

**THE SHAPE OF THE ROAD:
A STUDY OF THE JOURNEY IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S BORDER TRILOGY**

THESIS

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CHAPTER 1

“The Immappable World of Our Journey”:

An Overview of Journeys in the Border Trilogy and Westward Expansion

In his 1992 interview with Richard Woodward, Cormac McCarthy states: “There isn’t a place in the world you can go where they don’t know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West” (36). As McCarthy points out, the myth of the West remains a fairly recognizable one. However, it also represents a fluctuating myth informed by each new study, artistic rendition, or piece of literature that considers it. In his Border Trilogy, McCarthy revisits conventions of the Western and provides an intriguing lens through which his readers may view the myth of the West. This thesis will focus on one important aspect of this lens: the journeys that the young men in McCarthy’s novels undertake. McCarthy’s characters live in a West largely vacant of wilderness spaces. While pockets of open space still existed in mid-twentieth century America, the rough country that helped shape the myth of the West had largely vanished. Nevertheless, the history of America and American literature overflows with characters who continue to search for the essential West; the journeys of McCarthy’s young men in the Border Trilogy are no exception.

The journey has provided the framework for countless narratives. In particular, to travel west signified a journey to an ambiguous region. As Leslie Fiedler asserts in his book *The Return of the Vanishing America*, the West represented both an escapist utopia

and the irretrievable lost paradise of the Garden of Eden (32). According to Fiedler, Europeans initially searched out the West through imagination:

Though Europeans were content [. . .] to think of their private lives and common history as acted out in a tripartite world [a world with only the North, South, and East having been explored] in dreams they sought from the start the forbidden and impossible fourth quarter of the globe [. . .] the West persisted as fantasy, legend, a place to be sought inside the skull of ordinary dreamers or inspired poets. (30)

As Europeans' travels extended further from central Europe, the imaginary West morphed into reality. Fiedler points out that the region defined as the West shifted as European exploration expanded to the Americas: "Once the Atlantic was crossed, moreover, the name *West* was transferred, step by step, to whatever part of the continent lured men on just over the line of settlement, to the unexplored space behind the next natural barrier [. . .]" (emphasis in original 26). Continuing this trend of European culture, much of American literature focuses on the journey into an unexplored Western wilderness. This pattern may point to American culture's fascination with the freedom offered by a Western frontier.

According to Fredrick Jackson Turner, the American infatuation with freedom that the frontier represented played a significant role in shaping the development of the country. Historians continue to debate the validity of Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Presented in Chicago in 1893, the piece outlines ideas concerning the development of America. His thesis is: "Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great

West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (31). Whether one agrees with Turner or not, one should acknowledge the tremendous influence the essay had, and perhaps continues to have, on American discourse.¹ In his essay “The Problem of the West,” Turner admits that the West exists on more than a physical level: “The West, at bottom, is a form of society, rather than an area” (61). As America’s expansion west—fueled by social and economic push and pull factors—began to diminish the amount of frontier wilderness, the concept of the Western frontier as a place of freedom retained a tight grip on the minds of Americans. As they settled enough of the country to effectively erase the frontier line, the physical journey across the continent came to an end. Turner writes, “This, then, is the real situation: a people composed of heterogeneous materials, with diverse and conflicting ideals and social interests, having passed from the task of filling up the vacant spaces of the continent, is now thrown back upon itself, and is seeking an equilibrium” (75). In a sense the journey to the West became a circular journey, turning back on itself once Americans reached the end of the continent. Since the West denoted a space beyond the frontier line, the physical West relied, in part, on the existence of that demarcation. Thus, when Americans completely settled the frontier, they had to redefine the West without the use of that line. Once again the West retreated to the realm of a mythic mental concept. The films and books about the West provide a useful example for the consideration of how Americans came to define the West.

Fiedler writes that “[t]he heart of the Western is not the confrontation with the alien landscape (by itself this produces only the Northern), but the encounter with the Indian, that utter stranger for whom our New World is an Old Home” (21). Fiedler states

that the Indian represents the marginalized other whom the hero must confront and either destroy or become (24-5). Fiedler's concept provides a useful outline for considering McCarthy's work. Though Indians do factor into the Border Trilogy (particularly in *The Crossing*), one might argue that the primary confrontation for McCarthy's characters is the potential and sometimes actualized death that awaits them. One might replace the hero's confrontation with the Indian with his confrontation with death. As Jane Tompkins notes in her book *West of Everything*, death factors heavily in the schema of the traditional Western: "To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die. Death is everywhere in the genre" (24). Indeed death figures largely and in a variety of ways during the characters' journeys in the Border Trilogy.

In *All the Pretty Horses* John Grady Cole journeys to Mexico after the death of his grandfather. Cole also struggles with the death of his way of life. With his grandfather gone Cole's mother intends to sell her father's ranch, thus putting an end to her son's life as a working cowboy. The novel begins with Cole's searching for a country where he can live life as a cowboy. His idealized view of Mexico as an untamed land leads him south, much as the idealized view of the West led generations of Americans west. Expertly undermining the myth of the wild frontier, the Mexico that McCarthy writes for Cole does not entirely conform to the land he imagined. Nevertheless, Cole's journey is not devalued. Cole's sense of self remains rooted in conventional Western heroic principles, such as honoring one's word and helping those less fortunate. Along his journey he has had to question the validity of these heroic values, and he chooses to continue defining himself by a somewhat naïve ideology.

Thus, his character is cast as a man who holds fast to principles. At the novel's close, Cole still hasn't found his country. Thus, his journey brings him full circle.²

Billy Parham journeys throughout New Mexico and Mexico in the Trilogy's second book, which is set a few years before *All the Pretty Horses*. Parham's journeys in *The Crossing* allow one to consider man's obligation to the natural world and to family. Like Cole's heroic ideologies, Parham's obligations owe much to conventional Western ideals. Interestingly, Parham's life is riddled with strangers whose tales demonstrate the importance of storytelling. Storytelling adds a new facet to the consideration of journey. For centuries stories have preserved tales of the journey adding to its importance as a literary form and a catalyst for psychological change. The various stories that Parham hears along his journey serve as sign posts mapping his movement from boyhood to adulthood. Parham's movement into the awareness of adulthood casts him as a post-modern character; he seems destined to live a lonely, wandering life unable to connect to anyone. Parham's journeys are circular in the sense that they present recurring elements such as the storyteller, encounters with wolves and dogs, and repeated returns to Mexico. At the close of the novel, and Parham's journey, McCarthy leaves the reader with an ambiguous image. In stark contrast to the final heroic image of Cole's riding into the sunset, Parham's story concludes with him weeping as he kneels before the rising sun.

In *Cities of the Plain*, the final novel, the reader finds Parham and Cole as friends and coworkers on a New Mexico ranch near the Texas border. The men that they became along their earlier journeys inform their current choices. Cole's adherence to his principles leads to his destruction. Parham's inability to connect leads to a lifetime of drifting. Parham's and Cole's circular journeys might compel one to consider the

significance of a destination to the journey. Their final scenes also introduce the idea that death constitutes the last destination of life's journey. Death represents the ultimate example of a journey returning full circle to its beginning. Cole faces his death and Parham encounters, once again, a storytelling stranger, whom he at first mistakes for death.

McCarthy's decision to frame Cole's and Parham's movements from naïveté to an acute awareness of the world as a harsh and at times magnificent place as circular journeys encourage a reading of the Trilogy that focuses on the journey rather than the destination. The prima donna's advice to Parham in *The Crossing* echoes this sentiment. The goal of Parham and his younger brother Boyd's journey is to recover their family's stolen horses. The prima donna says: "You will see. The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other road that wears that shape but only the one. And every voyage begun upon it will be completed. Whether horses are found or not" (230). The woman seems to imply that the completion of the voyage does not rely on reaching a final destination or goal. The journey becomes an end itself rather than a means to an end. The circularity of the journey draws attention to this notion and emphasizes the futility of attempting to reach a preconceived destination. In this thesis I will provide a reading of the Border Trilogy that proves the circularity of Parham's and Cole's journeys and explores the implications of framing these journeys as passages that pivot back to their beginnings. I will also consider the importance of the journey to death and understanding in the Border Trilogy. In the final chapter, I will discuss the Border Trilogy as a whole considering McCarthy's overall message regarding the journey and provide examples of how McCarthy's style enhances this overall message.

During my journey writing this thesis, I was fortunate to be one of the first researchers to have access to The Cormac McCarthy Papers, now part of the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University-San Marcos. The collection of works, spanning 1964 to 2007, includes letters, manuscripts, notes, the unpublished screenplay for “Whales and Men” and the unfinished novel “The Passenger.” During my study of the documents, I discovered insights into McCarthy’s Border Trilogy in both expected and unexpected places. For instance, McCarthy’s reference to maps of Saltillo, Mexico, reinforce the notion that McCarthy, like James Joyce and his precise representation of Dublin in *Ulysses*, values a realistic rendition of the towns that appear in his novels. Likewise McCarthy’s correspondence with Barry G. King, M.D. confirms that the author wanted to depict an accurate treatment of Boyd’s gunshot wound. Unexpectedly, I also uncovered significant insights in letters to foreign publishers or on scribbled notes on the back of folders. The unexpected significance of a faintly penciled note on the back of a manila folder proves the wealth of insights that are present in the McCarthy Papers.

NOTES

1. For further reading on Turner's essay in conjunction with McCarthy's work see Neil Campbell's essay "Liberty Beyond its Proper Bounds: Cormac McCarthy's History of the West in *Blood Meridian*." Campbell cites McCarthy's first novel set in the West as one that "rewrites the myths and histories of the West inherited from Fredrick Jackson Turner [. . .]" (217). Campbell goes on to associate McCarthy's novel with the "New Western History, which began as a challenge to the mythicized view of the West Frederick Jackson Turner helped create in his 1893 essay, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History'" (218). It is important to note that Turner's essay influenced and likely continues to influence writings on the West.

2. Gail Moore Morrison briefly considers the notion that McCarthy's early novels follow circular journeys in her essay "*All the Pretty Horses*: John Grady Cole's Expulsion from Paradise." Morrison considers the plots of McCarthy's Appalachian novels: "It is difficult, for example, to think of a more classical plot device than the circularity of *Outer Dark*, which ends where it began, opening with the birth of a child and closing at the 'grave' of the same child, or of *Suttree* with its city-country-city movement, from civilization to wilderness and back again" (175). Later in her essay, Morrison states that the movements of sections two and three of *All the Pretty Horses* are circular (180).

CHAPTER 2

“Where is Your Country?”:

A Study of John Grady Cole’s Journeys to Mexico

When beginning a study of the heroes of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy and their circular journeys, one might first ask the question: What end does the circular journey serve? Returning to the prima donna’s enigmatic statement in *The Crossing* might provide an answer: “You will see. The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other road that wears that shape but only the one. And every voyage begun upon it will be completed” (230). As previously stated, one might partially interpret this statement as an assertion that the journey matters more than the destination. The journey of John Grady Cole provides an opportunity for him to grow as a man; thus, the value of his experiences is not based on reaching a preconceived destination. The circularity of Cole’s journey in *All the Pretty Horses* enhances the reader’s understanding of the principles that make up his character. The novel’s final scenes share striking similarities with early scenes. Like the “candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass” of the opening sentence, Cole’s journey ends as a distinct reflection of its beginning (3).¹ Cole’s grandfather dies at the beginning of his journey, and Abuela (a grandmother-figure in his life) passes at the end of his journey. He sets off for Mexico in search of a wild country where the cowboy still reigns supreme. At the end of the novel, Rawlins asks Cole “Where is your country?” and he replies that he doesn’t know; thus

the novel ends with Cole's riding into the sunset still searching for that country.² The circular pattern of a journey from home into the wilderness followed by a return home is a convention dating back to Homer's *Odyssey* and beyond.³ However, Cole's journey is unique since he, rather than coming back home, returns to his wanderings in a seemingly ceaseless journey across the desert landscape. Thus, McCarthy's circular journey motif does not offer the reward of the final rest that home represents. Perhaps this denial of home, what Cole terms as "country," allows the reader to focus less on the destination of Cole's journey and more on the journey itself.

In his study of the Border Trilogy, Patrick W. Shaw postulates that Cole's vanishing in the final lines of *All the Pretty Horses* points to a metaphor that one may use as a lens for interpreting the works: "[W]e may feasibly interpret this 'vanishing' of 'from nothing to nothing' metaphor as a metafictional key to the texts at hand. Fiction is created out of nothing and ultimately vanishes into nothing again. What it may mean is revealed only by the traces left in that vanishing" (258). In his article "Female Presence, Male Violence, and the Art of Artlessness in the Border Trilogy," Shaw sees in the "traces left in that vanishing" a composite of the female characters into a unified feminine presence and a decidedly masculine violence of the Trilogy. Shaw explores the complexity of McCarthy's Trilogy particularly as it is expressed through plot (268). Shaw's question of how the repetition of plot from one novel to the next serves the whole might prove useful if focused on a single novel: *All the Pretty Horses*.

