

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR  
IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S  
*THE CROSSING*

THESIS

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By

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* is a complex novel that demands multiple readings. Charles Bailey, for example, writes that *The Crossing* is an initiation story to be read in three parts (58). Robert Jarrett claims that the novel critiques the themes of the individual's retreat from society, man's relation to nature, and history's relation to postmodern man (96). Nell Sullivan applies a Lacanian approach to *The Crossing*, seeing Billy Parham as the oedipal son, struggling to find and accept his feminine side (172). These and many other critical approaches to *The Crossing* support Wayne Booth's claim: "Most works worth reading have so many possible themes, so many possible mythological or metaphorical or symbolic analogues, that to find any one of them, and to announce it as what the work is for, is to do at best a very small part of the critical task" (73). One of McCarthy's greatest tools used in creating such a myriad of themes and possible meanings in *The Crossing* is that of the unreliable narrator. In this work, I discuss how McCarthy uses unreliable narration in *The Crossing*, proving that unreliable narration plays a major role in creating multiple meanings to a novel that claims to be a story about storytelling.

The critical and analytical portion of this paper consists of four chapters. In each of these chapters I apply to *The Crossing* a different facet of unreliable narration as

discussed in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth's groundbreaking work on the unreliable narrator. According to Booth, unreliability in narration can be detected and classified in the following ways:

1. Deliberate confusion of the reader about fundamental truths (285).
2. Deliberate confusion about the relation of art and reality (288).
3. Confusion about moral and spiritual problems (292).
4. Secret communion, collusion, and collaboration (304).

Each chapter begins with a brief explanation and introduction to the particular area of unreliability to be discussed in the chapter.

In Chapter Two, I apply Booth's idea that unreliable narration causes deliberate confusion of fundamental truths to *The Crossing*. This chapter examines the novel's third-person narrator, whom I consider to be selectively omniscient, and shows how he/she often uses detail and precision to appear all knowing. At the same time, however, instances exist in the novel where the narrator is unknowing, or at least chooses not to reveal seemingly important information. This duality serves to confuse the reader, forcing him/her to question the reliability of the novel's main narrator. In this chapter, I discuss how the narrator uses metaphysical thoughts and occurrences to complicate and force the reader to question reality. Many of the dreams that occur in the novel as well as the "matrix" theme are also discussed in this chapter.

In Chapter Three, I look at ways in which *The Crossing* causes confusion in the relationship between art and reality. This idea relates to Chapter Two of this work, but focuses primarily on the relationship of art to reality. In this chapter, I discuss apparent values of the narrator and closely examine the statements made in *The Crossing* on

narration. The chapter ends with a discussion of the exaggerations and embellishments found in the novel.

In Chapter Four, I discuss how confusion about moral and spiritual problems relates to unreliability. In this chapter, I examine the familial relationships of Billy, Boyd, and Mr. Parham and discuss how rocky relationships challenge the brothers and affect their moral choices. This chapter discusses how lies and partial truths cause unreliability, as do contradictory and discrediting statements and actions. The chapter closes with a detailed discussion of the “corrido” and how this idea contributes to moral and spiritual problems.

In Chapter Five, I examine how McCarthy uses secret communion, collusion, and collaboration in *The Crossing* to both include and exclude characters and readers. In this chapter, I analyze instances where the narrator seemingly omits information, leaves questions unanswered, fails to develop important or relevant ideas, excludes certain readers, or gives clues that a hidden meaning exists. In the final portion of this chapter I discuss some of the overall themes of *The Crossing*, with a major focus on the novel’s difficult final scene.

