage in which Holden’s role and status is foreshadowed. In chapter II, the kid encounters an “old hermit” in the desert. After admitting his need of shelter because he has “got off the road someways or another” (*BM* 19), the kid sits in the stranger’s hut. The key portion of their interchange is reproduced below:

Lost ye way in the dark, said the old man. He stirred the fire, standing slender
tusks of bone up out of the ashes.

The kid didnt answer.

The old man swung his head back and forth. The way of the transgressor is
hard. God made this world, but he didnt make it to suit everybody, did he?

I dont believe he much had me in mind.

Aye, said the old man. But where does a man come by his notions. What
world’s he seen that he liked better?

I can think of better places and better ways.

Can ye make it be?

No.

No. It's a mystery. A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart, but he dont want to. Rightly so. Best not to look there. It aint the heart of a creature that is bound in the way that God has set for it. You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it. You believe that?

I dont know.

Believe that. (*BM* 20)

Here we see the hermit's prophetic description of the novum of *BM*: the judge as put in power by the human desire to know. Echoing classically utopian projects of science fiction narratives, humanity imagines a world we "like better," even though we cannot identify from where our vision comes. But in reaching to achieve the world we imagine, we neglect the "heart," the mysteries of the world, in order to "make a machine." And that machine will make another machine, initiating a mechanistically self-sustaining process that speeds beyond our control towards an evil that will "run itself a thousand years." Thus, in a ragged desire to banish the "silence" of the world, humanity puts into motion an impulse to understand that will dangerously outstrip us.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Occurring before the kid joins the Glanton gang, the hermit scene rarely receives critical attention. No doubt this is in part because it precedes the point in the narrative where the judge begins to cast his long and attention-grabbing shadows. However, Sepich proves exceptional in recognizing that, "much of [*Blood Meridian*'s] argument is laid in the early scene of the kid and the hermit" (*Notes* 147); he suggests that the

b. The Novum of *TR*: “The Bomb in the Garden”

Though the judge of *BM* constitutes a complicated and novum, depending on how one chooses to read *TR*, its novum may prove to be far more commonplace.⁶⁰ The choice referred to is one debated continually by McCarthy critics, and it is an argument that will surely never end in decisive victory by either side. Put simply, the choice has to do with the way in which one treats the catastrophe that produced the bleak world of *TR*: was the disaster human-caused (that is, anthropogenic), or, was it natural or random? In short, who (or what) is to blame?

The only clear explanatory detail from the text of *TR* is that whatever brought about the destruction followed from at least one specific event. That is to say, the state of earth as described throughout the novel cannot *only* be the result of a long process of disintegration (global warming, for example), because, at some point in time, some specific “thing” occurred. This much is evidenced in the only passage in the novel that explicitly refers to the catastrophe, a flashback:

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

subterranean setting of the hermit’s hut imbues the scene with a resonance near the “psychological core” of the novel (148).

⁶⁰Csicsery-Ronay does not think that a text must have one and *only* one novum. Though I am speaking of both *BM* and *TR* as if they do each have one, it is possible that each could have more. Csicsery-Ronay’s discussion of narratives with multiple novums begins on page 69.

nightwear, clutching the jamb cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? She said.

What is happening?

I dont know.

Why are you taking a bath?

I'm not. (52-53)

From this passage critics have variously drawn on other lesser pieces of evidence to argue for one of two credible readings: while some suggest the “shear of light” and “low concussions” could refer to a meteor impact (something like what wiped out the dinosaurs), others believe McCarthy is referring to some sort of human-made bomb. The quandary is only exacerbated by McCarthy’s typically enigmatic and laconic reluctance to sway critical opinion. In his article “What’s at the end of *The Road*?” Allen Josephs effectively summarizes the debate while making direct reference to McCarthy’s taciturn testimony, writing, “McCarthy remarked somewhat facetiously in a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal*: ‘I don’t have an opinion [as to the nature of the disaster]. At the Santa Fe Institute I’m with scientists of all disciplines, and some of them in geology said it looks like a meteor to them,’ as if [the scientists] were privy to information beyond his ken” (23). In his *Rolling Stone* interview, David Kushner writes about one specific way in which a SFI colleague directly interacted with *TR*, noting that McCarthy once sat down with Doug Erwin, a Smithsonian paleobiologist, to talk about the meteor that killed the dinosaurs. While certainly seeing a connection between the novel and his earlier extinction-oriented conversation with McCarthy, Erwin communicated to Kushner that he is content to forgive the novel’s “intentional inaccuracies” with respect to a realistic meteor-scenario, which suggests that he believes McCarthy deliberately changed details

of *TR* so as to forestall any science-savvy reader from categorically pegging the catastrophe as a meteorite. Having conversed with a world-renowned expert on the subject, why would McCarthy deviate from what he has learned for any other reason than to make interpreting the catastrophe more complicated? The battle lines in the debate are drawn, it seems, and McCarthy himself is determined to be of little help in explicating the specifics of the disaster he himself has created.

Before going on to argue that the catastrophe should be understood specifically as a bomb, it is important to address a third and so far unmentioned strand of critical response to the destruction central to *TR*. Though it is true that readers are largely split between viewing humans as either victims of random occurrence or perpetrators of destruction, there are also those who believe that, put simply, the cause of the catastrophe is irrelevant. Josephs espouses this opinion in his previously mentioned article when he asks, if McCarthy wanted readers to see the disaster in one way or another, why would he not be more explicit in the text (see 23)? Louise Squire articulates similar sentiments in language adopted from Adeline Johns-Putra's *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in the Time of Climate Change*. Squire writes, "As Johns-Putra points out, 'in never naming the [apocalyptic] event, [*The Road*] steadfastly refuses to fetishise the spectacular catastrophe in favour of enumerating the aspects of the world that remains after it'" (219). Similarly, in "*The Road* and a World to Come," Bill Hardwig adds, "McCarthy keeps the exact cause of the event ambiguous, as he is more interested in the science fiction theme of a new world in the future than he is about the scientific and historical explanations of the causes that initiate the change" (Hardwig 42). Within this same vein, Cant believes that the scale of the destruction and the seeming inconsistencies in *TR* signal that McCarthy's

means the novel to be overtly “allegorical” (268-269).⁶¹ He writes, “In this case the ‘nuclear holocaust’ is itself a metaphorical explanation for the state of the world that McCarthy creates as his wider metaphor for the condition of man in the realization of his cosmic insignificance” (269). Bringing to mind Chabon’s earlier mentioned review, Cant’s reading translates *TR* into starkly psychological terms. Thus, what Josephs, Squire, Hardwig, Cant and other likeminded critics believe is that *TR* is powerful and worthwhile precisely because it presents a post-apocalyptic landscape that is resolutely *post* in the sense that McCarthy does not dwell unnecessarily on causes. For them, the dark world of the future can and should be seen as divorced from the material changes that brought it about.