First one might identify the repetition of plot within the first novel of the Trilogy. One of the most obvious repetitions of plot is evident in the love affair between Cole and the patron's daughter. Alejandra's affair with Cole resembles her great aunt's affair as a

young woman. Dueña Alfonsa acknowledges the similarity between herself and Alejandra during the long account of her doomed experience with the young Mexican revolutionary Gustavo Madero. During her monologue, the dueña points out another form of repetition that constitutes a theme throughout the novel. The dueña states:

It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I don't believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God—who knows all that can be known—seems powerless to change. (239)⁴

The dueña uses the metaphor that history represents an endless succession of puppets controlled by “the hands of yet other puppets” (231). She mixes this complex determinism with an assertion of her own will on Alejandra in her attempt to control the young lovers. As James D. Lilley points out in his essay “‘The Hands of Yet Other Puppets’: Figuring Freedom and Reading Repetition in *All the Pretty Horses*,” the dueña finds freedom through her acknowledgement of the futile resistance to history combined with a “rebellious choice” that disregards this futile resistance (281). Often the events and decisions that affect the present seem random and unrelated. Indeed one may never fully grasp how past occurrences interact with the future. Lilley writes: “At the heart of the dueña’s worldview is a determinism that views the present as inextricably tied to the puppet strings of the past [. . .]” (280). The dueña recalls a lesson from her father as she addresses Cole towards the end of the novel:

My father had a great sense of the connectedness of things. I’m not sure I share it. He claimed that the responsibility for a decision could

never be abandoned to blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences. The example he gave was of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed, *cara y cruz*. No matter through whatever turnings nor how many of them. Till our turn comes at last and our turn passes. (230-31)

Dueña Alfonsa explains that her father probably felt that the parable of the coiner provided an illustration of the origin of acts. However, her own view of the world, though retaining her father's connectedness of things, leans more toward the cyclical repetition of history. This repetition does not originate at a certain point, such as a coiner's workshop; rather it includes the supposed origin as a part of the endless repetition: "For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on" (231). Lilley's final assessment of McCarthy's work seems to echo the "traces" of Shaw's discussion: "In the same way that his characters realize a paradoxical freedom within the determinism of their landscape, so too we as readers—similarly subjected to the determinism of plot and language—find an impressive qualitative 'dynamic space' within the confines of the text" (284). For Lilley the "traces" that remain after the vanishing represent the dueña's assertion of freedom, which is defined by the belief that the only freedom possible is "the freedom to will the repetition of the past toward the future" (284). Thus, like Shaw, Lilley notes the importance of repetition,

particularly circular repetition, to the worldview expressed in McCarthy's work.

Dueña Alfonsa's idea that history is a cycle that plays itself out through violence, or "a love of blood" (239), recalls an earlier notion that the narrator expresses as Cole rides through what was once Comanche country:

He rode where he would always choose to ride [. . .] At the hour
he'd always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was
shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past
where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out
of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each
armed for war which was their life and the women and children and
women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and
redeemable in blood only. (5)

Thus, Cole rides the same violent path that once carried the Comanche to war. The narrator's use of the phrase "always choose" implies an ironic mix of determinism and freewill. Cole chooses, but he will never, and perhaps can never, choose other than the path that he is on. This path includes his recognition of a nostalgic value of the past along with an acknowledgement of an ever-present brutality in this idealized past. Cole's and Rawlins' violent experiences in a Mexican prison evoke this notion that violence constitutes an integral part in a Mexico they once idealized. Later, Cole's father expresses a similar sentiment of repeated history: "We're like Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont know what's goin to show up here come daylight. We dont even know what color they'll be" (26). Perhaps a lead up to Alfonsa's elaborate explanation of circular history, Cole's father expresses not only the indecipherable past

but the equally unknowable future. It seems history's cyclical pattern of repetition offers the only consistent certainty.

Cole's journey into Mexico represents another repetition of plot. Cole travels to Mexico as an escape from his West Texas home. In his article "All the Pretty Mexicos: Cormac McCarthy's Mexican Representations," Daniel Cooper Alarcón states that McCarthy's portrayal of Mexico falls into the category of works that depict Mexico as the Infernal Paradise. Alarcón asserts that Anglo writers largely shaped the myth of Mexico as an Infernal Paradise, such as Katherine Anne Porter's stories set in Mexico and D.H. Lawrence's work (144). According to Alarcón, Cole's and Parham's travels through Mexico conform to this idea of Mexico as the Infernal Paradise, which represents "the primitive, preindustrial world where the infernal rests immediately beneath the fragile surface of paradise" (149). Thus, the narrative plot not only repeats the journey narrative; specifically it repeats depictions of Mexico as an idealized land against which the Anglo hero can test himself. In his article, Alarcón briefly considers the possibility that McCarthy's depiction of Mexico serves as a backdrop against which Cole's romanticized ideals will ultimately break down; however, he ultimately reasserts his initial assessment that the novel fits into the category of works that depict Mexico as the Infernal Paradise. Possibly, Alarcón is too quick to dismiss the possibility that McCarthy offers a representation of Mexico that is more than simply an Infernal Paradise.

Certainly the Mexico depicted represents an Infernal Paradise, but it might also just as importantly point to the cyclical pattern of expansion in North America. Recognizing the circular nature of presenting Mexico as an Infernal Paradise does not detract from Alarcón's conclusion; rather it expands it. As I stated earlier in this thesis,

the frontier, not just Mexico, represented a land full of possibility, freedom, domination, escape, and ultimately death for Americans. Mark Busby introduces this notion that McCarthy's characters' travels to Mexico denote a continuation of American expansion westward. However, Busby notes in his article "Into the Darkening Land the World to Come: Cormac McCarthy's Border Crossings" that this shift into Mexico redefines the American hero's expansion into a land with centuries of history: "If the American frontier hero pushes west into a historyless land, then when that figure turns south and crosses the border, he encounters a land with a strong and troubling past, for Mexico represents a country with a lengthy and distressing history [. . .]" (230). Cole's journey into Mexico represents just one in a long line of men who crossed over the borders of civilization in search of a mythic land that offered freedom. John Wegner's study of the role of the Mexican Revolution in the Trilogy points out the overwhelming importance history has on the people and lands that Cole, and later Billy Parham, encounter in Mexico. Wegner describes history as a revolving cyclical pattern: "The continual revolutions, the constant revolving, of history signifies the constant retelling and re-creation of history. The tale never ends; the thread of the story runs from character to character" (254).⁵

Returning to Shaw's notion that one should consider the traces left after the vanishing, we might now consider what these traces are for *All the Pretty Horses*. Initially, one might assume that everything dissolves into the vanishing world of fiction leaving nothing at all behind. But the plethora of criticism surrounding the Border Trilogy proves that the traces left behind are multifaceted and numerous.

Contrasted to Wegner's notion that Mexico's Revolutionary history represents a circular and unending story that links the Trilogy's characters, Stacy Peebles cites storytelling, not as a manifestation of history, but as a way to escape. Peebles considers the importance of narrative in her essay "What Happens to Country: The World to Come in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy." Tracing the importance of storytelling to the understanding of Cole and Parham, Peebles states that the physical landscape gives way to the metaphysical world of narrative (136). Thus, the characters use the country as a guide to understand their story: "McCarthy's regional imagination is, ultimately, not bounded by region itself, but becomes a regional comprehension of narrative" (142). As she considers the role of narrative in Cole's life, Peebles states that narrative represents a way for him to inhabit a metaphysical reality. The art of storytelling opens up a world beyond the physical: "The open range may be long gone, but John Grady has found another 'country' to inhabit—the space of his narrative and his own Western myth" (138).

Part of Cole's ability to embody his own Western myth is his consistency of character that conforms to conventional ideals of the chivalric hero; as Charles Bailey points out, Cole fulfills all the conventions of a Knightly hero (294).⁶ His dedication to the values and conventions that place him in this category often require him to choose between the rational self-serving choice and the heroic one. In her essay "*All the Pretty Horses*: John Grady Cole's Expulsion from Paradise," Gail Moore Morrison recognizes this aspect of Cole's character as a young man dedicated to certain principles:

John Grady may no better understand the rapaciousness of the world, the divisions of the human heart or the power struggle that occurs behind the

thick walls of the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción than John Wesley, Sutree or 'the kid' [characters from McCarthy's earlier novels] comes to understand the circumstances of his own destiny. But John Grady confronts them with a courage, strength of character and grace that seem to emanate from an unwavering commitment to a set of significant values he has internalized [. . .]. (175-76)⁷

Cole's attitude toward Jimmy Blevins (a young boy he and Rawlins meet just before they cross into Mexico) exemplifies Cole's dedication to these principles. Against Rawlins' continued insistence that they leave Blevins, Cole repeatedly defends the boy and seems driven by an appeal to higher values in his attitude toward him. For Cole, Blevins is a boy who cannot take care of himself. Thus, Cole acts as a sort of protective older brother for him: feeding him, clothing him, allowing Blevins to ride on his horse with him, trying to protect him from the knowledge that a group of Mexican wax-makers want to buy him. Rawlins serves as a useful contrast that highlights Cole's choice to act heroically. At one point Rawlins' statement on the consequences of choices reverberates later in Alfonsa's metaphor of puppets controlling puppets. However, Rawlins' sound advice to leave Blevins does not conform to Cole's heroic ideals. Rawlins states:

Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I'd made before it. You understand what I'm sayin?

Yeah. I think so. Meanin what?

Meanin this is it. [. . .] This is the time and there wont be another time and I guarantee it.

Meanin just leave him?

Yessir. (79)⁸

Cole's final decision firmly grounds his position as a man who defines himself by his adherence to principles: "John Grady crossed his hands on the pommel of his saddle and sat looking at them. After a while he raised his head. I cant do it, he said" (79).

Even when Cole wavers, he maintains his determination to define himself by heroic values through his self-reproach. When the Mexican police captain takes Blevins into the desert and shoots him, Cole follows Rawlins' advice and stays silent; the implication is that if Cole does protest, the guards might shoot him too. Cole's lack of action to prevent the murder stands in contrast to his earlier role as a protector of Blevins. Throughout the entire Trilogy, Cole's adherence to heroic ideals will be linked to death. His role as the hero requires him to give his life to uphold these principles, as Cole himself points out to Rawlins during their imprisonment in Saltillo.⁹ According to Cole, adherence to principles is closely tied to retaining one's dignity in the face of a prison population that would beat him into subservience.¹⁰ He says this to Rawlins: "You listen to me, he said. Dont you let em think they aint goin to have to. You hear me? I intend to make em kill me. I wont take nothing less. They either got to kill us or let us be. There aint no middle ground" (182-83).

This notion that no middle ground exists is brought to the forefront when Cole must fight a fellow inmate who has been hired to kill him. The language of the scene implies that the *cuchillero* represents a profound violence against which Cole has two distinct choices: fight or die. When Cole sizes up the *cuchillero*, the description portrays the young man as a manifestation of evil: "He looked deep into those dark eyes and there

were deeps there to look into. A whole malign history burning cold and remote and black" (200). The two men fighting with tin trays and make-shift knives conjures images of knights in battle (Bailey 294). Likewise, the description of the fatal wound as a "red boutonniere blossoming on the left pocket" of the *cuchillero*'s work shirt calls to mind Bailey's assessment of *All the Pretty Horses* as a "courtly romance" (294). The fight operates on two levels. The fight is not only a violent brawl; it is a sort of showdown between good and evil, an opportunity for Cole to test his adherence to his principles against a worthy opponent. When Cole staggers from the cafeteria, he leaves behind him a trail of bloody footprints, and he is portrayed as a Christ-like figure: "Kneeling he pushed against the ground to rise. Blood dripped between his outstretched hands [. . .] Pérez's man bent over him. He stooped and gathered him up in his arms and lifted him and carried him across the yard into Pérez's house" (202). Thus, Cole's violent encounter has allowed him to assert his principles and emerge as a hero.

Cole's earlier choice not to speak or act out against Blevins' death represents an event in which he does not place his principles before his own life. However, his visit to the judge's house in Ozona reveals that this moment of acting outside the confines of the hero's role constitutes, for him, a stain against his character. Cole tells the judge that he was not "in the right about everything" that happened to him in Mexico (290). His love for Alejandra compelled him to betray his patron, and his determination to survive compelled him to kill a young boy in the prison (290-91). Each of these incidents represents moments that support an understanding of Cole as a man who upholds his principles and follows his heart. However, the inability to act he experiences with Blevins' death does not uphold his hero status. Before the captain leaves Cole and

Rawlins at the prison, Cole clearly states his belief that he did not have to kill Blevins (180). The captain replies with a monologue on principles that seems strikingly similar to Cole's steadfast adherence to principles.¹¹ The captain says, "A man does not change his mind" (181). Cole might say the same thing in response to his repeated choice to help Blevins, pursue Alejandra, and return to Mexico for the horses. Cole's failure to try to stop Blevins' murder represents a moment when he does change his mind and turns away from the protective role he previously assumed towards him. When Cole visits the judge, he clearly states his belief that his inaction represents a flaw in his character. Cole confesses that he wanted to kill the Mexican captain because he "stood there and let him walk that boy [Blevins] out in the trees and shoot him" (293). Then, he states that despite the futility of speaking out for Blevins he should have done something (293). Immediately after his confession Cole expresses his determination to find the true owner of Blevins' horse; thus, one might view Cole's dedication to the return of Blevins' horse as an attempt to reassert his heroic principles and protective role over something connected to Blevins. Cole's status within his own Western Myth requires him to fulfill the role of the hero. Like the earlier description of Cole's riding the countryside, as the hero he must "always choose" to uphold the principles that define his hero role.