## CHAPTER II

### DELIBERATE CONFUSION OF THE READER ABOUT FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS

Most critics agree that Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* is a story about storytelling. The ex-priest, for example, tells Billy, "Things separate from their stories have no meaning. . . . Rightly heard all tales are one" (142-43). The primadonna, camped in a field of wildflowers, advises Billy to "Listen to the corridos of the country. They will tell you" (230). Similarly, the outspoken leader of a band of gypsies relates in the final story of the airplane, "La verdad no puede quedar en ningún otro lugar sino en el habla" (411) (The truth cannot remain in any other place but in the spoken word). These statements proclaiming the "tale" to be the one and only vessel of truth are believable when viewed on a superficial level, but *The Crossing* is not so easily understood. Truth may exist in a perfect tale, but few if any of the tales related in *The Crossing* come even close to being flawless.

Unreliable narration can often leave a reader confused about how to interpret a story or particular section of a tale. The mere presence of unreliability in a novel, however, should never be misinterpreted as just "poor" writing. Granted, a careless author might make mistakes in his/her writing, leaving the reader to view a narrator or character as unreliable, but skilled authors often use unreliable narration intentionally and



for a number of reasons. In his chapter titled, “Telling and Showing,” Wayne Booth shares the following insight borrowed from Mark Harris’s, “Easy Does It Not”:

“I shall not tell you anything,” says a fine young novelist in defense of his art. “I shall allow you to eavesdrop on my people, and sometimes they will tell the truth and sometimes they will lie, and you must determine for yourself when they are doing which. You do this every day. Your butcher says, ‘This is the best,’ and you reply, ‘That’s you saying it.’ Shall my people be less the captive of their desires than your butcher? I can show much, but show only. . . . You will no more expect the novelist to tell you precisely how something is said than you will expect him to stand by your chair and hold your book.” (117)

In *The Crossing*, McCarthy’s narrator and many of the supporting characters “show” much, but they often “tell” just enough to keep the novel flowing and the reader interested. If the reader is never forced to work to interpret the story correctly, much is missed and the very reason for the author’s use of unreliability may fall undetected.

According to Booth, “many stories require confusion in the reader, and the most effective way to achieve it is to use an observer who is himself confused” (284). In *The Crossing*, a nameless, third person narrator does most of the observing for the reader. The reader is never given the narrator’s age, gender, race, or any other clue that might aid in better understanding the narrator and his/her point of view. To further complicate matters, the narrator is selectively omniscient, at times revealing everything and at times revealing next to nothing. Early in the novel, for example, the narrator appears omniscient. He/she speaks for Billy: “He knew [Billy] that they [the wolves] would be

coming out onto the plain” (3). The narrator speaks of the wolves “loping and twisting” (4) and ends his/her narration: “He never told anybody” (5). A few pages later, the narrator again appears to know all: “The dog stood beside him testing the air with quick lifting motions of its muzzle, sorting and assembling some picture of the prior night’s events” (13). Similarly, when referring to the contents of Mr. Echol’s wolf bait, the narrator speaks on behalf of the wolves:

The inward parts of the beast who dreams of man and has so dreamt in running dreams a hundred thousand years and more. Dreams of that malignant lesser god come pale and naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and kin and rout them from their house (17).

Not only does the narrator apparently have the ability to look into the mind of Billy and others, he/she speaks as if knowing the thoughts of animals and even speaks of dreams supposedly dreamt more than a hundred thousand years ago. Furthermore, the narrator often speaks with such precision that it makes it difficult to question what is being said. The narrator states in reference to a wolf print left in the snow in the opening section of the novel, “He [Billy] knelt and blew the fresh snow out of the crystal print the wolf had made five nights ago” (21). The narrator is clear that the print was made by the very wolf that Billy tracks, and he/she also states that the print was made exactly five nights ago. The narrator is similarly precise a few pages later:

The wolf had crossed the international boundary line at about the point where it intersected the thirtieth minute of the one hundred and eighth meridian and she had crossed the old Nations road a mile north of the boundary and followed Whitewater Creek west up into the San Luis

Mountains and crossed through the gap north to the Animas Valley and on in to the Peloncillos as told. (24)

The narrator uses the phrase “at about,” alerting the reader that he/she doesn’t know exactly where the wolf had crossed the international boundary line. However, he/she immediately proceeds to give a lengthy and detailed description of the wolf’s recent travels. These and other examples early in the novel make it appear that the narrator can be omniscient when he/she chooses, apparently knowing the thoughts, dreams, and actions of man and beast alike.