There is certainly something to be said for McCarthy’s achievement in producing a post-apocalyptic narrative free of the Hollywood trappings of shock-value spectacle: we see no toppling buildings, tidal waves, space rocks hurtling towards earth, or worldwide nuclear pandemonium. Likewise, McCarthy’s refusal to clearly define the manner of the world’s destruction (either in the text or in subsequent interviews) allows him to sidestep overt (and therefore ineffective) moralizing. Though these are all real and admirable feats of the novel, it is misguided to maintain that McCarthy is indifferent to exploring the causes of the consequences he renders so magnificently. Though he refuses to tell the reader exactly what happened, his novel teaches us how to interrupt both the cause *and* the implications of the cause. I believe both these somewhat hidden aspects—the cause

⁶¹ By “inconsistencies,” I mean Cant’s belief that the “ubiquitous radioactivity” of a “post-nuclear holocaust world” would obviate survival, and his subsequent point that none of the characters in *TR* exhibit “any of the symptoms of radiation sickness” (269). While not wishing to dwell on what I take to be quibbling points, I would argue that the reader knows too little about the boy and father’s pre-novel struggles to decide whether or not survival is or is not out of the question (after all, given the child’s approximate age and time of birth, it has been at least seven years since the “event”); I would also note that the consumptive sickness of the father is not wholly dissimilar from symptoms of radiation poisoning.

and its significance to the world of the reader—necessitate an interpretation of the novel that goes beyond “allegorical” readings, as Cant frames it. Specifically, a careful consideration of the “cause” brings *TR* as science fiction into a dialogue with elements of McCarthy’s “critique” of the myth of American Exceptionalism, a dialogue that Cant himself does not even explore. Therefore, Hardwig is apt to see that *The Road* is “interested in the science fiction theme of a new world,” but mistaken in asserting that this specific “interest” can forego a parallel interest in the “scientific and historical explanations of the causes” that initiated change for the worse. To appreciate effects without considering causes is to miss a central core of McCarthy’s distinctly science fiction narrative.

Treatment of the flaw in Hardwig’s words (and, by extension, those of the other critics mentioned in the preceding paragraph) may in fact be far subtler than is immediately obvious. That is, though there is a substantive argument for reading *TR* with respect to a bomb, there is a much less particular reading of the novel that serves as holistic corrective to those who choose to neglect examining causation in *TR*. Such a reading understands the novel as a lament for an un-fixable world, a “thing which could not be put back” (*TR* 287), which we, as humanity, have ruined. In this sense, we can praise McCarthy for envisioning a masterful “after” world, but only if we see ourselves implicated in its horrific coming about. We are somehow responsible.⁶² This “corrective” reading, as I’ve termed it, is possibly less particular than arguing for a bomb because it leaves room for a swath of alternate anthropogenic causes. For example, the bleak world may have followed from uncontrollable, self-replicating nanotechnology (what futurists à

⁶² The feeling of this simple statement is corroborated by McCarthy himself; regardless of whatever environmental catastrophes are out there, “We’re going to do ourselves in first” (McCarthy qtd. in Kushner).

la Eric Drexler refer to as a “gray goo scenario”), a disastrous technological attempt to meddle with world atmosphere and weather, or a dramatic breaking point brought about by reckless neglect of climate change.⁶³ Indeed, it is even possible to see the world of the *TR* as the result of something less directly human—such as a meteor or volcanic activity—if (and only if) we continue to consider ourselves culpable in one way or another. Perhaps, for example, we were not careful in reading the astronomical or geological signs of an impending disaster. Thus, though we may or may not have directly caused what happened, we are in some way responsible for not having stopped or avoided it.

Falling neatly in line with Lincoln’s earlier mentioned thesis that all McCarthy’s work constitutes “lamentational canticles of warning” (see Lincoln 2), human culpability in *TR* reverberates through the mysterious last passage of the novel, a passage which deserves full reproduction both for its elegance and thematic importance:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (*TR* 287)

This is the third richly wrought mentioning of trout in the novel: earlier the father stands on a stone bridge where he had once “watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their

⁶³ As was mentioned earlier, this last option is still somewhat hard to square with the explosion that seems to take place outside of the father’s window.

perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (*TR* 30); ten pages later, the father again sees water, and we are told, “He’d stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in the pool, invisible to see in the teal-colored water except as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave” (*TR* 41-42). The imagery describing the brook trout, a fish “notoriously sensitive to environmental changes and pollution” (Hardwig 49), consistently renders the motifs of mystery and irrevocable loss. The fish that shimmered haltingly in the light of the sun from time immemorial are now, along with the sun itself, lost, left to exist only in the fading memories of those few who can remember a time before “the frailty of everything [was] revealed at last” (*TR* 28). And though the trout do not appear a fourth time, there is one additional passage in *TR* where strikingly similar language is used to describe a change beyond repair. About midway through the novel, the father is, as usual, trying to comfort the child, saying, “Everything’s okay. I promise” (*TR* 135). The next lines follow: “But when he bent to see into the boy’s face under the hood of the blanket he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again” (*TR* 136). Considering the father’s earlier warning that “the things you put in your head stay there forever” (*TR* 12), the child may be irreversibly damaged by any one of the numerous horrible things the pair witness. In the sense, the child, whose birth is described in terms of the “improbable appearance of the small crown of [his] head” (*TR* 59), is a “golden chalice” (*TR* 75), both delicate and utterly mysterious, in a world no longer fit to support him. Thus, the similarity between the descriptions of the child and the final fish evocation emphasizes the fragility of ancient mysteries that are not impervious to human mistakes,

whether that mystery is the birth and innocence of a child or the intricate beauties “humming” in the “deep glens” of nature.

Apart from suggesting that the final paragraph is a “curious” departure from the rest of the novel (a notion in itself refuted by the above-mentioned two additional trout references and the similar phrasing regarding the child), Hardwig skates past the tension between his overall argument and McCarthy’s ending by placing all emphasis on the inherent “mystery” involved (see 49). He admits that McCarthy is exploring something “older than man,” but does not recognize the pervasive weight that such an exploration has throughout the novel. Indeed, his strategy of dealing with the final paragraph of *TR* is similar to Josephs’s still more dubious method. Ironically, in his article that is, remember, titled “What’s at the end of *The Road*,” Josephs attempts to justify inserting a narrative break that definitively separates the “end” of the novel from the last words in the book.⁶⁴

He writes:

I have dealt above with what I call the plotted novel—but there is still that last stunning and cryptic paragraph, almost as disconnected from the preceding narrative as the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* is from its narrative. It is distinct in tone and voice and time and perspective from the novel, raising more questions than answers, and serves as its undesignated epilogue. (29)

Though Josephs is warranted to subsequently ask important questions about the nature of narration in the final paragraph (who is speaking? To whom? From what place and time?),

⁶⁴ Josephs is not alone in speaking of “what’s at the end of *The Road*” in ironically contradictory terms. In his 2007 review, Paul Kincaid writes, “The (almost literal) *deus ex machine* of the final scene ensures that the book has to be read as a religious parable rather than as rationalistic science fiction” (“Two Views”). Of course, though the appearance of the “parka man” may indeed be the “final scene” in the sense of character and action, it is not the end of the novel. There is, as I am arguing, another and *more* “final” passage that demands attention in bolstering the argument that the novel is science fiction.