A closer look at Cole's retrieval of the horses suggests that Cole's return for the horses represents a "quest undertaken as a matter of principle, as a reaffirmation of the traditional values and principles of honor" (Morrison 180). Initially, Cole's decision to return to La Encantada seems only a whim made by a man whose heartbreak has made him numb to the world: "He sat a long time. He leaned and spat. He looked toward the darkness in west. The hell with it, he said. I aint leavin my horse down here" (257).

Cole risks his life to retrieve all three horses (Redbo, Cole's horse; Junior, Rawlins' horse; and Blevins' horse) when he takes the captain hostage and travels with him through the desert trying to evade their pursuers. The risks that Cole takes are rooted in the fact that horses mean something more to Cole than simply a means of transport. Throughout the novel Cole's connection to horses remains a prevalent theme. His uncanny ability to break Rocha's horses is just one instance that establishes Cole as a man who understands the animals and has a connection to them. In a dream Cole runs with the horses as if a member of the herd: "[A]nd they ran all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken only praised" (161-62). Certainly Cole's admiration of the horse's freedom and beauty comes through in this passage. Cole sees something more at the core of a horse that might speak to his value of principles. During his trek through the desert with the captain, Cole dreams of horses again: "Finally what he saw in his dream was that the order in the horse's heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it" (280). The horse, unlike man, is unwavering.¹²

Cole's adherence to his principles wavers when he does not act to save Blevins. However, this failure to act seems to be the only time Cole falters. This notion is supported by Cole's choice not to kill the captain. Cole acknowledges that the pain from a gunshot wound in the leg and the rage he feels after the captain points a gun at him might have driven him to shoot the captain had the gun been loaded. However, in the end Cole decides to help the man saying: "I aint goin to kill you [. . .] I'm not like you" (278).

Cole removes his handcuffs and helps reset his shoulder. Cole's choice to help a man in need is made more profound because he helps a man who is essentially his enemy.

Eventually, their pursuers catch up to them, but they do not harm Cole.

Cole's development as a man who defines himself by his adherence to his principles may be traced by the choices he makes as he moves further away from childhood. Cole displays a consistent choice (with the exception of Blevins' death) to follow his principles. When he leaves Texas to pursue an idealized Mexico, his fantasy breaks down once he realizes that reality does not fit the ideal. His vision of his life in Mexico is marred by his doomed love affair, Blevins' death, the violent imprisonment that includes his fatal stabbing of another inmate, and his kidnapping of the police captain. These incidents, the markers of his journey, constitute the choices that shape and define Cole. Without his journey, though it is a circular one, Cole might not have become the hero of his Western Myth. Towards the end of the novel Cole's thoughts reveal his movement out of childhood and solidify the importance his journey has had on this movement: "He stood at the window of an empty café and watched the activities of the square and he said that it was good that God kept the truths of life from the young as they were starting out or else they'd have not heart to start at all" (284). The "truths of life" include a vanishing of Cole's idealized country. Thus, the destination vanishes and only the journey itself remains.

In the second book of the trilogy Billy Parham's numerous trips in and out of Mexico reveal a different sort of vanishing, but a vanishing nonetheless. Each time Parham returns to Mexico, his destination shifts, yet his journeys share similarities. First, the obligation he feels towards a wolf sends him on a search for a place in Mexico where

she can live freely. Next, he returns to retrieve his deceased father's horses. Finally, he travels to Mexico to find his brother. Like Cole, Parham's circular journeys allow him to grow as he confronts the world around him.

NOTES

1. Often McCarthy combines words such as his combination of “peirglass” in the first sentence of the novel.

2. For more on Cole’s understanding of country see Jay Ellis’ essay “‘What Happens to Country’ in *Blood Meridian*.” In his essay, Ellis compares *All the Pretty Horses* to *Blood Meridian* writing that Cole, similar to Toadvine and “the kid,” “depends on a sense of ‘country’ as possibility” (89).

3. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell provides an extensive study of this pattern as it occurs in the myths and folklore of cultures ranging from ancient Greece to the beginnings of Buddhism to early Gaelic legends and Native American folktales. Campbell sums up this pattern in the “Keys” chapter. He begins the chapter with a circular diagram that illustrates the path of the hero.

4. Often McCarthy does not use an apostrophe in contractions.

5. Mark Busby points out that the Border Trilogy replays another conventional narrative pattern: “Each McCarthy novel takes a representative young boy’s initiatory experience through a border crossing and turns the experience upside down so that the expected initiation is seemingly denied. But ironically it is through the denied experience that a young man is initiated into a more profound understanding [. . .]” (231). Thus, the initiation motif constitutes another repetition of plot.

6. According to Bailey, *All the Pretty Horses* fits the mold of a courtly romance:

John Grady Cole, the knight-errant, wanders into the wilderness and falls in love with an unattainable lady of a distinctly higher aristocratic class. He performs for her as a knight should, displaying a God-given talent for martial skills—in this case, taming horses. [. . .] In the Saltillo prison, he even engages in direct tournament combat, in which homemade knives become swords and metal cafeteria trays become shields. (294)

7. Gail Moore Morrison also characterizes Cole as a “knight errant, displaced and dispossessed, heroically tested and stubbornly faithful to a chivalric code whose power is severely circumscribed by the inevitable evil in a hostile world” (176).

8. McCarthy does not use quotation marks when writing dialogue.

9. Interestingly, the McCarthy Papers include two maps of Saltillo. The Sanborn’s Tourist map and another map dated 1991 indicate that it was important for the author to portray the town accurately. In the center of the 1991 map there is a mark directly in the center of town and the label “penitentiary” (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos).

10. Rawlins likely experienced physical abuse before John Grady was subjected to it. At the jail the Mexican captain beat Rawlins, but he only questioned Cole. Rawlins’ ambiguous question to Cole about the “shower room” seems to imply that Rawlins was tortured (169). In fact, in a letter regarding translation queries to Hayakawa Publishing Incorporated, dated June 14, 1994, McCarthy writes that the shower room is “where prisoners are tortured” (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos).

11. Interestingly, the captain, like Cole, adheres to his own principles. However, unlike Cole the captain's principles are not heroic in the least:

I will tell you a story, he said. Because I like you. I was young man like you. You see. And this time I tell you I was always with these older boys because I want to learn every thing. So on this night at the fiesta of San Pedro in the town of Linares in Nuevo León I was with these boys and they have some mescal and everything—you know what is mescal?—and there was this woman and all these boys is go out to this woman and they is have this woman. And I am the last one. And I go out to the place where is this woman and she is refuse me because she say I am too young or something like that.

What does a man do? You see. I can no go back because they will all see that I dont go with this woman. Because the truth is always plain. You see. A man cannot go back. Why he go back? Because he change his mind? A man does not change his mind.

The captain made a fist and held it up. (181)

12. Included in the numerous boxes of archives devoted to *All the Pretty Horses* is a photocopy of a 1954 J. Frank Dobie article, "Babicora," published in *The American Hereford Journal*. The article consists of Dobie's reminiscence of time spent at the Hearst Ranch in Mexico. Similar to McCarthy's collection of maps from Saltillo and Zacatecas, the study of Dobie's memories of the Hearst Ranch indicate that McCarthy valued accuracy in his depiction of the Mexican towns and ranches. It is also interesting to note that one

of Dobie's books *The Mustangs*, outlines the folklore and history surrounding the wild horses. In *The Mustangs* Dobie writes:

No one who conceives him as only a servant to man can apprehend the mustang. The true conceiver must be a true lover of freedom—a person who yearns to extend freedom to all life. Halted in animated expectancy or running in abandoned freedom, the mustang was the most beautiful, the most inspiring creature ever to print foot on the grasses of America. (110)

Certainly one can discern a similar appreciation for the animal in Cole's attitude toward horses.

CHAPTER 3

“Listen to the *Corridos* of the Country”:

Deciphering Billy Parham’s Journeys and the Tales he Witnesses

In her article “The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*,” Dianne Luce writes: “*The Crossing* focuses on the course of life, sequential and linear, causative, perhaps fated and yet surprising, as narrative plot—as story. And McCarthy is concerned with the role or function of story in human experience of life, not only our own stories, our autobiographies, but our biographies of others, our witnessing” (195). Throughout *The Crossing* the storytelling of strangers functions in part as a way for Billy Parham to gain access, or witness, various interpretations of the world. As Parham travels across Mexico, his encounters with strangers form an alternate narrative within the greater plot of the novel.¹ This alternate narrative consists of a meditation on the nature of reality and the world that Billy moves through. The stories Parham hears also enhance the notion that the journey is more important than the destination: the strangers appear throughout his journey, not once he reaches a destination. Despite the abundance of characters in *The Crossing*, these characters remain strangers in the sense that they are not fully-developed, as John Cant points out: “The range of characters is considerable, greater than in *All the Pretty Horses*, but none of them is conveyed with the force or depth of the minor characters of that novel” (196). In his book *Cormac McCarthy and*

the Myth of American Exceptionalism, Cant notes that this “reflects the isolation of Billy himself” (196). A closer look at Billy’s character and the tales that he hears along his journeys enhances one’s understanding of the importance of journey and the complex worldview presented in *The Crossing*.

Similar to John Grady Cole, Parham initially journeys to Mexico in search of a wild country. Unlike Cole, Parham does not seek this wildness so that he can live as a cowboy; rather Parham ventures south so that a wolf he has captured can live without the risk of death from the New Mexico ranch culture that she threatens. In contrast to Cole’s assertion of his principles as he journeys through Mexico, Parham bears witness to a highly-nuanced understanding of the world during his interactions with strangers on his three journeys into Mexico. During each of these journeys Parham meets a stranger who offers a worldview to the young traveler. Two events in the novel serve as evidence of Parham’s willingness to both bear witness to the reality of the world outside of his home and share counsel with a stranger for a time.

Early one morning Parham secretly leaves his house and witnesses a group of wolves. The reader knows little about Billy and even his name remains a mystery. Thus, Billy’s observance of the wolves constitutes one of the first insights into his character that McCarthy provides. Perhaps McCarthy’s choice to begin Parham’s story with his encounter with seven wolves stands as evidence of the significance of this moment to Billy. When he sees the wolves, he crouches on his knees in a distinct prefiguring of the novel’s final scene when he crouches on the road crying: “[H]e watched his breath appear and vanish and appear and vanish constantly before him in the cold and he waited a long time. Then he saw them coming. Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their

noses in the snow” (4). Billy seems to feel a connection to the wolves so intense and personal that he does not share the occurrence with anyone. Perhaps his appreciation for the wolves compels his later decision to free the she-wolf that he traps.

The second encounter occurs when Billy and Boyd run into an Indian who demands that the boys bring him food later that night. Though Billy brings him food, he does not return with the rifle shells the Indian requests. One of the most important characteristics the reader learns about Billy in this encounter is his willingness to bring the Indian supper, though the source of this willingness remains ambiguous:

How come you're lookin back? said Boyd.

I just am.

Are we goin to carry him some supper?

Yes. We can do that I reckon.

Everything you can do it dont mean that it's a good idea, said
Boyd.

I know it. (8-9)

Thus, Billy's choice to visit the Indian reveals a trait beyond a sense of compassion, obligation, or fear; it is not quite curiosity as much as a somewhat passive willingness to encounter the stranger. Throughout the novel, Billy's character sustains this willingness to interact with strangers.

Frequently, these strangers express their worldviews through stories. Billy meets an old priest who expresses the intricate role of the storyteller that cannot help but call to mind the incessantly retold tale of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's ancient mariner.²

The task of the narrator is not an easy one, he said. He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one. Always the teller must be at pains to devise against his listener's claim—perhaps spoken, perhaps not—that he has heard the tale before. He sets forth the categories into which the listener will wish to fit the narrative as he hears it. But he understands that the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside its purview. All is telling. Do not doubt it. (155)

The priest not only proclaims the power of narrative to move the listener; he also expands narrative to encompass the world. Here one might return to Patrick Shaw's notion that the meaning of narrative is "revealed only by the traces left" when the text vanishes as it returns to nothing (258). If indeed "[a]ll is telling" then the assessment of what does not vanish becomes highly convoluted (155). Storytelling might serve as the primary lens through which one may begin to understand the truths of the world. Mark Busby points out that the old priest's "belief in the power of storytelling seems the closest statement of McCarthy's own aesthetics in all of his works, a defense of the charges against his tales of violence and blood, of his repetition" (239). This notion elevates storytelling as a means of conveying truth, or at the very least conveying what the storyteller understands as truth. Throughout the novel, strangers tell Parham stories embedded with profound statements concerning the nature of God, justice, reality and even the journey itself.

In his article "McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of *The Crossing*," Edwin T. Arnold states that the title of *The Crossing* suggests that McCarthy assembles the various

journeys undertaken by Billy “into one inclusive movement” that involves “a concern greater than geographical or cultural passage” (216). One theme that unites Parham’s three journeys into Mexico is the appearance and subsequent vanishing of these strangers who offer advice to Parham. Luce distinguishes the priest, the blind revolutionary, and the gypsy as the characters whose stories constitute the longest tales in the novel; Luce points out that these tales “create eddies in the flow of his own tale, still pools in which the forward course of his own life lulls and he becomes audience to other lives parallel and tangential to his own” (195-96). Interestingly, the blind man’s explanation of his narrative might just as easily apply to the novel itself. In response to Billy’s question as to why he only met three people on the road to Parral, the blind man responds “that he did meet other people on that road [. . .] but that the three strangers at issue were those with whom he spoke of his blindness and that they must therefore be the principals in a cuento whose hero was a blind man, whose subject was sight” (285). Thus, the hero of *The Crossing* is a young boy on a journey; the blind man, the priest, and the gypsy each discuss a journey they have undergone with Billy.