On the other hand, and regardless of whether or not the narrator is completely omniscient, at times he/she fails to reveal bits of information leaving the characters and reader confused about what might have been missed in the omission. For instance, early in the story the narrator states of Billy’s attempt to track the wolf, “Once he rode her up out of a bed in a windbreak thicket on the south slope where she’d slept in the sun. Or thought he rode her up” (32). Initially, the narrator speaks on the whereabouts of the wolf clearly stating that Billy “rode her up.” The second sentence, however, questions the action supposedly performed in the first of the two sentences. The initial sentence states that Billy spooked the wolf out of hiding, but the second sentence begins with the word “or,” bringing the narrator’s reliability under question. This expression of uncertainty displayed by the narrator occurs suddenly and is spoken in such a subtle manner that a careless reader would likely miss it. Similarly, the narrator describes the face of Billy’s father: “His eyes were very blue and very beautiful half hid away in the leathery seams of his face. As if there were something there that the hardness of the country had not been able to touch” (16). These sentences provide the reader enough

information to formulate a mental picture of Mr. Parham's face, but he/she is left wondering whether or not there exists a hidden "something" that the country in fact has not "been able to touch." The subtle use of the phrase, "as if" raises a question and leaves the matter open to discussion. Another instance of the narrator withholding information is found in the following: "By the time he'd fed and watered it was daylight and he saddled Bird and mounted up and rode out of the barn bay and down to the river to look for the Indian or to see if he was still there (emphasis added) (13). In this long and detailed sentence, the narrator reveals all up and until using the word "or." Again, by using "or" the narrator shows uncertainty. Does Billy leave early in the morning actually intending to look for the Indian? This implies perhaps that Billy wants to speak with the Indian. The second possibility is that Billy just wants to see if the Indian is still camped where he had left him the previous evening. This sentence also uses the word "and" a number of times to connect the many actions and ideas. According to David Holloway,

The absence of distinct sentences, let alone subordinate clauses, and the simple listing by repetition of "and" quickens the eye faster than ever across the words which describe the scene, denying the reader time in which to pause and reflect upon the significant meaning of any of the discrete objects or actions narrated (195-96).

This idea is further exemplified in the following sentence:

He [Billy] pulled his breeches off the footboard of the bed and got his shirt and his blanketlined duckingcoat and got his boots from under the bed and went out to the kitchen and dressed in the dark by the faint warmth of the stove and held the boots to the windowlight to pair them left and right and

pulled them on and rose and went to the kitchen door and stepped out and closed the door behind him (emphasis added). (3)

This long and difficult sentence can easily be simplified; (Billy carefully dresses in the dark in warm clothes and leaves the kitchen), but in this and countless other instances in the novel the narrator goes to extremes to deliver the message in great detail, leaving the reader the task of deciphering the information. These techniques and other stylistic issues primarily related by a selectively omniscient narrator invites the reader to participate in the story as he/she attempts to fill in the missing pieces.

In *The Crossing*, McCarthy deals with many fundamental truths regarding life and the world; but such truths, perhaps fundamental to the characters and the overall power of the novel, are seldom clearly or unequivocally revealed. Wayne Booth supports this idea:

If the reader is to desire the truth he must first be convinced that he does not already possess it. . . . Any work depending on this desire must raise an important question in a lively form if the reader is to care about reading on to find the answer, or to feel the importance of the answer when it comes (285).

Billy definitely seeks truth in life, but whether or not he will ever feel satisfied with what he discovers is questionable. Following the story told by the blind man and his wife, for example, Billy asks, “Pero es verídica, esta historia?” (284) (But is this story true?).