etc.), his choice to distance it because it is supposedly “disconnected” and “distinct” from what precedes it is somewhat ludicrous given the wildly various nature of *TR*’s narration as a whole. Indeed, throughout the novel there is a relatively high rate of inconsistency. Consider two examples: first, the following first-personal address that ends in an almost whimsical philosophical pondering: “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?” (*TR* 32). Echoing Josephs, we might ask, “who is speaking, and to whom?” Similarly, where is the narrative consistency in the discrete passage that reads: “Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground” (*TR* 196). Whose fathers? Who is being addressed? Far from justifying setting the final paragraph apart as an epilogue, Bill Hardwig actually believes that the disjointed structure and narration of *TR* are laid out like Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, a novel constructed in fragments for the purpose of communicating “overwhelming loss” and trauma (43). As Hardwig describes it, “McCarthy presents the reader with clumps of memories, scenes, and events that seem almost at random. Paragraphs are short and intense, like telegrams, and are separated, not by chapter titles or dividing symbols, but only by space” (43). Like Vonnegut’s novel, McCarthy’s fragments have a method to their madness, one that touches all of the novel’s overarching narrative quirks. Thus, though Josephs is not wrong for seeing the suggestive importance of the final paragraph—the ways in which it raises “more questions than answers”—his method of setting it slightly aside in order to better accommodate his personal argument seems both rash and illogical.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Additionally, given that McCarthy has already set a precedent for using an epilogue in *BM* (as Josephs

In complement to the mourning of natural mystery in the final paragraph, there are several other strains in the novel that justify reading the catastrophe as anthropogenic. Specifically, one can sense that humanity is to blame through a careful reading of the father's point of view in key passages. Consider, first, his thoughts shortly after he has defended his son by killing a solitary member of a "bloodcult":

This was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made the world a lie every word. (*TR* 75)

Though it can in no way be used as a proof text to resolutely argue human culpability, the last line of this passage suggests an indictment. On one level, it is obvious that the father blames the "human being" in front of him for making the world "a lie" insofar as the latter has turned from properly decent, civil behavior to brutal cannibalism. Seen thus, the other man stands as revolting testimony to a particularly weak and disgusting response to apocalypse; for his betrayal of the human race, the man is despicable. However, on another and deeper level, the father's anger implicates humanity in a broad sense. Thus, the father's identification of kinship with his "brother at last" serves to number himself among those who have made the world "a lie." In the "cold and shifting" eyes of the other, the father sees himself, and he sees his hand in the human downfall that brought about his current and enduring hell; despite *our* twenty-first century finery and sophistication, when the fatal mistake is made, *we* fall apart. His frustration at having made the world "a lie" is later echoed when he stands in the "charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies

himself points out) why would he not design an explicit epilogue in *TR* if he desired a similar effect?

arranged in their thousands row on row” (*TR* 187). Indeed, referring specifically to the above passage, Benjamin Mangrum writes that, “in one way, this scene depicts the man’s astonishment that the same world that has produced these texts—these exemplars of high culture—has also destroyed itself” (279). In a similar vein, one might recall the earlier mentioned passage: “On this road there are no godspoke men. They have gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world” (*TR* 32). Though the exact nature of the word “godspoke” is somewhat ambiguous, its usage certainly suggests loss and anger;⁶⁶ the father **is spurned** by being a single member of the species that has reneged on its relationship to a world now sorely beyond repair.

The father’s bitter attitude towards humanity evoked by the “godspoke” men and his distaste for his “brother at last” is made explicit in two connected dreams, one of which occurs at the beginning of the novel and the other of which appears much later. The opening of *TR* finds the father stirring from sleep. Even at the expense of considerable space, it is worth quoting in entirety:

In the dream from which he’d wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls. Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granite beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without

⁶⁶ I believe the “godspoke” passage can best be understood in relation to other memorable passages, one of which involves the father’s thoughts about his son: “If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (*TR* 5). Whereas humanity has long claimed identity in God (*imago dei*), the squandering implied by the disaster has uncovered the pretense of such a faith; in this sense, *if* there is a God—which seems a substantial *if* for the father—then the only person fit for God’s word is the child, who is “the best guy” (*TR* 279). Read thus, the previous quotation could be translated as: If anything pure and good remains, it remains in and as this child. “Godspoke” men, those who claimed genesis in an omniscient, benevolent being, are gone; and now, if it is at all appropriate to speak of God, this child is the only reasonable affiliate. This is the reason the father says to Ely, “What if I said that he’s a god?” (*TR* 172).

cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (TR 3-4)

In her article “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative,” Lydia Cooper describes this opening as the father’s “nightmare vision of humankind’s participation in its own destruction” (221). Cooper specifically points to the way in which the monster’s possession of a “heart and a mind strikes a terrifying note, as the beast turns from the man and boy and lopes ‘soundlessly into the dark’” (221). Indeed, according to Cooper, “contrasted with the father’s refrain that the boy must ‘carry the fire,’ a metaphor for the practice of civility and ethics, this darkness seems to represent a willful dullness of emotion and intellect” (221). Like Yeats’s “rough beast,”⁶⁷ this grotesquely human-like creature “slouches” into an unknown but terrible future, moving not towards the progressive light of humanity but willfully into the regressive oblivion of darkness.

⁶⁷ After all, one need only recall the title of McCarthy’s novel, “No Country for Old Men” to see the author’s appreciation for Yeats.

Keeping in mind both the opening dream scene and Cooper's analysis, consider the later re-appearance of the dream. Awakening, as always, in the dark—"like a man waking in a grave" (*TR* 213)—the father's thoughts are again revealed to the reader:

Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave. The light was a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper. The wax spattered on the stones. Tracks of unknown creatures in the mortified [sic] loess.⁶⁸ In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them. (*TR* 280)

The two are in the cave again, and we assume that, like before, the child leads the father "by the hand" (*TR* 3). We are told this time that the child is bearing the light (once again, "carrying the fire") into the darkness, each step dissolving darkness in the "cold corridor" (*TR* 280). They see the tracks at the edge of the "rimstone pool." And there, at the point of "no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them" they must see again the horrifically humanlike creature. Their light of human "civility" and "ethics," as Cooper puts it, has brought them only far enough to witness a dark depth from which they will not return. Shortly after the recounting of this second dream, the father and boy share a brief conversation. The father dies in the succeeding night.