One of Parham’s early dreams might foreshadow the strangers that enter his life:

He’d had a dream and in the dream a messenger had come in off the plains from the south with something writ upon a ledgerscrap but he could not read it. He looked at the messenger but that face was obscured in shadow and featureless and he knew that the messenger was a messenger alone and could tell him nothing of the news he bore. (83)

Perhaps the messenger of the dream prefigures the messenger of the priest’s story: “He was a bearer of messages. He carried a satchel of leather and canvas secured with a lock.

He had no way to know what the messages said nor had he any curiosity concerning them” (147). The messenger of the priest’s story lacks curiosity about the messages because “[h]e believed that in the world was another agenda, another order, and with this power lay whatever brief he may have held” (147). The messenger in Billy’s dream and the messenger in the priest’s story (whom the priest reveals as the man who sat under the ruins of the church in Caborca) do not have the power to narrate the messages they carry.³ The strangers Billy meets have not lost this ability. A closer look at the stranger’s stories will help flesh out the worldviews expressed in each.

Parham’s first journey begins when he decides to return the she-wolf to the mountains of Mexico. Parham’s statement echoes John Grady Cole’s when he decides to return to Mexico for his horse in *All the Pretty Horses*: “The hell with it, he said. I aint leavin my horse down there” (257). Parham’s utterance: “Just damn all of it” conveys the same seemingly flippant resolution (*The Crossing* 63). However, these two decisions actually have profound effects on each of the young men’s lives. As discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, Cole’s return provides an opportunity for him to test his principles under extreme pressure. Parham’s choice to leave his home in New Mexico marks the moment when he begins a circular journey that will play out three times and ultimately claim the life of the wolf and his brother.

Once in Mexico the wolf is forced to undergo a marathon of dog-fights. Billy (after attempting to reclaim the wolf) shoots her rather than let her die in battle.⁴ After burying the wolf, Parham travels through Mexico and eventually encounters the former priest in the deserted town of Huisiachepic. The priest tells Parham a story that outlines his definition of the world:

Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes. Of a certain size and color. A certain weight. When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer have even a name. The story on the other hand can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place. [. . .] And like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one to tell. (142-43)

Considering the priest's understanding of story, one might interpret Parham's question "What is the story?" as an ambiguous one. Is Billy asking about the essential one story, or does he want to hear the specific story of the priest? The priest might answer that they are the same story: "Rightly heard all tales are one" (143). The priest's story concerns a man who lived under the ruined arch of the church of La Púisima Concepción de Neustra Señora de Caborca. The final lines of the story represent the clearest expression of the priest's worldview: "What the priest saw at last was that the lesson of a life can never be its own. Only the witness has power to take its measure. It is lived for the other only" (158). Parham's final moments with the body of the wolf might inform this notion that a life is lived for another. Arnold points out that after the wolf dies, Parham gains an understanding of the other world that she exists in, the world that is hinted at earlier in the novel by Don Arnulfo (220-21).⁵ The notion that Billy is a witness to the stories and lives of others that he meets along his journey is essential to the understanding that his journey is more important than any preconceived destination he might begin that journey with. An observation by David Holloway in his book *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* contributes to the interpretation of Billy as a witness from the beginning of the novel. Holloway points out that the focus on Boyd in the opening pages implies that the

novel will consist of the story of Boyd's life and Billy will only serve as witness to that life (30). Parham's next journey places him alongside Boyd and allows yet another opportunity to consider the priest's notion that life is lived only for the other. Indeed Boyd's life seems lived for many others since his story is preserved not as a factual rendition of events, but rather as the tale of a legendary young hero in the *corridos* of the country.

After returning to New Mexico, Parham discovers that the Indian he encountered earlier in the novel has killed his parents and slit his dog's throat. He finds Boyd and they set off for Mexico (with the now silent but alive dog) to reclaim his father's horses.⁶ On this journey fraught with unexpected encounters and violence, Billy and Boyd's search for their father's horses ranges from an easy retrieval of one from a German doctor to forcibly reclaiming others from a band of *caballeros* only to lose most of them again. The *caballeros* end up shooting Boyd and during the chase the brothers rely on a group of workers traveling down the road. The workers take Boyd into the bed of their truck and Billy rides on. Significantly, Boyd and Billy's journey, like Cole and Rawlins' journey, is not what they expected. Their goal is not reached; nevertheless the journey remains a valuable means for Billy to gain a greater understanding of himself. For instance, once Billy and Boyd are separated, Billy seeks solace through stories (274).⁷ It is interesting that Billy consoles the horse, and certainly himself, with stories; this aspect of his character might indicate that Billy is not only willing to witness others' stories, but he also appreciates their tales. Soon after seeking solace in storytelling, he finds himself in the home of another stranger whose companion tells his tragic story.

The stranger is a former freedom-fighter whose wife tells Parham the story of his blinding during the revolution and how the two of them met.⁸ A German commander named Wirtz declared that the revolutionaries were fools to “die for a cause that was both wrong and doomed” and, feigning a kiss, sucks out his eyes (276). For the priest his world as defined by the principles of his priesthood vanished when he realized that there could be no witness for God’s existence. For the blind man the world he knew literally vanished: “[T]he eyes dried on his cheeks like grapes and the world grew dim and colorless and then it vanished forever” (277). Several parallels might be seen between the man in the priest’s story and the blind man. Both the man the priest encounters beneath the church ruins and the blind man have been spared death while others around them have died a violent death. Even actions which tempt death (the man’s decision to live beneath a crumbling church and the blind man’s attempt to drown himself) are unsuccessful. Like the man beneath the church ruins, the blind man is isolated from society. McCarthy’s tendency to repeat certain details links the stranger’s stories and enhances the notion that all tales are in fact one.

The woman tells Parham of her husband’s encounters as a newly-blind man traveling through the world. One of the blind man’s worldviews seems particularly relevant to Parham’s condition: “He said that like every man who comes to the end of something there was nothing to be done but to begin again” (291). Then he states that for the blind, “[o]rigins and destinations became but rumors” (291). As the novel progresses, a pattern emerges concerning Parham’s attempts to set the world right. Parham’s trips are “doomed enterprises” since he never achieves his goal (129). His attempt to return the wolf to Mexico ends with her death at his own hand; his attempt to reclaim his

father's horses proves disastrous. As Billy points out, the only time he gets what he came for occurs during his third journey to Mexico, but it is still not what he wanted (416). This pattern of setting out on a journey with a specific goal in mind and then failing to reach that goal supports the notion that the goal is futile. The journey is not dictated by this goal. Also, the repetition of this pattern contributes to the idea that Parham's journeys are circular.

Billy's circular journeys continue when Boyd heals and disappears with a young unnamed Mexican girl. Billy returns to the U.S. and unsuccessfully tries to join the World War II war effort. After working under various ranch outfits, he decides to return to Mexico in search of his brother. He discovers that Boyd has died and become a hero for the revolution whose embellished story is retold through the *corridos* of the countryside. Significantly, Boyd is remembered through story adding one more layer to the stories of others that Billy hears. In his book *Cormac McCarthy*, Robert Jarrett provides an intriguing interpretation of the *corridos* surrounding Boyd's life in Mexico. According to Jarrett, Parham is aware of the "inadequacy of his own code" that compels him to begin again and return to Mexico; however, he continues his repeated journeys into the country (102-3). Thus, there is a discrepancy between what Billy expects and what actually happens. Jarrett proposes that the *corridos* suggest a similar disjunction: "The contrast between the reality of Boyd's life and his romantic identity in the ballad mirrors that between the Billy who enacts the role of cowboy hero and the confused boy who wanders in and out of Mexico" (104).

On Parham's return trip to New Mexico with Boyd's body a band of robbers assail Billy and stab Niño (the horse that belonged to his father). A group of gypsies

hauling an aged airplane (that bares a distinct resemblance to Boyd's remains) treat his horse, and their leader is the third stranger who tells Parham a story. Similar to the link between the priest's and the blind man's stories, the gypsy's story calls to mind the blind man's tale through subtle details. The gypsy's story includes an account of a drowned body while the blind man tells Billy that he once tried to drown himself. The blind man calls into question physical reality stating that his blindness is a blessing: "[H]e said that because what can be touched falls into dust there can be no mistaking these things for the real. At best they are only tracings of where the real has been" (294). The gypsy also questions reality, but he questions the nature of the history of an object stating that the plane he hauls has three histories (403). Like the priest's earlier statement on the importance of narrative, the gypsy seems to center meaning on story:

He spoke of the identity of the little canvas biplane as having no meaning except in its history [. . .]. He said that men assume the truth of a thing to reside in that thing without regard to the opinions of those beholding it while that which is fraudulent is held to be so no matter how closely it might duplicate the required appearance. [. . .] One could even say that what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated. Yet wherein does that history lie? (405).

The implication is that there is no simple answer to the gypsy's question. The gypsy's story of the plane is soon refuted by a solitary rider Billy meets after the band leaves his camp. This man dismisses the gypsy's epic story of the plane being carried down from the mountains and along the Papigochic River and states that it came from a barn in Flores Magón. Thus, the man adds yet another version of the plane's history to the story

of the aircraft. Perhaps the point of the gypsy's story is simply to call into question whether or not a single true story exists for any thing or person while simultaneously asserting that meaning is born out of the complex stories concerning that person or object. Interestingly, Parham's encounter with the solitary man following the gypsy's caravan constitutes the moment when Parham tells his own story.

Dianne Luce points out that Parham initially tells his story to Boyd in the opening lines of the novel; she cites this event as an "innate capacity for narrating the world" (211). Luce also notes that this ability to participate in narration is never fully restored in the novel (211). In fact, Luce surmises that the result of Billy's journey is a virtually irreparable damage to his spirit: "*The Crossing* is the story of a boy who discovers too early and too crushingly what cannot be held and whose spirit suffers a grievous wound" (211). Along these same lines, Susan Kollin in "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western" writes: "*The Crossing* shows the cowboy's life as lonely and isolated. Billy Parham never manages to connect with other people in the text" (577). However, one might interpret Billy's short narration of his family's history as his attempt through storytelling to reclaim that part of himself that has the capacity to narrate a story. Perhaps the isolation that Kollin recognizes drives Billy to try to articulate his life, to tell his story to the rider. Unlike the stories of the three strangers, his story is largely devoid of any profound assessment of life or the reality of the world. Nevertheless, Parham, like the storytelling strangers, is participating for a moment in what Luce calls "the vast matrix" of the world's story (211). Parham strips his story to its bare bones only recounting specific facts concerning his families' deaths and the states from which they originated. Towards the end of his brief family tree he

seems to slip into sentimentality as he remembers his younger sister, Boyd's twin: "I went to Fort Sumner to try to find her grave but I couldn't find it. Her name was Margaret. I always liked that name for a girl. If I ever had a girl that's what I'd name her" (419). Margaret is the only family member he names, perhaps in an attempt to emphasize her importance to him and the fact that her story lives on in him: "I remember her just as plain" (419). Billy's sharing of his story is cut short when the man responds that he must leave. Since Parham has not opened up to any of the people he has met on his journeys, one might see his motivation in telling his story as an attempt to connect in some way with the man. Though the man does seem to genuinely wish him well, Billy is unable to connect truly with him by sharing his story.

That Billy wants to connect is, perhaps, made clear by the novel's final scene. After violently chasing a stray dog from the building he takes shelter in for the night, Billy is woken up by a bright light that many critics have cited as the first Atomic Bomb test in Trinity, New Mexico.⁹ Lit by the fading, artificial light out of the north, Billy's country now seems alien to him and he calls out for the very dog that hours earlier he drove away (425). The dog never returns, and the novel ends when the sun rises in the East; like the blind man's wife feeding the blackbirds "without discrimination" (294), the true sun rises "for all and without distinction" (426).

Throughout his numerous circular journeys that send him returning time and again to Mexico, Parham's character has acted as witness to the stories of numerous strangers. Three of these strangers in particular discuss their personal journeys with Billy. Several unifying themes link the three stories such as the importance of storytelling and the evasive nature of the definition of the world that the storyteller seeks

to express. The truths of the world, as interpreted by the storytellers, might initially seem pessimistic and violent. However, each storyteller also conveys a sense of contentment and certainty with his worldview. Busby has described McCarthy's interweaving of the good and evil in the world as "nihilistic optimism" (227). In "The Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction," Arnold asserts that one should not confine McCarthy to the label of nihilist: "We often make of individual texts what we like, but each is a part of the larger mosaic, and the pattern of McCarthy's mosaic, to my eyes, is complex, profound, significant, and deeply moving" (51). Arnold moves even further away from nihilism in his interpretation of the second novel in the Border Trilogy: "*The Crossing* is surely a story of heart, of the need for compassion, charity, and fellowship in such an uncertain world" ("McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of *The Crossing*" 230). Indeed a final look at the three stories reveals that each contains a somewhat positive note.