Similarly, when asked by a gypsy which of three stories he desires to hear, Billy responds with a smile, “the true history” (404). The reader has no reason to believe that Billy is insincere in his desires to find truth, but the truth that exists in *The Crossing* is never easily defined. In the novel, Billy loses his parents, his brother, his property, and a wolf

he desperately tries to save. By casting Billy as a sympathetic character interested in seeking truth, the author invites the reader to join with Billy in his quest to uncover the “true tales”. To echo Booth’s statement, unless a reader cares for the novel, or at least cares for one of the characters found in the novel, the importance of finding answers to difficult questions greatly diminishes (285).

The unreliable nature of *The Crossing* often leaves the reader wondering if things are real or merely imagined. Metaphysical language and countless references to supernatural events continually cause the reader to question the reliability of the narration. In the opening scene of the novel, for instance, the narrator states, “The antelope moved *like phantoms* . . . with some *inner fire* . . . they seemed of *another world entire* . . . until they were the smallest of figures in that dim whiteness and then *they disappeared*” (emphasis added) (4). As shown by the italicized words and phrases, these sentences are packed with supernatural inferences. The antelope enter the scene “like phantoms,” and as quickly as they appear, again ghostlike they disappear. The narrator relates that the antelope “seemed of another world entire,” referring to a place foreign to the actual surroundings found somewhere on the Animas Plains of New Mexico. A few pages later, the narrator again uses supernatural terms and references, this time speaking of Mr. Parham and how he sets a wolf trap:

He [Mr. Parham] put the dirt in the screenbox as he dug and then he laid the trowel by and took a pair of c-clamps from the basket and with them screwed down the springs until the jaws fell open. He held the trap up and eyed the notch in the pan while he backed off one screw and adjusted the trigger. Crouched in the broken shadow with the sun at his back and

holding the trap at eyelevel against the morning sky he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. Like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. If there be such space. If it be knowable. (22)

The beginning sentences of this scene describe in detail the precision that Mr. Parham takes in setting the wolf trap. Once the trap is set, however, the narrator shifts gears and uses the episode to speak of a strange netherworld found somewhere between the Parham family's New Mexican homeland and some other unknown, perhaps unknowable world. This supernatural netherworld, commonly called the "matrix" by the narrator and others, is referred to a number of times in the novel and will be discussed in detail later in this work.

Many of the metaphysical statements made by the narrator of *The Crossing* relate to eyes and seeing. The first instance of the narrator using eyes and sight to speak of things supernatural is found in his/her description of the Indian's eyes:

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

This paragraph leaves the reader wondering what the narrator means when he/she speaks of a “miswandered journey;” a journey from “whence there could be no way back forever” (6). In typical McCarthy style, the answer to this “maze” is not to be found directly. A hundred or so pages later we discover that Billy and Boyd have in fact become orphaned. According to most critics, the Indian whose eyes are referred to in this passage plays a central role in the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Parham. The future events of this “miswandered” encounter, perhaps foreseen by the narrator and at least envisioned by the Indian, are not fully revealed to the reader until after the murderous event actually takes place.

Part I of *The Crossing* is heavily steeped in supernatural language. This opening section of the novel deals primarily with Billy’s attempt to return a captured shewolf to Mexico. On many occasions, the narrator speaks of the supernatural nature of the wolf. He/she often uses the wolf’s eyes to symbolize a world foreign to Billy and the reader. According to the narrator, shortly after being captured and detained by Billy, the wolf “looked up at him, the eye delicately aslant, the knowledge of the world it held sufficient to the day if not to the day’s evil. Then she closed her eyes” (55). The narrator describes the wolf’s eye as being “delicately aslant.” These seemingly contradictory terms remind the reader that the wolf’s world is much different than Billy’s world. Spoken indirectly by the narrator, it appears that either he/she or McCarthy is making a “naturalistic” statement when speaking of the wolf’s knowledge of the “day’s evil.” In a sense, this statement makes it appear that the narrator finds Billy’s capture of the wolf an evil deed. The reader is allowed to see the events as presented by the narrator and perhaps even given a glimpse inside the mind of the wolf, but he/she is left to decide what, if anything



should be made of the whole affair. The narrator again speaks of the wolf's eyes in a metaphysical manner a few pages later:

Her eyes burned out there like gatelamps to another world. A world  
burning on the shore of an unknowable void. A world construed out of  
blood and blood's alkahest and blood in its core and in its integument. . . .  
Her eyes did not leave him or cease to burn . . . the reflection of her eyes  
came up in the dark water like some other self of wolf that did inhere in  
the earth or wait in every secret place even to such false waterholes (73-  
74, 79).