Having so far provided several reasons to read the desolation in *TR* in general anthropogenic terms—all of which resist the notion that cause is somehow irrelevant or inessential—it is now appropriate to pinpoint the specific mechanism of destruction. In conceptualizing the novum of this novel, the following argument will further make clear the way in which humanity had a hand in its own disaster. Recalling the aforementioned

⁶⁸ According to Webster's, loess is "an unstratified usually buff to yellow brown loamy deposit found in North America, Europe, and Asia and believed to be chiefly deposited by wind."

bathtub scene, one may first note that the language (the “shear of light” and “series of low concussions”) certainly suggests a bomb. Likewise, the landscapes of ash and the later, eerie description of city buildings “vaguely askew” because the “iron armatures had softened in the heat and then reset again to leave the buildings standing out of true” (*TR* 272) testify to the extreme effects of a nuclear blast. Furthermore, returning to the bathtub scene, the fact that the father immediately proceeds to fill his bathtub for tacit purposes other than bathing corroborates this notion, because, though it may be true that, as he says to his pregnant wife, he does not fully understand what is going on, his immediate reaction to provide his small family with potable water suggests that he is not wholly caught off guard by whatever is happening.⁶⁹ In the event of a meteor, one would think that either the characters would know exactly what is going on (because the collision has been anticipated and charted by meteorologists), or, alternately, that they would have no idea (because the impact was a freak occurrence of nature impervious to technological prediction). In contrast, McCarthy’s description suggests that the man is somewhat prepared, at least to the point where his markedly Cold-War era instincts kick in.

While the bathtub reaction does suggest a distinctly Cold War-era response, others have developed more thoroughgoing arguments for the importance of the Cold War in McCarthy’s work. Indeed, though he does not specifically refer to the passage in question, Pierre Lagayette enumerates the ways in which both the Border Trilogy and *TR* are laced with Cold War sensibilities applied by McCarthy via “retrospection and perspicacity” (80). Given that McCarthy was born in 1933, this integration fits with the fact that, as Dawn Saliba points out, he “came of age during the twentieth century and

⁶⁹ Though its possible that he thinks of potable water only for hydration, he may also have in mind delivering a baby.

many of his formative years were spent under the threat of the nuclear bomb” (154). Furthermore, for Lagayette, this (possibly autobiographical) integration is one of many examples throughout McCarthy’s oeuvre that cause him to believe that McCarthy has “not been entirely insensitive to the course of world history, despite the remoteness of the environments in which his narratives take place” (80). Apart from what has already been said about *BM*’s narrative arc mirroring historical transitions, Lagayette’s citation of Vincent Brewton’s writing about the influence of Vietnam demonstrates that “some clear and discernable correlation exists between McCarthy’s works and the cultural periods that inspired them and led to their publication” (80). Returning specifically to *TR*, Lagayette writes:

The world [of *TR*] has suffered a terrible conflagration and one is led to wonder, despite the desolate coldness of the landscape, whether the journey of father and son does not illustrate the ultimate failure of the Cold War [...] The atomic age and the Cold War signified the end of security for the United States, but the dismantlement of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not dispel nuclear risks altogether nor threats on the United States’ security. (89)

Particularly when the novel is framed in terms of a period of ongoing “threat” to U.S. security, it is no surprise that other critics have expanded Lagayette’s discussion of the Cold War to see *TR* in dialogue with more contemporary, national concerns. Tim Edwards, for example, identifies the way in which a storyline that once would have been suited to the Cold War era has “taken on greater urgency in a post-9/11 world” (60). Additionally, Lydia Cooper believes “the apocalypticism of *The Road* seems to be a response to an immediate and visceral fear of cataclysmic doom in the United States after

the terrorist attacks on 9/11” (“*The Road as Grail Narrative*” 221).⁷⁰ As readings rooted in historical anxieties, tracing the influence of either the Cold War or 9/11 through *TR* interprets the catastrophe as attributable to humanity.

In contrast to both Hardwig and Josephs—who, as was noted, view the final paragraph of *TR* as a jarring departure from the overall narrative—Tim Edwards refers to the final words in the novel as a “pastoral coda” (55). Though for reasons which I will explain the use of the term “pastoral” is somewhat misleading, Edwards’s description of the last paragraph as a “coda” is fitting. While, according to Josephs, an epilogue is marked for being set apart from the narrative, a “coda” is implicitly connected and prefigured by what comes before it. Indeed, in language redolent of the term’s musical origins, the eighth edition of the *Handbook of Literature* defines a coda as a “conclusion” that “restates or summarizes or integrates the preceding themes or movements” (William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman 101). Thus, far from appearing out of nowhere as a “curiosity” (see Hardwig 49), the final paragraph is a coda in that it finishes the narrative by referring specifically to previous passages and motifs (i.e., the instances of other trout imagery and the description of the son).

Having conferred this more reasonable label on the final paragraph, Edwards goes on to call the passage not only pastoral, “but elegiac, for those brook trout are gone, those mountain streams barren of life” (55). They are gone because, as Edwards believes, the landscape of *TR* is blasted “not by natural violence but by human violence” (55). In this sense, Edwards reads the novel as a “dire warning” (55) that “recalls Leo Marx’s discussion of a ‘variant of the machine-in-the-garden trope’, a variant Marx sees arising

⁷⁰ Evidencing further critical support, Cooper actually comments that Dianne C. Luce’s “explicit association of the presentiment-laden darkness of the novel with the events of 9/11 is not further explored but deserves exposition” (“*The Road as Grail Narrative*” 221).

in texts published some years after his now classic study of American pastoralism, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*” (55). Coming long after “haunting” machine harbingers of nineteenth-century industrialism, such as the steamboat or the locomotive, twentieth and twenty-first century narratives contend with machines that have “grown deadly, even universally deadly” (56). Specifically, Edwards writes:

[I]n *TR* the machine in McCarthy’s garden is in fact ‘The Bomb’ itself, whose apocalyptic arrival [...] leaves behind a cauterized world, frozen in nuclear winter—and, significantly, a landscape (a deathscape, really) bleak and decidedly unromantic, a landscape in a sense, without meaning.” (56)

By aligning the bomb with Marx’s articulation of the “machine,” Edwards is evoking what Marx recognizes as the “dual meaning of the machine” (Marx 489):⁷¹ the literal “workaday machines” prevalent since the industrial revolution *and* the machine’s “semantic precursor in the seventeenth century trope of a metaphysical Machine—emblem of a materialist and mechanistic cosmology” (Marx 489). Thus, as “machine in the garden,” the bomb is both a specific creation, an instrument designed with a given purpose in mind, and a metonym for the larger, encompassing mechanistic worldview.

The double meaning of the bomb-as-machine put forward by Marx resonates with Csicsery-Ronay’s description of nuclear weapons as the epitome of what he, following David E. Nye, calls the “technosublime.” Unlike the Romantic sublime as conceived by either Kant or Burke, the technosublime assumes that human engineered creations can

⁷¹ This quotation refers to the “afterword” that Marx added to the most recent (2000) publication of his work.

trigger sublime experiences. To explain the significance of this difference, Csicsery-Ronay quotes extensively from Nye's *The American Technological Sublime*:

Because human beings had created the awe-inspiring steamboats, railroads, bridges, and dams, the sublime object itself was a manifestation of reason. Because the overwhelming power displayed was human rather than natural, the 'dialogue' was not between man and nature but between man and the man-made. The awe induced by seeing an immense or dynamic technological object became a celebration of the power of human reason... (Nye qtd. in Csicsery-Ronay 156)

But of course, as Csicsery-Ronay makes clear, in the case of the atomic bomb, the awe inducing "celebration" of human reason is quickly checked by destructive repercussions.