The priest, after questioning God's existence, concludes his story with a sense of closure since he has finally realized that though there can be no witness to God's existence, He does not need this witness to exist. Furthermore, he seems content with his belief that the true reality rests in God's grace: "In the end we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his grace" (158). As I stated earlier, the blind man tells Billy that he considers his blindness a blessing since it allows him to discern the falseness of this world; through blindness he awakens to the truth of the world:

[W]hat can be touched falls into dust there can be no mistaking these things for the real. At best they are only tracings of where the real has

been. Perhaps they are not even that. Perhaps they are no more than obstacles to be negotiated in the ultimate sightlessness of the world (294).

Finally, the gypsy's concluding words distinctly echo the blind man's notion that the truth of the world exists outside of man's understanding of reality: "He [the gypsy's father] said that what men do not understand is that what the dead have quit is itself no world but is also only the picture of the world in men's hearts. He said that the world cannot be quit for it is eternal in whatever form as are all things within it" (414). As the gypsy leaves, Billy denies that he is a man of the road; the gypsy responds by smiling and affirming Billy's status as a man of the road by stating that "on the road there were no special cases" (414). Thus, the gypsy feels camaraderie towards Billy as a fellow traveler. Each of the travelers expresses a sense not necessarily that at its heart life is good as much as a notion that the heart of life exists and that they have witnessed it.

Parham's final act might be interpreted as tragic since he indeed is left alone on a seemingly ceaseless journey. As Kenneth Lincoln writes, Billy weeps "for the road itself, all lonesome travelers as one without end or home. He wanders his own endless path among men journeying to a new day, another step somewhere, more sorrow and witness and pain" (116). However, one might also interpret his tears as testimony that he has been moved to feel a profound connection to something. For the dog and his own isolation he weeps and in this weeping, perhaps, claims his humanity. Parham's journeys and the stories he hears along the way contribute to this final act of expressing his humanity, which might be interpreted as evidence that his journey taught him that he wants to connect to the world. Luce considers Billy's choice to call the dog back to him

as “a small sign that his capacity for life and the right valuing of it has not been utterly extinguished” (212).¹⁰

In the final book of the trilogy, McCarthy revisits the themes of the importance of storytelling to Parham’s attempts to connect to others and Cole’s adherence to principles. *Cities of the Plain* continues the idea of Parham as a man who has trouble connecting. Cole’s iron-clad adherence to his principles once again casts him as the love-struck hero willing to die for his sense of right and wrong. Each man returns to Mexico, and each one’s circular journey reaches a deeper level with the introduction of death as a moment when life returns to its beginning.

NOTES

1. In his review of the novel, Peter Davies notes this alternate narrative. Davies writes that the strangers' long stories make "the book at times feels like a cross between a Mexican Canterbury Tales and a western Odyssey" (219).

2. In Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the mariner is moved to speak his tale to certain people (in the poem the person is a wedding guest). Like the old priest's assessment of the narrator's role as one that teaches something to the listener, the mariner is also compelled to teach certain individuals:

I have strange power of speech;

That moment that his face I see,

I know the man that must hear me:

To him my tale I teach. (lines 586-90)

3. The priest describes men who have lost this ability to narrate: "That which speaks in us one to another and is beyond our words or beyond the lifting or the turning of a hand to say that this is the way my heart is, or this. That thing was lost in him" (146).

4. In an early draft of *The Crossing*, Parham does not shoot the wolf. There is no mention of the two Airedales, and Billy waits until the dog fights end to claim the wolf for a fee. Billy returns to a barn with the wolf and tends her wounds, and then he travels with her to a creek. Along the way he sings to her as he will sing to his horse in the published version of the novel: "He rode by the light of the stars and sang to the wolf and

he sang to the wolf in spanish [sic] a sad corrido [sic] about the death of a brave soldadera who took up her fallen husband's gun and faced the enemy alone in a waste of death" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos). Rather than shooting the wolf, Billy sits with her as she dies: "Her legs ran slowly in the leaves and he held his hand against her heart and her heart beat and then it did not beat and that was all" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos). The change raises a number of issues. First of all, Billy's shooting of the wolf emphasizes how dire her situation is as she prepares to face the Airedales. Second, Parham's violent act against the wolf is performed out of mercy; this act stands in contrast to the endless series of violent acts that other men have instigated toward her out of greed, sport, and entertainment. Finally, the change might also help to emphasize the strong sense of protection Billy feels toward the wolf. Simply waiting until the dog fights end to collect an injured wolf is much more passive than Billy's act of stepping into the ring and shooting the wolf to stop the fights himself.

5. Don Arnulfo tells Billy that the essential wolf cannot be caught since it is like a snowflake: "If you catch it you lose it. And where it goes there is no coming back from" (46). Don Arnulfo goes on to explain that "[t]he wolf is made like the world is made. You cannot touch the world. You cannot hold it in your hand for it is made of breath only" (46). For further discussion of this other world see S.K. Robisch's "The Trapper Mystic: Werewolves in *The Crossing*" and Mark Busby's "Into the Darkening Land, the World to Come: Cormac McCarthy's Border Crossings."

6. As Billy begins his journey with Boyd certain similarities to his journey with the wolf emerge. Like the wolf's lack of a choice to return to Mexico, as far as Billy is concerned Boyd has no say in the venture either. Parham tells the sheriff his intentions:

First thing I got to do is go get Boyd.

Go get Boyd?

Yessir.

Boyd aint goin nowhere.

If I am he is. (169)

Incidentally, Boyd seems willing enough to go with Billy, responding to his question about whether or not he is ready to go: "Just waitin on you" (171). Another significant similarity is the fact that both Boyd and the she-wolf die in Mexico.

7. "The horse faltered behind him and he dropped back and took hold of the bridle cheekstrap and walked beside the horse and talked to it. The horse so crusted with white salt rime it shone like some prodigy embarked upon the darkening plain. When he'd said all he knew how to say he told it stories. He told it stories in spanish [sic] that his grandmother had told him as a child and when he'd told all of those that he could remember he sang to it." (274).

8. For more on the revolution in *The Crossing* see John Wegner's essay "'Mexico para los Mexicanos': Revolution, Mexico, and McCarthy's Border Trilogy." Wegner considers the entire Trilogy, but he notes that in the second novel "the resonance of the revolution is most apparent" (250).

9. Dianne Luce in "The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*," Mark Busby "Into the Darkening Land, the World to Come: Cormac

McCarthy's Border Crossings," Susan Kollin "Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western."

10. However, Luce goes on to conclude that the final image of Billy kneeling on the road indicates an ambiguous image of "defeat" or "supplication" (212). Luce suggests that the concluding image of the rising sun conveys the message that the world's tale will continue to unfold despite man's destructive nature (212).

CHAPTER 4

“Otra vez”:

McCarthy’s Final Round of Journeys for Billy Parham and John Grady Cole

The first scene of *Cities of the Plain* seems a long-awaited fulfillment of the reader’s natural desire to see the two heroes of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy interact. Unlike the first two novels, the story begins in Mexico; the novel opens with John Grady Cole and Billy Parham in a whorehouse in Juárez. Throughout his essay “Cormac McCarthy’s Sense of Ending: Serialized Narrative and Revision in *Cities of the Plain*,” Robert Jarrett considers how the final novel rewrites the first two novels. Thus, similar to the ordering of another round of drinks, the third novel offers another round of narrative strikingly similar to the first two novels: *Cities of the Plain* repeats the plot of *All the Pretty Horses*, and the Epilogue presents an enigmatic storyteller who tells Parham a story loaded with philosophical ruminations on death, dreams, the journey and time. The similarities between the plot of the final novel and the plots of the first two are numerous. Cole’s intense interest in the young prostitute Magdalena reminds the reader of his love for Alejandra. His dedication to her and desire to rescue her from the tyranny Cole sees represented by her pimp Eduardo also hints at Boyd’s attachment to the young girl in *The Crossing*. Parham once again bears witness, this time to Cole’s exploits and ultimately his death. Returning once again to Patrick Shaw’s insistence that one should look to what is left in the vanishing, beyond these repetitions of plot one may discern a clearer

understanding of Cole's and Parham's characters. *Cities of the Plain* offers more for the reader than a simple repeated portrayal of the two young men from the previous novels. The final story of Parham and Cole provides the reader with a narrative interwoven with each character's distinct perspectives to create a novel that—despite its repetitions of theme, plot, and character—emerges as a unique and final assessment of the world and Parham's and Cole's journeys through it.

All the Pretty Horses may have left the reader with a somewhat ambiguous notion of Cole as a man who is willing to die for his love and his principles. In *Cities of the Plain*, Cole's adherence to principles emerges, without a doubt, as his defining characteristic ultimately leading to his death. *The Crossing* may have left one with a convoluted notion of Parham as a man whose willingness to witness strangers' stories emerges from his desire to connect both to the world and to his fellow man; the notion that this desire might not be fulfilled is only implied by the final scene, which depicts Parham sobbing and alone. *Cities of the Plain*, particularly the Epilogue, reaffirms this notion that Parham is a man who may never fully connect to the world, but may never lose his desire to feel this connection. Initially, Parham and Cole seem, at least in part, to have found what they searched for in the previous two novels. Cole works on a ranch in New Mexico near the Texas border and spends his days fulfilling his dream of the cowboy life. Parham seems to have found a community at this ranch and even a replacement for his younger brother in Cole. Their journeys into Mexico and back to the ranch are smaller in range compared to the vast expanses each traveled in the first two novels. The twin cities referred to in the title associate El Paso and its sister city Juárez with the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Linking the cities to places of infamous

debauchery might emphasize the shifted reasons Cole and Parham now cross the border. Rather than seeking an open country that would allow a man to live freely, or setting out on a quest to retrieve a father's horses or find a brother, the two young men now cross the border to drink and visit prostitutes and then return. As John Cant points out, Cole and Parham are more familiar with the Mexico they cross over to: "[T]his later more 'modern' crossing sees the young men exploiting a culture of cheap whiskey and prostitutes that they understand only too well and with which they are complicit" (217).¹ Perhaps McCarthy's choice to limit their crossings is a means of marking the conclusion of the series. In his essay "Thematic Motifs in *Cities of the Plain*," Barclay Owens points out that "[b]y restricting the narrative to Mac's ranch and Juárez, McCarthy has come full circle: the end of the trail is the beginning" (111).² According to Owens the lesson one should take away from the Trilogy is that the dreams of youth are only an illusion, the reality is that Mexico and the Old West are violent places where American idealistic dreams rarely if ever become reality (111).³

As Mark Busby writes, the final book of the trilogy represents "like the other ones, a tragicomic examination of the twists and turns along life's journey" (245). Indeed Cole's and Parham's experiences in *Cities of the Plain* support the notion that a focus on the journey itself, rather than the destination, enhances one's understanding of the novel. Many of the turns on Cole's journey seem to return him to situations he has encountered earlier in his life. In the first novel, the reader learns of Cole's dedication to upholding his principles. As Robert Jarrett points out, in *Cities of the Plain* he is able to "reenact compulsively his role in *All the Pretty Horses* as romantic hero and last cowboy" ("Cormac McCarthy's Sense of an Ending: Serialized Narrative and Revision in *Cities of*

the Plain" 329). The main text of *Cities of the Plain* revolves around the final months of Cole's life. His journey only ends when he meets death. The Epilogue focuses largely on a day in what one may assume are the final years in Parham's life. Parham encounters a "deathlike traveler" (Busby 247). The choice to conclude their journeys with death, or the contemplation of death, introduces the notion that one may interpret death as the final end to life's journey. And death, like the time before birth, constitutes a circling back to the ultimate unknown. As the narrative progresses towards this final encounter with death, elements from the previous two novels emerge for another round. A closer look at certain recurrent elements enhances and expands the reader's understanding of Cole and Parham.

Cole's relationship with horses represents one element that reappears in the third novel. As in *All the Pretty Horses*, Cole's uncanny ability to break a horse, select good horses, and be honest in all matters concerning horses makes him an important asset for his boss. Mac McGovern replaces Senõr Rocha as Cole's boss in *Cities of the Plain*. As stated earlier in this thesis, in the first novel of the Trilogy Cole's respect for horses may be rooted in his affection for them as creatures that, unlike man, do not waver.⁴ Timothy P. Caron writes in his essay "Blood is Blood: *All the Pretty Horses* in a Multicultural Literature Class" that Cole's admiration of horses in the first novel is linked to his adherence to principles: "Cole's strength of character derives from his love of horses. For him, the horse embodies all that is good and noble within this world" (165). Cole's attitude toward horses in the third novel extends this notion that he bases his connection to horses on a deep respect for the animal. For instance, when a man brings a lame filly to the ranch Cole denies the man's request to train her since the crack in her hoof has

been disguised (*Cities of the Plain* 45-7). Repeatedly Cole refuses to have anything to do with the man or the horse since agreeing to go along with the deception would be dishonest (45-7). Perhaps Cole would feel dishonest toward the filly if he agreed to train her despite her cracked heel. As Cole tells Billy later in the novel, a horse understands the truth from a lie because it can sense what is in a man's heart; Billy agrees (84). The result of the reappearance of horses in Cole's story reaffirms the respect for the animal developed throughout *All the Pretty Horses*.