In this example, the narrator makes it clear that he/she believes that the wolf belongs to a world alien to the world of Billy. The wolf's eyes are said to "burn," as if the wolf holds the power to look directly into the mind of Billy or perhaps even decode certain but hidden truths. For both the wolf and Billy, however, the world is often "unknowable" and "secret." Even if the wolf were to possess the supernatural ability to see and understand things not seen and understood by man, she may never come to a full understanding of man's ways or of the hidden truths of the world. The narrator provides the reader small glimpses into the mind of the wolf on a metaphysical level, but the reader is never allowed, nor can even expect to fully understand the animal. Regarding the mysterious nature of the wolf, perhaps Don Arnulfo says it best: "El lobo es una cosa incognoscible. Lo que se tiene en la trampa no es mas que dientes y forro. El lobo propio no se puede conocer. Lobo o lo que sabe el lobo. Tan como preguntar lo que saben las piedras. Los arboles. El mundo" (45) (The wolf is an unknowable thing. That

which you have in the trap is nothing but teeth and fur. The wolf itself you cannot know. The wolf or that which the wolf knows. It's like asking what the rocks know. The trees. The world).

One of the ways that McCarthy's narrators express experiences and share possible hopes, desires, and fears, is through dreams. There are at least thirteen dream sequences found in the novel, and most of the dreams are dark and mysterious. A close examination proves, however, that only one of the dreams in *The Crossing* can actually be considered a "nightmare," and this dream also contains a deeper meaning. Billy's nightmarish dream takes place high on a Mexican plateau overlooking "the broad barranca of the Bavispe and the ensuing Carretas Plain" (135). Prior to having this dream, Billy passes by a large rock wall on which are painted "old pictographs of men and animals and suns and moons as well as other representations that seemed to have no referent in the world although they once may have" (135). As is often the case with dreams, Billy's experience of seeing the pictographs shortly before falling asleep soon becomes the subject of the dream:

He [Billy] dreamt of wild men who came to him with clubs and their teeth were filed to points and they gathered round him and warned him of their work before they even set about it. He woke and lay listening. As if they might yet be there just beyond the darkness of his hat. Squatting among the rocks. Chiseling in stone with stones those semblances of the living world they'd have endure and the world dead at their hands. (135-36)

This dream has the markings of a nightmare as Billy's subconscious mind gives life to the pictographs seen earlier in the afternoon. The vividness of the dream and the

darkness created by sleeping with his hat over his eyes cause Billy to listen and wonder if the savage men with clubs were merely imagined or actually real. Beneath the cover of the nightmare, however, lies a deeper meaning. Both the description of the pictographs and Billy's dream speak about the past world and life of the Indians. In the narrator's description of the pictographs, the men, animals, suns and moons are said to "have no referent in the world although they once may have" (135). According to the narrator, the Indians depicted in the drawings are no longer found in the world that Billy walks. The Indians represented in the ancient pictographs are long since dead, but Billy dreams of them, momentarily bringing them to life. Much more than just a nightmare, McCarthy uses this dream sequence primarily to show the importance of records. Had Billy not seen the old pictographs earlier in the day he certainly would not have dreamt of the savages. In a story about storytelling, this is just one of many instances where McCarthy's narrators speak of the importance of the tale. As is often the case, however, the reader must read between the lines to find the hidden meanings not directly revealed by the unreliable narrator.