As he puts it:

With atomic weapons, much of the classical shock of terrifying destructiveness returns to the technosublime. Once the entire biosphere becomes vulnerable to engineered destruction [...], the most destructive physical might has been appropriated, and the once-sublime domain of nature seems to exist on human sufferance. The nuclear sublime is the catalyst for collective mistrust of the technological elite. But it goes further, to awe and terror at the prospect that the war machine develops autonomously from mundane social concerns. Chained to the logic of the arms race, human engineers are no longer privileged actors at the forefront of history, but rather passive agents of technoevolution's unfriendly experiments, only partially aware of what they're doing. (Csicsery-Ronay 159)

In this sense, not only is the bomb a "universally deadly" machine, to return to Marx, but it is also the product of a self-perpetuating and overpowering mechanistic process.

Though we are originally responsible for it, it assumes control. When the destruction in *TR* is viewed within this understanding of the technosublime, one is reminded of one specific passage from the novel. Like several of the other scenes mentioned throughout this paper, the passage is a dream, though this time it is the child's. After waking, "whimpering in the night," the child says:

I had a bad dream.

I know.

Should I tell you what it was?

If you want to.

I had this penguin that you wound up and it would waddle and flap its flippers.

And we were in that house that we used to live in and it came around the corner but nobody had wound it up and it was really scary.

Okay.

It was a lot scarier in the dream.

I know. Dreams can be really scary.

Why did I have that scary dream?

I dont know. But it's okay now. I'm going to put some wood on the fire. You go to sleep.

The boy didnt answer. Then he said: The winder wasnt turning. (*TR* 36)

Apart from aging the child at around six or seven, this dream communicates an anxiety about machine power that echoes Csicsery-Ronay's articulation of the bomb and the technosublime. Realizing in his retelling that the particulars of the dream sound rather innocuous—especially given the description of the flailing flippers—the child is

nevertheless disturbed by the self-perpetuating agency of a device that shows no sign of slowing (because the “the winder wasnt turning”). Though the wind-up toy is, of course, extremely different than weaponized nuclear power, both devices reduce humans to the passive role of observing a self-sufficient automaton. Thus, while the toy may frighten the child, the far more troublesome bomb similarly surges all but unbidden from the self-perpetuating workings of a recklessly mechanistic cultural orientation.

Having illuminated Marx’s use of the word *machine*, it is now crucial to clarify the ways in which, in reference to McCarthy, the word *pastoral* is a clouded term. Far from reveling in nostalgia for an unspoiled state of harmony, McCarthy’s aim is somewhat ambiguous—*TR* mourns the destruction of the natural world while simultaneously deconstructing the typically Edenic narratives usually taken for granted in pastoral literature. To unpack this statement, it is helpful to recall a portion of Cant’s analysis of McCarthy’s critique of American Exceptionalism:

Beneath all these forms of Exceptionalism lies the pastoral conception of the New Adam. A number of critics read McCarthy’s texts as elegies for a lost American Eden. I shall attempt to refute these readings; although it is clear that McCarthy characterizes the modern world as a waste land [sic] in both the literal and metaphorical sense it is clear that he depicts both the rural past and the wilderness as anything but paradisaal. McCarthy’s characters are consistently led astray by their search for an Adamic identity [to suggest that] the paradise they seek never existed in the first place. (9-10)

Given this assertion, it is not surprising that Edwards believes that *TR* explicitly explodes Adamic identity. He writes, the man “seems to be a sort of anti-Adam, who literally sees

his world being uncreated before his eyes, a process rendered in terms of language, or more properly, the loss of language” (59). Edwards is thinking specifically of the following passage:

[the father] tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much has gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (*TR* 89)

Just as the natural world falls to pieces, so too does the myth that is meant to orient humans in an ordering relationship to it.

Edwards goes beyond discussing Cant's specific identification of inverted Adamic identity to explore in depth other ways in which the novel disrupts quintessentially American pastoral tropes. Specifically, he contrasts McCarthy's distinctly meaningless and dulled landscape with Emerson's notion of the “natural world as an edifying text, even a sacred text, a source of poetry and metaphor and truth” (56). Whereas Emerson's all-seeing “transparent eyeball” takes in and understands everything, McCarthy's scene is set amidst a “cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (*TR* 3). Thus, “the visionary clarity of Emerson's nature is notably absent from the blasted environment of McCarthy's world in *TR*” (Edwards 56-57). Indeed, the only traces of Emersonian transcendental immediacy that find their way into *TR* do so only through the memory of

the father, and, even then, the “garden” does not prevail unscathed. Instead, according to Edwards, the novel “juxtaposes past and present [in a] gothic rather than a romantic or transcendental sense” (58). To illustrate this point, Edwards points directly to three passages that stem from the father’s perspective, the first of which is a dream of his late wife:⁷²

In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed⁷³ and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes. In the morning it was snowing again. Beads of small gray ice strung along the light-wires overhead. (*TR* 18)

For Edwards, this passage “rehearses in miniature what McCarthy’s novel as whole accomplishes: a juxtaposing of a seemingly Edenic past with a clearly hellish present; yet that Edenic past seems to carry in it, somehow, the seeds of its own destruction” (58). As specific evidence for this statement, Edwards writes, “we should note how the underlying Gothicism of the passage here counterpoints the more romantic imagery of the leafy canopy, and the entire image is undercut by the closing lines of the vignette” (58). Thus, the garden in the dream is sullied by the destruction of the waking world. Though Edwards does not draw the connection, one might extend his argument for the embedded “gothic nightmare” in this scene by noting that certain details in this dream are not wholly dissimilar from the two cave-creature dreams: the jutting ribs of the nude bride, “pale” and bleached (see footnote for the definition of “pipeclayed”), recall the stark,

⁷² Though Edwards does reasonably infer that the subject of the dream is the man’s wife, it is worth noting that the text is neither wholly conclusive nor decisive as to the identity of “the pale bride”; it seems possible that the dream could also refer to a more archetypal or metaphoric “bride.”

⁷³ Pipeclaying refers to the process by which leather is whitened by the application of “pipeclay,” a “fine white clay.”

“alabaster bones” of the “pale and naked and translucent” being in whom brain, bowels, and heart churn (*TR* 3-4). Like the creature that stares into the light with “dead white and sightless” (*TR* 4) eyes, only to turn into the darkness, the bride’s eyes are “downturned,” averted (*TR* 18). Apart from the dream of his “bride,” the second passage of interest for Edwards is the father’s memory of a day he spent fishing on a lake with his uncle, remembered as the “perfect day of childhood. This the day to shape the days upon” (*TR* 13). Despite the obvious fondness for the lost time and place, Edwards cites the “mixed nature” of the memory, calling attention to “vaguely gothic images: dead fish, gnarled and weathered tress, and birches described as ‘bone pale’” (58). Lastly, the third and most “revealing” (59) passage for Edwards is another of the father’s dreams:

He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying here in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory. (*TR* 18)

Again we see that the father’s memories of the pre-disaster, natural world are never wholly free of wreckage that cannot be put right, wreckage clearly tied to human agency. Thus, according to Edwards, this harsh blurring between a hopelessly Edenic image and the man’s ashen reality “underscores just how lost the paradise of old truly is” (59). Any Emersonian sense of Nature suffocates in the ash of the world of *TR*, unable to persist even in dreams.