Billy also experiences a respect and connection to a particular animal. In *The Crossing* Billy attempts to return a she-wolf to Mexico because he feels a sense of responsibility toward the animal. Although the wolf preys on livestock and Billy and his father trap her with the intention of killing her, Billy tries to save her. During his journey to Mexico his connection to the wolf develops. In *Cities of the Plain* a pack of wild dogs kill livestock. Certainly the notion of wild dogs killing livestock calls to mind the she-wolf. However, Billy does not feel the sort of responsibility for the dogs that he felt for the she-wolf. The lengthy and methodic passages of preparing traps, muzzling the wolf, and traveling with her across the countryside are absent from the dog-hunt in *Cities of the Plain*. Rather the challenge of tracking down the animals killing livestock in the third novel emerges as a tribute to the camaraderie between the cowboys on the ranch. Throughout the slaughter of the dogs, the ranch hands work together to kill the dogs and seem to have fun as they ride down the pack. For instance, towards the end of the hunt Cole and Parham each rope the same dog and end up decapitating the yellow beast:

Ayee muchachos, called Joaquín. He whooped and laughed and leaned and hazed his hat at the heeling dogs.

Damn, said Billy. I didn't know you was goin to do that.

I didn't either.

Son of a bitch. He hauled his rope toward him, coiling it as it came. (167-68)

One of the dogs killed has recently had a litter of puppies. Cole feels a responsibility to rescue these pups and he convinces Billy to help him find the den. Interestingly, Billy's she-wolf was also carrying a litter of puppies that died with her. Thus, one might interpret a litter of pups as a recurrent element. Perhaps the two men's rescue of the pups stands as a contrast to the wolf's pups burial with their mother. One might interpret the death of the wolf's litter as a way to emphasize the sense of loss that Billy experiences when his journey to return the wolf to her homeland fails. In the third novel, the litter serves as a way to underscore the intimate friendship between Billy and John Grady. Similar to their ability to work together to kill the wild dogs, the two friends work together to rescue the pups. Cole decides to keep a pup and chooses one that huddled in the corner near the dead runt of the litter and resisted the two young men's attempts to pull him from the den. Cole's affection for this pup is perhaps sourced in its stubbornness—a trait Cole shares since he too stubbornly adheres to his principles. The most significant scene with Cole's dog occurs when Billy rides away from the ranch after Cole's death with the dog in his saddle. This intimate scene stands in contrast to Billy's violent reaction to the dog in the final scenes of *The Crossing*.⁵ It seems Billy enjoys a delayed connection to a dog, a connection that he might have longed for when he called out to the stray in the second novel.⁶ However, like so much in *Cities of the Plain* the

fulfillment of this unrealized desire from the previous novel is tinged with melancholy: Billy rides away with the dog only because his friend has died.

Another recurrent element that originally appeared in *The Crossing* is the blind maestro who befriends Cole. The blind musician and his young daughter call to mind the blind freedom fighter who also had a young woman as his companion. However, this incarnation of a blind man in the third novel is different since he does not simply drift into Cole's life and disappear as the strangers do in *The Crossing*. Though he is reluctant to get involved in Cole's attempt to marry Magdalena, the maestro warns Cole that he and Magdalena will likely be killed by Eduardo (*Cities of the Plain* 196-97). However, he also contradictorily tells Cole to follow his heart: "A man is always right to pursue the thing he loves" (199). Charles Bailey points out that Mr. Johnson advises Cole similarly and Mac McGovern's offer of his wife's old wedding ring seems to encourage the same message (296-97). Throughout his attempt to marry Magdalena, Cole will consistently define himself by his principle of following his heart.

Perhaps the most significant recurrent element from the first novel is Cole's love for Magdalena. As Billy puts it: "It's just the old story all over again. Losin your head over a piece of tail" (136).⁷ Billy's statement might simultaneously refer to Cole and Billy's younger brother Boyd, who ran away with a young Mexican girl in *The Crossing*. However, in the second novel, Billy seems more reluctant to offer Boyd advice regarding his growing affection for the young girl. After his experience with Boyd's ill-fated love, Billy is more cynical. Barclay Owens also notes a change in Billy's character. In *The Crossing*, Billy willingly crosses into Mexico to return a wolf, retrieve stolen horses, and locate his brother. However, the older Billy of the third novel appears hesitant to

advocate border-crossings in pursuit of somewhat idealistic goals. Owens writes: “[. . .] Billy has outgrown his youthful, naïve attraction to Mexico’s romantic possibilities” (98). Not only his age but his experiences along his journeys into Mexico inform the man he has become. Billy, like Cole, did not find what he was looking for when he reached his destination. The journey shapes his character. Unlike the jaded Billy, Cole’s journey only strengthens his dedication to his principles. Owens writes:

Throughout the Border Trilogy, the existential, Adamic hero never takes the path of least resistance. Instead, he behaves according to the unyielding ethics required in the cowboy’s code of honor, in which a man is expected to act spontaneously from the heart while stubbornly ignoring all-too-certain ramifications of the deed. (98)

From the opening scene Cole’s intense interest in the young epileptic prostitute echoes his ardent pursuit of Alejandra. Like Alejandra, Magdalena and Cole meet in secret, though only a handful of times. Both women possess a similar physical beauty, but their social statuses are opposite.⁸ Alejandra is an aristocrat, while Magdalena occupies the lower rungs of society.⁹ Perhaps the most significant change from Cole’s first love interest is Magdalena’s consent to run away with him. Unlike Alejandra’s love for her father, Magdalena has little holding her to life as a prostitute. Importantly, Magdalena’s willingness to marry John Grady seems to ensure that one dream, unrealized in *All the Pretty Horses*, will come to fruition. The potential of a happy ending only magnifies the final tragic conclusion of the affair. Cole’s determination to rescue Magdalena from the brothel enhances his dedication to his principles and his willingness

to die for the woman he loves. Unlike his failure to act out against Blevins' death, along his journey Cole has become a man who does not waver from what he believes is right.

The two lovers share a similar dedication to goals that seem unreachable.¹⁰ Even as her situation seems hopeless, Magdalena remains optimistic or, perhaps, naïve to her circumstances: If she attempts to leave the whorehouse, Eduardo will kill her or have her killed. For instance, when the cab driver comes to pick her up, he is not the man she expects. After hesitating, she agrees to go with him. Even after a vision of her death she desperately clings to some hope that she can escape her situation: "She asked the driver if they were to cross here to the other side and he said yes. He said that she would be going to the other side now" (225). Of course, the other side that the driver refers to is the death that awaits her at the hands of Eduardo's thug Tiburcio.

Cole's reaction to Magdalena's death emphasizes his dedication to his principles. His adherence to principles does not allow him to quit despite the odds stacked against him. In a conversation with Billy, Cole reveals this belief:

There's a difference between quittin and knowin when you're beat.

John Grady nodded.

I guess you dont believe that. Do you?

John Grady studied the mountains. No, he said. I guess I don't. (218)

The notion that quitting is the same as knowing when you are beaten might call to mind Magdalena's final moments and indeed the entirety of her attempt to run away with Cole. She continues in her attempt to cross to the U.S. despite the overwhelming obstacles she faces. Cole's reaction to her death affirms his status as a man who follows his principles and drives him to confront Eduardo, a decision that results in his own death.

As Robert Jarrett points out, the character Eduardo combines elements of the aristocratic Rocha and the opponent Cole fights in the Saltillo prison: “Eduardo, in his dandyism, prefigures the hacendado of *All the Pretty Horses* and, at the same time doubles the *cuchillero* who gives Cole his initial wound in *All the Pretty Horses*” (“Cormac McCarthy’s Sense of an Ending: Seralized Narrative and Revision in *Cities of the Plain*” 326). Rocha represents a threat whose actions might inadvertently lead to death.¹¹ The contrast between Eduardo and Rocha is interesting. Though Rocha represents a formidable obstacle because of his position as Cole’s boss and his social status, his attitude toward Cole seems more similar to Mac’s: each man invites Cole into his home to play a game, and Mac, like Rocha, deeply trusts John Grady’s assessment of horses. The stand-off with Eduardo is more dangerous than Cole’s stand off with Rocha since Eduardo will kill John Grady himself almost without a second thought.

Though the majority of the scenes with Eduardo focus on Cole as his opponent, a brief exchange between the pimp and Billy reveals another aspect of Billy’s character that has changed from the previous novel. Eduardo recognizes that Cole is caught up in a passion, but this recognition does not lead to any sympathy for the young man. When Billy goes to Eduardo to present Cole’s offer to pay off Magdalena’s debt to him, their conversation recalls Billy’s encounters with the gypsy and the priest in *The Crossing*:

Your friend is in the grip of an irrational passion. Nothing you say to him will matter. He has in his head a certain story. Of how things will be. In this story he will be happy. What is wrong with this story?

You tell me.

What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story. Men have a picture of how the world will be. [. . .] The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of. Do you believe that? (134)

Billy confirms that he believes it but states that he feels it is a “betrayal of some kind” to admit this despite the fact that it is the truth (134). Significantly, Billy’s confession marks a moment in his journey when he finally admits his own understanding of the world. Throughout *The Crossing*, Billy meets strangers and simply witnesses their stories. Perhaps Billy’s declaration of his belief that the world that men dream of is not necessarily how the world is reveals that his encounters with strangers have changed him. His beliefs have also been shaped by his experiences along his journey.

Cole’s fight in the Saltillo prison is one experience along his journey that certainly informs his fight with Eduardo. The knife fight between Eduardo and Cole might be interpreted as a replay of the knife fight Cole has in the Saltillo prison. In each fight Cole is the less experienced fighter, though each time he also delivers a final fatal blow to his opponent.¹² The language used to describe this fatal blow enhances the contrast between what Bailey termed the “courtly romance” (294) of *All the Pretty Horses* and the brute reality of the fight in *Cities of the Plain*. For example, in the first novel the wound that Cole inflicts on the *cuchillero* is described as a “red boutonniere blossoming on the left pocket of his blue workshirt” (201). Eduardo’s fatal wound is written in much harsher terms: “The handle of the hunting knife jutted from the underside of his jaw. He reached and touched it. His mouth was clenched in a grimace. His jaw was nailed to his upper skull and he held the handle in both hands as if he would remove

it but he did not” (*Cities of the Plain* 254). In *All the Pretty Horses*, Cole receives help directly after the fight. However, in *Cities of the Plain* Cole’s only relief comes hours after the fight when a young boy agrees to hide him and find Billy. As stated in chapter two of this thesis, the knife fight in the Saltillo prison represents a moment when Cole is truly willing to die for his principles. In *Cities of the Plain* Cole again is faced with this confrontation; his death firmly establishes the notion that he will die for his principles.

Indeed the knife fight between Eduardo and Cole is one of the most significant passages in the novel. Vince Brewton sees the final fight as a message regarding the pointlessness of Cole’s attempt to run away with Magdalena: “The elementary fact that escapes all romantics, is that the reality of the world seldom if ever coincides with the reality of our desires [. . .]” (141). Brewton goes on to explain that since Magdalena is a whore, her and Cole’s “worlds cannot touch; their quest for a life together has no future” (141). It is precisely this hopelessness that Brewton sees in the two young lovers that enhances their willingness to forsake their life. The goal, or destination, of their journey is not realized: Cole and Magdalena die before they can marry and live in the house he has prepared for them. Nevertheless, along their journey important elements of their character are realized. In particular, the young lovers understand that they are willing to die in their attempts to reach each other. In her interpretation of the knife fight between Eduardo and John Grady, Lydia Cooper sees the fight as Cole’s attempt to redefine Magdalena. Cooper interprets Cole’s choice to fight for his love as a way to ensure that Magdalena is not simply defined by her status as a whore who worked for Eduardo: “John Grady, by offering himself up, imposes meaning on Magdalena, imbues her ‘nothingness’ with his own life and essence; she is ‘something’ to him” (19). In his essay

“Games in the Border Trilogy,” Marty Priola interprets Cole’s offering of himself as evidence of his rational choice to engage Eduardo in a fight (271). Priola compares the final fight to a game of chess and sees the same carefully calculated forethought that makes Cole such a successful chess player as the means by which Cole wins the knife fight: “His conflict with the posturing pimp Eduardo is much like the chess game: moves are made after deliberation. [. . .] At the last, we see John Grady rising above his abilities, and winning against the much more skillful *cuchillero*—even as he loses everything. Sometimes the bishop must be sacrificed in order to win the game” (271). Thus, like “the candleflame and the image of the candleflame” the third novel in the Trilogy ends with Billy carrying Cole’s dead body through the streets of Juárez and might call to mind the Trilogy’s opening in which Cole viewed his dead grandfather (*All the Pretty Horses* 3).

The final sentence includes a reference to the complex worldview that McCarthy outlines in the first two novels: “This man and his burden passed on forever out of that nameless crossroads and the woman stepped once more into the street and the children followed and all continued on to their appointed places which as some believe were chosen long ago even to the beginning of the world” (*Cities of the Plain* 262). This worldview depicts men’s choices as part of a complex and incomprehensible chain of events and not always their own.¹³ The previous two novels depict John Grady and Billy alone. While the Trilogy ends with them together, Cole has reached life’s final destination: death. Interestingly, McCarthy includes a lengthy Epilogue, which considers, among other of life’s mysteries, death. The decision to end the novel with a philosophical consideration of the world almost serves as an introduction to the Epilogue.