Another of Billy's dreams clearly hints that something deeper is to be found beneath the surface of the tale:

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 messenger alone and could tell him nothing of the news he bore. (82-83)

Some sixty-five pages later, the ex-priest, deep in a seemingly unrelated story about a heretic, continues the previously unfinished thought: “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. . . . He was simply a messenger” (147). The words of the ex-priest complement and certainly add to Billy’s dream about the unknown messenger, but the contents of the actual message are still hidden from both Billy and the reader. When added to Billy’s dream, the ex-priest’s tale of the messenger shows that the theme of messages, even hidden messages, is important to the narrator. Ironically, when told the story of the messenger, a tale paralleling his own puzzling dream, Billy does not comment. This fact makes the reader wonder if Billy has forgotten his dream, or has perhaps decided that the true message of the “hidden messenger” is no longer important. These and other questions strongly support John Beck’s claim:

McCarthy’s texts, like his strange, abandoned, or lost commentators, are perpetually troubling in their own ability to testify; that is, to tell what has happened. What makes these parables still more confusing for the reader is that the auditor—invariably one of McCarthy’s heroic youths—is seemingly oblivious or indifferent to the import of the tales, usually showing little or no interest in them. (211)

The messenger who bears a hidden message represents one of many instances where the narrator hints at seemingly important information yet leaves the reader to wonder first if the listener of the tale even cares to know the truth, and perhaps most importantly, whether or not the truth is even worth searching for.

The narrator and many of the story's sub-narrators speak of a matrix that both encompasses and joins together all things past, present, and future. Dianne C. Luce, for example, writes that *The Crossing* can be read as "a matrix of intersecting stories, partial or complete, often competing, with varying relationships to truth" (196). The matrix theme is fundamental to the story's progression and overall power, but this idea, developing on many levels as it weaves throughout the text, is extremely complex and difficult to follow. The narrator first mentions the term "matrix" when speaking of Mr. Echols' wolf bait. Mr. Parham and his sons enter Mr. Echols' cabin in search of wolf traps and initially discover "old apothecary jars all bearing antique octagon labels edged in red upon which in Echols' neat script were listed contents and dates. In the jars dark liquids. Dried viscera. Liver, gall, kidneys" (17). In contrast to the neatly labeled jars of animal innards, the narrator continues, "On a lower shelf stood a wooden ammunition box with dovetailed corners and in the box a dozen or so small bottles or vials with no labels to them. Written in red crayon across the top board of the box were the words No. 7 Matrix" (17). The contents of the apothecary jars are "neatly labeled," but the small bottles and vials contain a mysterious, foul, and unknown liquid labeled only as "No. 7 Matrix." A few pages later, and after many unsuccessful attempts to trap the wolf, Billy again returns to Mr. Echols' cabin. On this visit Billy discovers "other bottles with curled and yellowed labels that bore only numbers and there were bottles made of purple glass dark near to blackness that had no label at all" (40). Finding a few unlabeled bottles in an old storage shed is certainly not out of the ordinary. It is no mistake, however, that the baits referred to in this instance range from being clearly named and labeled to merely labeled "No. 7 Matrix" and finally become nothing but bottles of nameless and

numberless liquid. Later in the narrative, Billy questions Don Arnulfo on how best to trap wolves: “I got one bottle that says Number Seven Matrix. . . . And another that dont say nothin” (44). Instead of giving Billy the information he seeks, Don Arnulfo simply responds, “La matríz” (44) (The matrix). For Billy, the term “matrix” is just a name given by Mr. Echols to a particular type of wolf bait. For Don Arnulfo, however, the term “matrix” represents much more than this. Speaking for Don Arnulfo, the narrator states, “He [Don Arnulfo] said that the matrix was not so easily defined. . . . The matrix will not help you. He said that the boy should find that place where acts of God and those of man are of a piece. Where they cannot be distinguished” (45, 47). When asking where he could find such a place, Don Arnulfo again responds to Billy via the narrator: “The old man said that it was not a question of finding such a place but rather of knowing it when it presented itself. He said that it was at such places that God sits and conspires in the destruction of that which he has been at such pains to create” (47). According to Don Arnulfo, this advice regarding where and how the matrix separating man and a conspiring God might best be understood is not a popular notion. This is proven in the man’s next statement: “Y por eso soy hereje” (47) (And for that I’m a heretic). In the brief visit Billy makes to Don Arnulfo the old and sickly man says much regarding the matrix separating man and God, but he finishes his oratory claiming to know nothing and tells Billy that others consider him to be just a heretic (47). These and other statements made by Don Arnulfo bring his reliability under question and the reader is left alone to decide what, if anything, should be taken from the advice given to Billy.