But if, as I have argued, *TR* is deeply concerned with a lament for a mechanistically destroyed natural world, how can McCarthy dismiss any longing for paradisaical, Edenic unity? The answer, I think, has to do with humanity's relation to the natural world. McCarthy's novel—and the "pastoral coda" to which I've been referring—grieves for the damage done to a world beyond human knowledge and ordering. In this sense, Edwards is correct to read the brook trout pastoral coda as "elegiac" insofar as it refers to the loss of actual, real things that have been destroyed by the bomb (fish, vital mountain springs, etc.), but wrong if he were to posit that McCarthy is elegizing a lost sense of mythic unity that he truly believes in. This distinguishing line is subtle but important. On the one hand, *TR* mourns the irreparable loss of organic life, things and mysteries uninterested in human life, and on the other hand, *TR* would improperly be said to mourn a ruptured (but theoretically repairable) human narrative of Edenic harmony. **The former sorrows** a real mistake, while the latter perpetuates an anthropocentric idealization of the natural world. Apart from the already stressed reiteration of the maltreatment and fragility of a thing "which could not be put back," the importance of the above distinction is, I think, implied by the coda's use of the words "maps and mazes" with reference to a "mystery" that has "hummed" from a time long before humanity (see *TR* 287). For McCarthy, the "garden" in which the bomb appears is not Adam's garden; rather, McCarthy's garden is better understood in relation to Jay Ellis's earlier mentioned discussion of *BM*. The "garden" elegized in *TR* is the *place* that existed before country and land were sectioned into humanized *space*. Only with this nuanced reading of McCarthy can we properly understand Edwards when he writes, "*The Road* looks

squarely and unflinchingly at the horrors of the ruined garden in the wake of man's most precipitous Fall yet" (58).

Here, then, is the clearly inverted myth; here is McCarthy's "critique." As "narrative kernel" (90), to use Csiscery-Ronay's description, the novum-as-bomb—and specifically the scale of destruction caused by the bomb—play the role of the 'new thing' that "intervenes in the routine" to alter the "trajectory of history" (6). As the terrible culmination and pinnacle of engineered nuclear capabilities, the bomb's genealogy as a "material phenomenon" is fully "explicable," and the effect is nothing less than a "wholesale change in the perception of reality" (6). The result is the wreckage of a once mysterious natural world and the accompanying dissolution of classically pastoral American myths. What remains is a vividly realized illustration of the tension between the tenuously persisting light of previous civility and a threatening, human-initiated darkness.

Conclusion: The Novels in an Intertextual Relationship

As I have suggested throughout this paper, I will conclude by positioning *BM* and *TR* in an intertextual relationship. The point in making this move is to posit a measure of consistency in McCarthy's vision as it manifests in the two novels (which are, of course, separated by twenty-one years and four intervening novels). Thus, while not denying that McCarthy's writing has surely changed through time, I wish to intertwine and enrich an appreciation for each of the otherwise discrete novels of my focus. They point to one another; *BM* anticipates *TR*, just as *TR* harkens back to *BM*. Specifically, this reciprocity stems from elements embedded in my preceding discussion of the novels in both science fiction and mythoclastic terms. Far from exhausting the implications of the relationship I will establish, I merely wish to set the groundwork for what I believe may prove an original and productive angle for discussing McCarthy.

Though the relationship that I will describe diverges from Cant, it is appropriate to first return once more to *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* to note the way in which he positions *TR* vis-à-vis other McCarthy works. In his second appendix,⁷⁴ Cant writes, "In my view *The Road* is a literary return, a retrospective on the author's own previous works, a re-viewing of his own work that offers a different

⁷⁴ In his introduction, Cant notes that he wants his monograph to be a "comprehensive" analysis, though he understands that McCarthy may publish more at any point, a possibility that he regards as "wonderful" even though it would render his study incomplete (4-5). This is precisely what happened; both *TR* and McCarthy's *A Sunset Limited* (a short work taglined as a "novel in dramatic form") were released shortly before his own work; thus, Cant elected to "append a brief consideration" of each work in the form of an appendix (see 257).

perspective to that of the young man whose vision was structured by the oedipal paradigm that we find in the aforementioned *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*" (266). Though I did not draw particular attention to it in my argument, at least one aspect of the oedipal paradigm in *BM* seems fairly obvious; the self-emancipated, runaway "kid" is locked into struggle with the judge, who is, according to Cant, a "surrogate father to the kid" (175). Though more could be said about oedipal themes in the novel,⁷⁵ this posturing of the kid and his terrible "father figure" is sufficient to understand what Cant sees as *TR*'s intertextual revision of McCarthy's output:

The Road reverses the oedipal theme completely and it is this reversal that gives the text a unique place in the author's oeuvre. The entire novel is devoted to a journey motivated by the father's heroic quest for a place in which his young son can survive. And this quest, undertaken in the certainty of his own impending death, is motivated by paternal love, a love that the son returns. (271)

Surely Cant is right to note that *TR* is the first of McCarthy's works to unabashedly champion paternal ties; he believes this anomaly is inherently linked to McCarthy's recently stabilized personal life (see 271-272), and he ultimately identifies and explores *Outer Dark* as the most informative predecessor in McCarthy's work. While this reading is instructive (particularly with respect to McCarthy's illustration of oedipal themes), I believe *BM* proves a more holistically compelling anticipation of *TR*.

Much of what I will say about the relationship between the novels builds from what I take to be a central passage in *BM*; appearing near the exact middle of the novel,

⁷⁵ The second and less obvious aspect of *BM*'s oedipal paradigm as Cant sees it is couched in the metafictional parlance of McCarthy's struggle with his "literary" forefathers (175): "It is perhaps possible that McCarthy felt himself driven to ever greater extremes in order to outdo his literary 'fathers'—Melville, Faulkner, et al" (175). In her "Open Yale" lecture on the novel, Amy Hungerford goes into much more dazzling detail fleshing out this same, compelling argument.

this passage includes perhaps the most direct reference to the book's title. In my reading, the passage explicitly presages *TR*. The judge has been conversing with various members of the gang, telling them the story of the Appalachian "harnessmaker." Following the judge's story—and several accusations that he has gotten the facts mixed up (see *BM* 151)—the men eventually transition into a broader exchange about fathers and sons.

Tobin asks:

So what is the way of raising a child?

At a young age, said the judge, they should be put in a pit with wild dogs.

They should be set to puzzle out from their proper clues the one of three doors that does not harbor wild lions. They should be made to run naked in the desert until...