In the Epilogue the 78-year-old Billy is no longer a cowboy, though he has recently played one as an extra in a movie. He is a drifter who once again bears witness to a stranger's story concerning the nature of the world. Though the stranger tells Billy that he is not death, his story of a dream within a dream considers the nature of death. The story also echoes the previous tales that Billy hears in *The Crossing*. As Busby points out, the story is another form of circular journey: "As before in McCarthy's telling of another story of human journeys, it becomes clear that we are all actually on the same journey told again and again in different but always similar ways [. . .]" (247). Toward the beginning of the stranger's story, he tells Billy that all stories have their "beginnings in a question" since "[w]here all is known no narrative is possible" (277). Thus, at its most basic level the story represents an attempt to understand ambiguity or mystery.¹⁴ The stranger tells the story of a dream he has had of a man who realizes something profound about the nature of the world while dreaming himself:

What he saw was the strangeness of the world and how little was known and how poorly one could prepare for aught that was to come. He saw that a man's life was little more than an instant and that as time was eternal therefore every man was always and eternally in the middle of his journey, whatever be his years or whatever distance he had come. (282)

The statement that man is always in the middle of his journey seems to dismiss the notion that man will ever be able to reach his destination. Indeed the journey, not the destination, makes a man whom he will be. And his journey, as the stranger tells Billy, is in the end an "immappable world" (288). Perhaps the only thing certain along the

journey is that it will end with death. The stranger's parting remarks weave together the two strands of death and story that make up men's lives:

Every man's death is a standing in for every other. And since death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love that man who stands for us. We are not waiting for his history to be written. He passed here long ago. That man who is all men and who stands in the dock for us until our own time come and we must stand for him. Do you love him, that man? Will you honor the path he has taken? Will you listen to his tale? (288-89)

Certainly Billy has listened to men's tales and witnessed death throughout his entire life.

Perhaps the two most significant deaths Billy lives through are the deaths of Boyd and John Grady. As stated in chapter three of this thesis, in *The Crossing* the priest tells Billy that a man lives his life so that another may understand its lesson (158). It seems that death too is meant for another and requires those for whom the dead man stands in to remember his life by witnessing his tale. Linda Townley Woodson provides a helpful interpretation of the Epilogue, which she believes serves as a final statement for all three works (206). If indeed the Epilogue provides a concluding statement for the Trilogy, this might enhance the importance of death to the Trilogy's final message. The extensive consideration of death throughout the Epilogue encourages the reader to consider the role death—the awareness of death—plays on life's journey.

As Charles Bailey points out in his study of the hero in the Trilogy, *Cities of the Plain* might re-present elements from *All the Pretty Horses*, but these elements are all tarnished in some way:

The arena for the cowboy/knight's heroism quickly and irreversibly diminishes. [. . .] The Madonna Alejandra is forced into prostitution. The aristocratic dueña has descended to the cowardly one-eyed criada. The lake has become a whorehouse. But not only that, the cowboy's way of life is reduced and disappearing in the face of advancing, destructive technology. The American government has commandeered the wilderness for nuclear testing. (298)

Though Bailey's statement rings true, the Epilogue might provide one exception. Billy's attempts to connect seem tarnished when Cole dies. However, the final scene between the aged Billy and a woman named Betty, who has taken him in, is endearing and suggests that she shares a connection with him whether he recognizes it or not. Billy has just had a dream about Boyd and Betty comforts him:

She patted his hand. Gnarled and ropescarred, speckled from the sun and the years of it. The ropy veins that bound them to his heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God's plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world. She rose to go.

Betty, he said.

Yes.

I'm not what you think I am. I aint nothin. I dont know why you put up with me.

Well, Mr. Parham, I know who you are. And I do know why. You go to sleep now. I'll see you in the morning.

Yes mam. (291-92)

It seems that through Betty's care Billy has finally found the connection he has searched for since he was orphaned. His journey has not only shaped him metaphorically, it has literally marked him through wrinkles and scars. In the Epilogue, the stranger tells Billy "One thing leads to another. I doubt that our journeys can be lost to us. For good or bad" (269). One might interpret this statement as testimony to the importance of our journeys not only in *Cities of the Plain* but in the Border Trilogy and perhaps all of McCarthy's work. For good or bad our journeys lead us to the present and shape who we become as people, and the bulk of our lives consist of our journey.

NOTES

1. For an alternate approach to McCarthy's choice to allude to Sodom and Gomorrah, see Lydia Cooper's essay "'Do You See This?': Meaning and Relationship in the Judeo-Christian Imagery of *Cities of the Plain*." Cooper sees hope imbedded in the Biblical story of Lot: "The tale of Sodom and Gomorrah is apocalyptic in the sense that it is a story of fire, brimstone, and utter annihilation, but it is also an intriguing story of God allowing his mind to be changed, and of God offering salvation to one righteous man that he (God) saw" (13-14).

2. Owens also states that the limited movement enhances the contrast between McGovern's peaceful pastoral ranch and a violent Mexico (110). In his essay "Into the Darkening Land, the World to Come: Cormac McCarthy's Border Crossings," Mark Busby mentions the use of the mountains as a refuge in contrast to the violence of the cities: "McCarthy's high country here is the refuge from much of the corruption of the cities of the plain" (245).

3. In his extensive study of the thematic motifs in *Cities of the Plain*, Barclay Owens writes: "The protagonists of *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy represent the American wanderlust for adventure, the whole westering manifesto that promises so much and serves as the centerpiece of American mythos" (111). Owens traces McCarthy's use of reoccurring colors and images as methods of expressing the notion that Mexico "embodies the violence of the Old West" (111). The dream of the West that compelled early settlers to venture into the new frontier of the Western U.S. and then

Mexico stands in stark contrast to the reality of that frontier. As Owens points out, the conclusion of that journey to the wild frontier is much like its beginning. In particular, Cole seems a young man driven by the same motives that compelled generations of Americans to set off to the frontier. Cole seeks an end to his journey that embodies the idyllic promise that the West represented; as Owens writes: “We all have felt the mythic impulse for heroics: to love, to rebel, to get back to nature, to stake out turf, to build a little place we can call our own” (111). Since Cole fails in realizing this dream—he never finds his country—one might question the validity of his search. According to Owens, Cole’s failure is rooted in the fact that his idyllic country is only a dream; the reality is that “the Old West was often a violent and lawless place of massacres” (111). It is not reaching a destination that makes Cole who he is; rather it is the journey that provides the opportunities for him to adhere to the principles that define his character. Thus, once again greater value may be placed on the journey.

4. See my discussion of Cole’s failure to act to save Blevins’ life in chapter two of this thesis.

5. In an early draft of *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy included a scene that helps to link Cole’s dog to the stray dog and the she-wolf in *The Crossing*. In this deleted scene, the dog walks on three legs like the stray and the injured wolf. Also Billy helps the dog’s injured paw just as he tries to help the she-wolf’s injured leg:

When he looked back for the dog again the dog had stepped on a thorn and was hobbling along holding its right forefoot to its chest. It didnt complain. He pulled the horse up and sat looking down at it and the

dog cast about uneasily with its eyes because there was some memory in its blood of the injured being left behind.

He slid down off the horse and crouched and snapped his fingers. The dog limped up and offered its paw and looked away. He found the thorn and tried to pull it but it was broken off too short. He took out his knife and worked the end up and took it between his teeth and pulled it. The dog trembled but it did not whine. (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos)

6. For more on the final scene of *The Crossing* see Edwin T. Arnold's essay "McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of *The Crossing*." Arnold discusses the sense of hope coupled with devastation that may be read in Billy's final cry for the stray dog; he also discusses the tripartite imagery in the novel (231).

7. Susan Kollin offers an alternate interpretation of Cole's love for Magdalena as something more than a romance between a man and a woman. Kollin considers the possibility that Cole's love for Magdalena, as Eduardo implies, "indicates the ways John Grady's yearnings for her are tied up with his desires for a mythic Mexico itself" (584).

8. Charles Bailey writes that the two women fulfill a similar female role to Cole's courtly adventure: "Magdalena is another version of the courtly lady, her cause made more desperate by the horrors of the world that entraps her. Her physical description, her pale skin and lush black hair, suggest Alejandra from the previous novel" (297).

9. Magdalena does occupy a somewhat elevated status since she has been

taken to the White Lake, a high-class brothel.

10. There is some evidence that McCarthy considers this romance between Cole and Magdalena as the source of their downfall. For instance, in an early character sketch of Mac, McCarthy writes: “A man in his forties who has never had children, independent and self-made as a rancher, much respected, quiet and fair and honest. He probably sees John Grady [sic] the son he never had. John Grady is cut from the same bolt of cloth, but with the *fatal romantic flaw*” (my emphasis, Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos). Also McCarthy writes of Magdalena: “What gets her killed is her *belief*, hence at the moment of her commitment to J.G. she [sic] also committed to their deaths” (emphasis in original, Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos).

11. The case could be made that Rocha assumed Cole would not survive imprisonment. After Alfonsa arranges Cole’s release, she tells him that he would have died if left in the prison (*All the Pretty Horses* 229). One might assume that Rocha felt the same way.

12. Interestingly, Cole’s choice to wrap his slicker around his arm indicates that he has some experience in knife-fighting. In a 1978 draft of *Cities of the Plain* titled *A Treatment for a Film*, Eduardo wraps his sports coat around his arm. This draft was written before *All the Pretty Horses*. Perhaps McCarthy’s choice to have Cole perform the defensive action was made in response to Cole’s fight in the Saltillo prison in the first novel. Another interesting change from this 1978 draft is Magdalena’s name; in this early draft she is named Elvira. Every other name remains the same (Cormac McCarthy

Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos).

13. For more on this worldview see my discussion of James D. Lilley's essay "'The Hands of Yet Other Puppets': Figuring Freedom and Reading Repetition in *All the Pretty Horses*" in chapter two of this thesis.

14. One might interpret this statement on stories as a meta-fictional lens through which to interpret McCarthy's Trilogy. On its most basic level the series also tells a story in an attempt to understand the ambiguity and mystery that life presents. In his essay "'A False Book is No Book at All': The Ideology of Representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy," David Holloway briefly notes that "[. . .] the epilogue might be read as a self-reflexive inquiry into the act of writing itself [. . .]" (188).

CHAPTER 5

“Between the Wish and the Thing the World Lies Waiting”:

A Concluding Assessment of the Journey in McCarthy’s Border Trilogy

Tucked away in a box of the McCarthy Papers is a manila folder with a note on it.

The note reads:

Where do we go when the story’s told?

We begin again

We have no choice

Yes, we have a choice. But we do not choose but rather are chosen.

(Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos)

Thus, I end this consideration of the Border Trilogy with the same question with which I began: What end does the circular journey serve? The recognition that Billy Parham’s and John Grady Cole’s journeys follow circular patterns supports the conclusion that the journey is more important than the destination. The two young men’s journeys shape their lives, and likewise their lives shape their journeys. The thematic motif of the circular journey calls to mind a number of complex ideas: the myth of the West, the worldview that history plays out as a cycle, the storyteller and the witness to the story, and death.

As my analysis of the myth of the West in chapter one points out, McCarthy’s

young men travel south in search of the same wild frontier that compelled thousands of Europeans and Americans to venture west. However, Parham's and Cole's expectations are rarely if ever fulfilled, and they seldom arrive at their intended destination. In fact, more often than not they end up where they began: at the conclusion of his journey in *All the Pretty Horses*, Cole still searches for his country and his love, and *The Crossing* closes with Parham still attempting to connect to someone else as he wanders through the world. The narrator's assessment of Parham toward the end of *Cities of the Plain* might also be applied to Cole: "In everything that he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong" (266). This statement is profound, especially since it comes from an omniscient narrator that has proved reliable throughout the Trilogy. In part, the statement might suggest the sort of disillusionment Parham and Cole experience when they travel to Mexico with preconceived notions regarding their destinations and what they will encounter in the region. Each time the young men fail to reach their destination enhances the idea that the journey has precedence over the destination. It is important to note that though Parham and Cole may have been wrong about the world and their lives in it, they still reach an understanding of themselves. Along his journey Cole discovers that he is a man who defines himself by his principles no matter the cost. Parham learns that his drifting and willingness to bear witness to strangers' stories is partially compelled by his desire to connect to others. Throughout each volume of the Trilogy, Cole's and Parham's journeys help to define them and allow them to intimately apprehend their character.

McCarthy's choice to write the three novels in a serialized form also contributes to the primacy of the journey over the destination. In particular, the repeated plots in the

novels enhance the notion that the young men are on a circular journey; the destination does not factor into a circular journey, which ends where it began. The worldview presented by the dueña's definition of history as puppets controlled by other puppets and infinitum in *All the Pretty Horses* helps illustrate the numerous repetitions of plot one finds among the three novels. To gain a greater understanding of the worldview expressed throughout the Border Trilogy, one might turn to a novel McCarthy once named as his favorite.¹ In "The Mat-Maker" chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville illustrates a similar worldview to the one expressed in the Border Trilogy. The chapter begins with one of Ishmael's ruminations on the nature of time and fate as he weaves a mat with Queequeg:

[I]t seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration, blending of other threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect the completed fabric; this savage's sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity—not wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together.