Betty Morris claims that the words, “No. 7 Matrix” represent the matrix of violence that accompanies many of the actions and tales found in the novel. Morris

writes, “The significance of the matrix and its association with violence appears in the discovery of the ammunition box and its red label” (211). Similarly, the blind man’s tale begins with the gruesome story of how a revolutionary was blinded by a German Huertista who literally sucked the man’s eyes from their sockets. These and other tales found in the novel relate to the Mexican Revolution and supports John Wegner’s idea: “In McCarthy’s Border Trilogy the story that contains all other stories is the Mexican Revolution” (67). Whether or not the reader chooses to agree with Morris and Wegner, the Mexican Revolution plays a central role in many of the tales and the matrix of war is clearly one of the major themes addressed in the novel.

The narrator speaks of the differences between America and Mexico early in the story. Billy’s first visit to Mexico, for example, is related as follows: “They crossed [Billy and the wolf] sometime near noon the international boundary line into Mexico, State of Sonora, undifferentiated in its terrain from the country they quit and yet wholly alien and wholly strange” (74). According to the narrator, the desert landscape of Mexico appears “undifferentiated” from that of America yet the new country is “alien” and “strange.” In this particular instance, the narrator fails to explain how, or even if Billy understands that he has crossed the international boundary line. Furthermore, the reader is never told whether or not Billy shares the same sentiments and ideas regarding Mexico as the narrator. By placing a young American alone and unprepared for the challenges he will soon face deep in Mexico, McCarthy creates the perfect scenario for the unpredictable acts of chaos and violence that Billy will encounter while on his journeys.

A third matrix discussed in the novel and commonly examined by critics is the matrix of time and timelessness. This matrix is particularly complex and has been

interpreted by scholars in a number of different ways. Stacey Peebles writes, “Worlds do collide in McCarthy’s fiction, but more often they overlap” (105). Charles Bailey notes, “*The Crossing* is about time and storytelling—more specifically, about how human beings exist in a dimension of time, which separates them from God” (58). And John Wegner writes, “For Mexico, the revolution is continual and ongoing, hence the past is a significant part of the present” (61). Each of these statements helps the reader to better understand the time/timelessness theme of the tale, but the unreliable nature of the narrator makes it difficult, if not impossible to fully explain the matrix of time that develops throughout the novel.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the time/timelessness matrix revolves not around the events experienced by the living, but around the many questions surrounding the mysteries of death. Many theories and religious beliefs exist concerning what happens or does not happen to a person’s soul once a body dies. Death is addressed a number of times in *The Crossing*, and perhaps McCarthy uses this delicate topic to keep the reader guessing as he/she struggles to understand the time/timelessness theme that develops throughout the work. Early in the novel, for instance, Billy encounters the mutilated carcass of a young heifer recently killed by a wolf. According to the narrator, the heifer

was lying on its side in the shadow of the woods with its eyes glazed over and its tongue out and she [the wolf] had begun to feed on it between its rear legs and eaten the liver and dragged the intestines over the snow and eaten several pounds of meat from the inside of the thighs. . . . The one



eye that looked up was blue and cast and there was no reflection in it and  
no world. (32)