Hold now, said Tobin. The question was meant in all earnestness.

And the answer, said the judge. If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now? Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creatures could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet? The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once the darkening and the evening of his day. He loves games? Well let him play for stakes. This you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons. (*BM* 153)

After the judge speaks these words he falls silent at the fireside, "so like an icon" (153).

The men also become quiet, not wanting to "waken something that had better been left

sleeping” (153). The scene ends in this uneasy silence, thus granting the judge’s words a certain prophetic weight.

In relation to *TR*, this passage strikes me for several reasons. The first and most obvious reason is the judge’s evocation of the cyclical nature of “ruins” as they have been and will continue to be “wondered at” through time by “tribes of savages” and “with other people, with other sons” (*BM* 153). In the case of *BM*, I believe “tribes of savages” refers to both the Indians (who the judge alternately calls “the heathen” (see 312)) and the band of wandering scalphunters. Indeed, here I think of Cant’s reminder that the word “heathen” is both biblical and Shakespearean in that McCarthy’s characters are, “like Lear, [...] ‘on the heath,’ lost to God and family alike” (16). In this sense, the judge’s words are also apt when considering *TR*. McCarthy’s presentation of the cannibalistic “bloodcults,” with their “crude tattoos” and dress of “every description” (*TR* 90-91), is, after all, similar to his descriptions of the *BM* scalphunters and their Indian opponents. Indeed, the Glanton gang is described as a “pack of viciouslooking humans” with “weapons of every description,” like “a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them *fed on human flesh*” (*BM* 83 emphasis added). Similarly, at the most macabre pool party imaginable, the naked mercenaries are described in terms of their “great puckered scars” and various brandings of “letters and numbers as if they were articles requiring inventory” (174), striking details which echo in *TR*’s “bloodcults,” whose tattoos and scars are “etched carefully in ink like a blueprint for assembly” (*TR* 90). And where we see *TR*’s “bloodcults” matching the judge’s foretelling of “tribes of savages,” the “other people, with other sons” eerily brings the father and child to mind. Lost to both *God* (and “godspoke” men) and the absent mother of the *family*, the ‘heathen’

duo of the future certainly has no shortage of “ruins” at which to wonder. In this sense, just as the clay artifacts strewn in the sand once constituted a great and proud civilization, so too will the objects of the future someday become relics in a dawning age; the judge in the desert of the nineteenth century looks both backward and forward in time to prophesy the ultimate parallelism of human experience.

But the judge does not stop at simply foreseeing the world of *TR*; he actually posits a reason for its coming about. The reason, as he says, and as the title emphasizes, is that humanity’s “spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once the darkening and evening of his day” (153).⁷⁶ Though as an explanation for the world of *TR*, these words are admittedly cryptic, I believe they apply insofar as they suggest the way in which creation is concomitant—and indeed, bound up with—destruction. When humanity is at the height of ingenuity and success, it is equally open to the potential for destruction. Such a terrible paradox is perhaps nowhere more present than in the historical case of the atomic bomb, the case that I have argued makes its fictionalized and inflated reappearance as *TR*’s science fiction novum.

And apart from the specific example of the bomb, the paradox of creative apex tied to destructive nadir prophesized by the judge is concretized in *TR*’s problematic portrayal of fire;⁷⁷ as Chabon observes, the father and son rally around “carrying the fire” in a “world destroyed by fire.” Indeed, whether one reads the duo’s fire in metaphorical terms as the safeguarding of human civility (an interpretation shared by many critics and

⁷⁶ The judge is featured in another passage that echoes the title; according to the expriest, the gang first encountered Holden sitting on a rock at “about the meridian of the day.” He was sitting there ‘like he’d been expecting us,’ without a “canteen. It was like... You couldnt tell where he’d come from” (*BM* 131-132).

⁷⁷ Though I will limit myself to a discussion of “fire” in *TR*, it is also a major element in *BM*, so much so that Sepich writes, “Fire could be *BM*’s theme” (*Notes* 151).

assumed throughout my reading) or merely with respect to the necessity of literal fire for survival,⁷⁸ their credo appears incongruous with the ashen state of the world in which they struggle. Drawing specific attention to Christian overtones, Paul Sheehan restates Chabon's observation: "The claim that they are 'carrying the fire' is literalized toward the end [...] Yet fire is also the instrument of global catastrophe [...] The 'best' and the 'worst' are embodied in an element with univocal religious connotations" (102).⁷⁹

Similarly, Steven Skrimshire expounds on this paradox, writing:

[is McCarthy] speaking about the terrible inevitability of human nature? Such could be interpreted in the inexorable movements towards the bearers of fire at the end [the "parka man" and woman]. It is a cyclical move towards redemption and destruction in equal measure, as if one is bound to bring with it the other. Matthew Ryan (2007) also observes a parallel tension in the 'ambiguity of the familial bond': the fact that the father's aggressive defense of the son represents both 'the germ of the human community that might sprout again' and also 'the legitimation of violence.' (11)

In this sense, "fire," something with the capacity to both enkindle human flourishing and destroy that flourishing, is strikingly akin to the father's ultimately doomed isolation from anyone other than his son. Again, Sheehan agrees, noting that the man's "two-sided" temperament bespeaks a "limitless love, care, and projection" with a constantly undercutting "intransigent fundamentalism" (103). For Sheehan this is made explicit in

⁷⁸ Among other examples, page 136 of *TR* details the father's meticulous crafting of physical fire as an essential survival tool.

⁷⁹ Francisco Collado-Rodriguez also discusses the paradox of "fire" in the novel in religious terms, noting that, "despite its divine character in old mythologies [as a] source of life," real fire actually appears in the novel as punishing lightning and thunder. As he points out, the first character that the father and son encounter has been struck through one eye by a lightning bolt; thus, this "event becomes a first warning that the longed-for luminosity can also kill. Too much light can make you blind" (61).

the following words spoken by the father: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (*TR* 77).⁸⁰ When the father is at his “best” (as a caregiver), he is also at his “worst” (as a member of the larger human family). This complex nexus between the judge’s “meridian” speech, the thematic role of fire, and the community-violence dynamic is unified in the father’s discovery of the flare gun near the end of *TR*. After coming ashore from the derelict ship, the father shares his findings with his son:

I found a first aid kit. And I found a flarepistol

What’s that?

I’ll show you. It’s to signal with.

[...]

The boy lifted the gun from the case and held it. Can you shoot somebody with it?

You could.

Would it kill them?

No. But it might set them on fire.

Is that why you got it?

Yes.

Because there’s nobody to signal to. Is there?

No. (*TR* 241)

A flare gun, a device specifically designed to reach out for help among the greater human community, is, for the father, purposed solely for violence; thus, from this moment on,

⁸⁰ While the father could have sworn to “kill anyone who tries to hurt you,” his actual phrasing (“I will kill anyone who touches you”) is especially poignant given that the woman at the end of the novel embraces the child (see *TR* 286). The suggestion is that, had he still been alive, the father may have killed the woman due to his inability to distinguish affection from aggression.

the father is “carrying fire” of quite a different sort, a homicidal sort. Indeed, we see the fulfillment of this weaponization when the father defends himself and the child with the flare gun by shooting and killing an archer in a window (see *TR* 263).