The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course—its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions modified by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events. (233-34) ²

Ishmael's extensive consideration of the act of weaving a mat as a metaphor for the interaction of fate, freewill, and chance is similar to the worldview expressed by the dueña's metaphor of puppets controlled by puppets. The blind maestro from *Cities of the Plain* expresses an understanding of the world similar to the dueña's worldview:

Each act in this world from which there can be no turning back has before it another, and it another yet. In a vast and endless net. [. . .] Choice is lost in the maze of generations and each act in that maze is itself an enslavement for it voids every alternative and binds one ever more tightly into the constraints that make a life. [. . .] Our plans are predicated upon a future unknown to us. The world takes its form hourly by a weighing of things at hand, and while we may seek to puzzle out that form we have no way to do so. (195)

Indeed chance, free will, and fate influence Cole's and Parham's journeys. The complex interaction of these three forces is incomprehensible to the individual. Consequently, when Parham and Cole set out on their journeys with destinations in mind, these destinations are never reached in part because so many factors shape their journey.

As the prima donna says in *The Crossing*, “the shape of the road is the road” (230). The shape is not determined by the destination but by the journey, or the road, and the experiences that the young men have upon that road. Throughout the Trilogy, Parham’s and Cole’s journeys are marked by circular or repeated patterns. Robert Jarrett makes the case that *Cities of the Plain* plays an essential role in one’s understanding of the first two novels and repetition constitutes a pattern that links the three novels:

In comparison with the other novels of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain* asserts its own priority over *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, requiring their reinterpretation. Illuminated by the light of *Cities of the Plain*, my rereading attends less to these novels as autonomous texts and more to how the first two novels of the trilogy introduce, amplify, and revise aspects of narrative—language, character functions, motifs, and plots—that achieve full significance only in the trilogy’s final novel. (“Cormac McCarthy’s Sense of an Ending: Serialized Narrative and Revision in *Cities of the Plain*” 314)

One might interpret Jarrett’s assertion as one that supports the notion that the young men’s journeys follow a circular pattern. Furthermore, the circular journey supports the argument that the journey takes precedence over the destination.

McCarthy’s repetition of plot does not represent the only element that enhances the notion that the two heroes undertake circular journeys. McCarthy’s syntax often assumes the circular pattern of his character’s journeys. For instance, in a scene from *All the Pretty Horses* depicting Cole and Alejandra’s rendezvous McCarthy’s disregard for

punctuation and use of an extended sentence fragment allows the prose to circle back to repeated images or phrases effortlessly:

The nightdamp laid the dust going up the ciénaga road and they rode the horses side by side at a walk, sitting the animals bareback and riding with hackamores. Leading the horses by hand out through the gate into the road and mounting up and riding the horses side by side up the ciénaga road with the moon in the west and some dogs barking over toward the shearing-sheds and the greyhounds answering back from their pens and him closing the gate and turning and holding his cupped hands for her to step into and lifting her onto the black horse's naked back and then untying the stallion from the gate and stepping once onto the gateslat and mounting up all in one motion and turning the horse and them riding side by side up the ciénaga road with the moon in the west like a moon of white linen hung from wires and some dogs barking. (140)

The paratactic style helps to create a flow from one image to the next almost like a prose poem.³ The repetition of the “ciénaga road,” the moon, the dogs barking, and the two lovers riding “side by side” encourages the reader to circle back to certain images and sounds.

During his third journey into Mexico in *The Crossing*, Parham retrieves his brother's remains. The diction and repeated use of the adjective “gray” and words such as “slouched” convey the somberness Parham must feel on this trip: “Gray sky, gray land. All day he slouched north on the wet and slouching horse through the sandy muck of the upcountry roads. The rain went harrying over the road before him in the gusts of

wind and rattled over his slicker and the hooftracks oozed shut behind him” (388).

Punctuating “Gray sky, gray land” as a sentence draws the reader’s attention to the notion that not only Billy, but the entire countryside reflects the despair he is experiencing as he approaches Boyd’s grave.

In *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy again uses repeated words to return the reader to the image of a gray and cold landscape:

John Grady squared his hat and walked out along the edge of the bluff.

The desert plain lay cold and blue below them in the graying light and the shape of the river running down from the north through the break of gray winter trees lay in a pale serpentine of mist. To the south the cold gray grid of the distant city and the shape of the older city across the river like stampings in the desert soil. (92)

McCarthy links the bleakness of the ranch’s landscape with the city by using the same words to describe each. It seems appropriate to connect the ranch to the border cities since Cole’s and Parham’s journeys in the final novel are limited to their travels between Mac’s land and Juárez. Thus, in each novel the syntax and use of repeated words enhance the overall message of circularity.

The use of the word “ciénaga,” in the passage from *All the Pretty Horses* quoted above, indicates another aspect of McCarthy’s fiction that enhances the realism conveyed in his work. On one level the use of foreign words renders the text exotic; however, McCarthy’s use of Spanish in dialogue throughout the Trilogy also gives the characters’ conversations a sense of realism.⁴ John Cant cites the use of Spanish in *The Crossing* as one of several significant elements that enable the reader to “engage more deeply with the

culture of the border country and of Mexico itself.” (201). As Mark Busby points out, the realism of the Trilogy’s dialogue is not limited to its use of Spanish: “The first half [of *Cities of the Plain*] is filled with a crisp West Texas dialogue that is so right in nuance and sound no one would know the writer spent his first forty-five years outside of Texas [. . .]” (244). One might apply Busby’s statement to dialogues found throughout each of the novels. Indeed in early manuscripts and notes McCarthy often scribbled idiomatic expressions in the margins.⁵ The use of Spanish, believable expressions and rhythmic dialogue enhance the realism of the texts.

Returning to the motif of circularity, reflected images often echo this notion of circularity as well. Throughout each novel, McCarthy writes of mirrored images. For example, in *All the Pretty Horses* the first line establishes the author’s use of reflected images: “The candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door” (3). In *The Crossing* Boyd sees himself reflected in the Indian’s eyes: “He stood twinned in those dark wells with hair so pale, so thin and strange, the selfsame child” (6). Finally, in *Cities of the Plain* Josefina looks at Magdalena in the mirror: “She studied the girl and she studied the girl in the mirror” (100). The novels are full of myriad examples of reflected images; locating the images is one thing, interpreting them another.⁶

Certainly the notion of reflection is linked to circularity. One might turn to John Beck’s essay “‘A Certain but Fugitive Testimony’: Witnessing the Light of Time in Cormac McCarthy’s Southwestern Fiction” to gain a fuller understanding of the reflected image. Beck draws from Roland Barthes’ philosophy in his consideration of the photograph and the Trilogy. Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, as Beck understands it, asserts:

“As the imprint of the past, the photograph offers an immanent history which is both separate from the past—since the imprint is the trace of a previous presence—and also coterminous with the present as artifact” (212). According to Beck, photography can only attempt to reflect or capture life (214). Beck quotes a passage from *The Crossing* in which the gypsy tells Parham the story of his father’s disregard for photographs, which do not adequately represent the world and remind the gypsy’s father of death rather than a preservation of life (214). The notion that photographs cannot represent the world might be extended to man’s understanding of the world: “He said that what men do not understand is that what the dead have quit is itself no world but is also only the picture of the world in men’s hearts” (*The Crossing* 413). Beck writes: “What is suggested by McCarthy’s gypsy is that the technological attempt to preserve the life of the past through the photograph fails and confirms only the inevitability of death” (214). In light of Beck’s statement, images of life are essentially an image of death. Cole’s and Parham’s journeys are presented to the reader through the written word; thus, they share similarities with the photograph since they are frozen in time. One might apply this notion to the circularity of Cole’s and Parham’s journeys: The end of each man’s journey reflects the beginning of his story, his life on the page. This notion also returns us to my statement in chapter one that the primary confrontation for each of McCarthy’s young men is their death.

Cole’s journey literally ends in his death. Keeping Beck’s essay in mind, one might interpret Cole’s death as a circle back to the beginning of his tale. The images of the candle in the first scene of *All the Pretty Horses* and the final scene of Cole’s death link his end with his beginning: “He looked down at the guttered candlestub. He pressed

his thumbprint in the warm wax pooled on the oak veneer. Lastly he looked at the face so caved and drawn among the folds of funeral cloth, the yellowed moustache, the eyelids paper thin. That was not sleeping. That was not sleeping” (*All the Pretty Horses* 3).

When Billy leaves Cole to bring him a glass of water a candle stub and the color yellow reemerge: “He set the candlestub in its saucer of grease on the shelf and backed out and let the curtain fall. [. . .] The square of yellow light that shone through the sacking looked like some haven of promise out there but his heart misgave him” (260). When Parham returns to find Cole, his repetition of “Do you see? Do you see?” (261) calls to mind the twice repeated statement “That was not sleeping” from *All the Pretty Horses* (3).

Billy’s story begins with him describing the countryside to his brother Boyd:

He carried Boyd before him in his saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish [sic] and english [sic]. In the new house he slept in a room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and listen to his brother’s breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have. (*The Crossing* 3)

In the last novel, Parham “slept in a shed room off the kitchen that was much like the room he’d slept in as a boy” (290). Much as he told Boyd of the countryside and animals as they traveled, he tells Betty’s children “about horses and cattle and the old days” (290). Significantly, Billy dreams of Boyd during the final scene of the Epilogue: “One night he dreamt that Boyd was in the room with him but he would not speak for all that he called out to him. When he woke the woman was sitting on his bed with her hand on his shoulder” (290-91). Parham tells Betty a brief history of his and Boyd’s journey to

Mexico; perhaps his narrative is meant to call to mind his earlier whispered plans to the sleeping Boyd. Thus, Parham's and Cole's journeys circle back to their beginnings like the photograph's reflection of life, which calls to mind the image of death. However, McCarthy's stories of Cole and Parham capture more than a photograph is able to capture.

According to Beck, the story is the only way to transcend the inevitable death inherent in pictures: "While the photograph reveals the death of time, the tale lives in time and in the telling" (215). Cole's and Parham's journeys not only share similarities with the photograph, their stories also share similarities with the living tale. Though their tales are preserved as the written word, the stories may be interpreted any number of ways and the opening of McCarthy's manuscripts and notes to researchers ensures an ever-evolving wealth of interpretations. Beck qualifies his assertion that "the tale lives in time" with a reference to something the priest points out in *The Crossing* (215).

According to the priest, the tale must never end or else it too will cease to express what the photograph only attempts to express: "[T]he tale has no abode or place of being except in the telling only and there it lives and makes its home and therefore we can never be done with the telling. Of the telling there is no end" (143). One may discern a hint of circularity in this notion that the tale is never done being told; once one telling of the story ends, another must begin again. Interestingly, McCarthy's dedication, which oddly appears at the end of the final novel, seems to ask the reader to begin again:

I will be your child to hold

And you will be me when I am old

The world grows cold

The heathen rage

The story's told

Turn the page. (n. pag.)

Towards the end of their conversation in *Cities of the Plain*, Parham tells the stranger “*Es un dibujo nada más*. It aint your life. A picture aint a thing. It’s just a picture” (273).⁷ The stranger replies: “Well said but what is your life? Can you see it? It vanishes at its own appearance. Moment by moment. Until it vanishes to appear no more. [. . .] It is that which is missing from our map and from the picture that it makes. And yet it is all we have” (273). In his article, Beck cites this conversation, which is in line with his assertion that pictures of the world call to mind death: the picture cannot express reality or a life since the life it tries to express is constantly vanishing (215-16). Only the tale can come close to expressing the complexity of a life. Yet, somewhere between the picture and the actual world, between our birth and our death, our lives are lived and our journeys unfold.

NOTES

1. In his 1992 interview with McCarthy, Richard Woodward writes that *Moby Dick* is McCarthy's favorite book (36).

2. Interestingly, the priest conjures a similar image when he retells an understanding of God as a weaver of the world, which was told to him by the man who lived under the church's arch:

In his dreams God was much occupied. [. . .] The man could see Him bent at his work. As if through a glass. Seated solely in the light of his own presence. Weaving the world. In his hands it flowed out of nothing and in his hands it vanished into nothing once again. Endlessly. Endlessly. So. Here was a God to study. A God who seemed a slave to his own selfordinated duties. A God with a fathomless capacity to bend all to an inscrutable purpose. Not chaos itself lay outside of that matrix. And somewhere in that tapestry that was the world in its making and in its unmaking was a thread that was he and he woke weeping. (*The Crossing* 149)

3. Abrams defines paratactic style as "one in which the members within a sentence, or else a sequence of complete sentences, are put one after the other without any expression of their connection or relations except (at most) the noncommittal connective 'and'" (313).

4. For further reading on the exoticism of Mexico see Daniel Cooper Alarcón's essay "All the Pretty Mexicos: Cormac McCarthy's Mexican Representations," which I discuss in chapter two of this thesis.

5. For instance, in some notes for *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy wrote out various common phrases such as "shit fired" "all fired" and "whip ass" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University-San Marcos).

6. Another aspect of the notion of reflections and Parham's and Cole's understanding of themselves might be drawn from Jacques Lacan's mirror stage. The mirror stage represents "the moment when the infant learns to identify with his or her image in a mirror, and so begins to develop a sense of a separate self, and an (illusory) understanding of oneself as an autonomous subject, that is later enhanced by what is reflected back to it from encounters with other people" (Abrams 261). Certainly Cole and Parham encounter people along their journey who enable them to reflect back on themselves. Cole's interactions with Blevins, the captain, the *cuchillero*, Magdalena, and Eduardo allow him to uncover his deep dedication to his principles. Billy's meetings with strangers reveal an underlying desire to connect to others.

7. It is a drawing nothing more.

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