Underneath this discussion of the way in which the judge’s words envision *TR*, it is clear that judge himself stands somehow outside or above the processes he describes. Indeed, given the calculated and detached way that he juxtaposes humans and wolves—a species he may actually prefer—it is clear that the judge is not, to distort Wordsworth, a “man speaking to men.” Recalling the earlier arguments of both Dorson and Spurgeon, he exists perpetually at the moment when violence becomes law, or when the desire for knowledge begets oppressive power. As I have argued, this genesis of the judge as the novum of *BM* captures the runaway scientific consciousness that McCarthy presents in his portrayal of the end of the west. Insofar as this end and the judge speak to a deep tension between humanity, the natural world, and scientific progress, they reappear in the world of *TR* as the machine-in-the-garden—the bomb, which, like the erected fences in the epilogue of *BM*, also closes an age with violence. And while it is the hermit in *BM* who explicitly draws attention to mechanistic power, it is, as I have argued, the child who does the same in *TR*. Indeed, the child’s unnerving refrain of “the winder wasnt turning” recalls the exact words of the earlier quoted hermit: “...make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it” (20). Thus, both novels are haunted by the power of science that progresses beyond human control; in this sense, the judge is implicated in the destruction of *TR*, almost as if incriminated. And here we can understand the full weight of the name of his rifle:

[the judge] had with him that selfsame rifle you see with him now, all mounted in german silver and the name that he'd give it set with silver wire under the cheekpiece in latin. *Et In Arcadia Ego*. A reference to the lethal in it. Common enough for a man to name his gun [...] His is the first and only I ever seen with an inscription from the classics. (*BM* 131)

Paying characteristically close attention to the craft of the created object, McCarthy inscribes human technology with the mythic omnipresence of death. Thus, destruction is present in Arcadia through the contrivance of a rifle, an instrument of deadly scientific efficiency. Like the bomb in *TR*, *BM* harbors the machine in the garden.

Implicated, as he is, in the destructive violence of these disparate novels, the perpetuity of the judge through time and space has the ring of the inevitable; thus, one thinks of the kid's terrible dream:

In that sleep and in sleeps to follow the judge did visit. Who would come other? A great and shambling mutant, silent and serene. Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of the void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. (*BM* 322)

The point, it seems, is not to explain the judge away; genealogy will not neatly expurgate a force so tightly wound up in our own human patterns of rising and falling. Though the

judge is, as the expriest tells us, “A thing to study” (*BM* 141), he is not a thing to be understood and filed away. In this sense, I take seriously Sepich’s point that “Holden’s been with McCarthy forever” (*Notes* 141). Writing, as he was, before the publication of *TR*, one might alter Sepich in appending his words to argue that Holden has and will continue to remain with McCarthy since *BM*. Indeed, Holden will remain with all of us.

Apart from emphasizing the elusive omnipotence of the judge, the novels demonstrate that the search—the “study,” as the expriest puts it—is essential. Indeed, not wholly dissimilar from the way in which the duo of *TR* reach the edge of a “black and ancient lake” in the father’s previously discussed, novel-opening dream, the above-quoted description of a person standing “at last darkened and dumb at the shore of the void” also brings to mind the ocean as it appears in both novels. Though a mythic symbol of both natural power and rejuvenation (as well as the geographic foregone conclusion of Manifest Destiny as framed within the myth of American Exceptionalism),⁸¹ the sea is in both novels simply an extension of the desolate wasteland preceding it. In *BM*, McCarthy describes the beach thus: “Loose strands of ambercolored kelp lay in a rubbery wrack at the tideline. A dead seal. Beyond the inner bay part of a reef in a thin line like something foundered there on which the sea was teething” (*BM* 317). And, similarly, in *TR*:

They trekked out along the crescent sweep of beach, keeping to the firmer sand below the tidewrack. They stood, their clothes flapping softly. Glass float covered with a gray crust. The bones of seabirds. At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as eye

⁸¹ As Toadvine says, “You wouldn’t think that a man would run plumb out of country out here, would ye?” (*BM* 297).

could see like an isocline of death. One vast salt sepulchre. Senseless. Senseless.
(*TR* 223)

Like the failure of the pilgrim who would strive to seek out the origins of the judge, McCarthy's characters come to the "shore" of a seeming void that offers neither knowledge nor salvation. Indeed, quite apart from granting answers, in both novels the sea is rendered as a murky unknown. In *BM*, the kid is joined on the beach by two horses, and we read, "The colt stood against the horse with its head down and the horse was watching, out there past men's knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea" (*BM* 316); and in *TR*, the father stands looking out at the water: "He thought there could be deathships⁸² out there yet, drifting with their lolling rags of sail. Or life in the deep. Great squid propelling themselves over the floor of the sea in the cold darkness. Shuttling past like trains, eyes the size of saucers" (*TR* 219). Like the judge, the sea frustrates and complicates our desire to know and understand.

It is in this series of overlapping connections and images that I understand *BM* and *TR* to co-exist in a reciprocating relationship. As is made clear by my Cant-influenced argument for reading the novels as mythoclastic narratives stemming from science fiction impulses and characteristics, I believe both novels coalesce in examining the tensions between nature, human culture, and scientifically mechanistic thinking. The novels share the judge, the animating and problematic force of mechanistic agency, and they share the search for—the study *of*—that same terrible figure. In this way they track his presence through American myth to determine what is left, what of science oriented,

⁸² Though this word is not explained, I assume it could refer to either abandoned and floating derelict ships or "bloodcults" in boats.

mechanistic thinking is salvageable for our national stories. In the case of *BM*, McCarthy depicts an honestly historical revision of a place and time to explore the roots of science-dominated thinking, and, in *TR*, he asks whether survival and progress are possible after destruction at the hands of exactly the same powerful force.

Returning once again to Jay Ellis's discussion of *BM*, the relationship between the novels may indeed resonate with the notion of *space* transforming into *place*. While the epilogue of *BM* rationalizes the space of the west into fenced in, ordered place, it is exactly this sense of ordered place that falls to pieces in the world of *TR*. Indeed, as the father tells the child, the state roads "used to belong to the states. What used to be called states" (*TR* 43). The question, it seems, is whether or not the nuclear disintegration of place can or will return the world of *TR* to space, mysterious and dismantled as it is. According to the opening chapter of *BM*, the answer is "no":

[the kid's] origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay (5).

Once mechanistically paved over by the space in the novel's epilogue and carried into the bomb-wielding world of *TR*, the place at the opening of *BM* is forever lost to the utter desolation of scientifically engineered destruction. And perhaps this loss, this destruction, has within it something of our beginning; just as the noon of our "expression signals the onset of night" (*BM* 153), so too does our night signal our long-ago dawn. As we read in *TR*: "Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was

made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. Silence” (274).

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