In this graphic description, the narrator mentions the heifer's eyes in both the opening and closing sentences. Billy first notices that the cow's eyes were "glazed over," a common expression used when detailing the death of a creature. In the final sentence, the eye is said to be "blue and cast" with "no reflection in it and no world." The narrator graphically explains the condition of the dead cow, and while the gruesomeness of the tale may be shocking for the faint of heart, the death of one animal by another is simply nature's way. The description of the dead heifer is complete but this introduction to the matrix of death and its relation to the theme of time/timelessness is just beginning to develop. A few pages later, Don Arnulfo states to Billy via the narrator:

He [Don Arnulfo] said that men believe the blood of the slain to be of no  
consequence but that the wolf knows better. He said that the wolf is a  
being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no  
order in the world save that which death has put there. (45)

According to Don Arnulfo, the wolf is a supernatural being that understands that true order is found only in death. Ironically, the scene of the dead cow with bloody intestines scattered about does not represent "order" to the common reader. For the wolf, however, the cow is merely a food source, and in killing and eating the heifer the wolf's life continues. In this sense, the death of a cow does represent "order," but for this idea to be understood the reader is expected to consider the overall picture, and do so through the eyes of the wolf. These and other matrices found in the novel add to the complexity of

the work, as the reader is kept involved and continually guessing at the possible meaning or meanings of the tales.

### CHAPTER III

#### DELIBERATE CONFUSION ABOUT THE RELATION OF ART AND REALITY

In *The Crossing*, the themes of “art” and “reality” are central and vital to a comprehensive reading of the novel. Wayne Booth writes: “Many modern works use [a] kind of confusing, unreliable narration in a deliberate polemic against conventional notions of reality and in favor of the superior reality given by the world of the book” (288). Because the novel defines “art” and “reality” in a number of ways, Billy and the reader are often left unsure as to which part or parts of the tales shared in the novel are meant to be taken as fact. For this reason, the reader’s task is indeed “a difficult one” (155). Booth notes that as readers “we must experience confusion, we must taste genuine ambiguity if [a story’s] resolution is to seem either convincing or worthwhile” (289). Julie Rivkin agrees that ambiguity causes a necessary confusion and adds to Booth’s argument: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (18). Many vital questions raised in *The Crossing* are left partially or even completely unanswered; but such ambiguity creates multiple readings and a much greater task for the reader as he/she joins with the story’s protagonist on his quest to uncover hidden messages and truths.

The narrator and many of the secondary characters speak of narration a number of times in the novel. This proves that narration can be viewed as an “art” form and also shows that narration is important to the author and vital to a clear understanding of the overall story. In the ex-priest’s tale, for instance, the narrator speaks for the ex-priest:

The task of the narrator is not an easy one. . . . 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. (155)

The ex-priest claims that the storyteller’s task is not to “choose his tale from among the many that are possible,” but is instead to “make many of the one” (155). For the ex-priest, the story itself matters most and the subject and message of the tale are mere secondary components. The ex-priest also states that a skilled storyteller relates his/her story in a way that the tale appears fresh and new on each and every telling. In my opinion, this idea belongs to both the ex-priest and the author. Wayne Booth supports this idea:

Even the novel in which no narrator is dramatized creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails. This implied author is always distinct from the ‘real man’—

whatever we may take him to be—who creates a superior version of himself, a ‘second self,’ as he creates his work. (151)

The nameless, third-person narrator of *The Crossing* tells the story from a position beside the author at a comfortable distance outside the actual novel; and it is possible that many of McCarthy’s opinions and philosophies are shared through the mouth of this narrator. True to the unreliable nature of the novel, however, this idea is only implied; and while some of McCarthy’s opinions are likely expressed through his narrator(s), it is impossible to know exactly when or if McCarthy himself is speaking through others. Paralleling Booth’s statement, the ex-priest also speaks of an “indifferent God”:

Who can dream of God? This man did. In his dreams God was much occupied. Spoken to He did not answer. Called to did not hear. 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. (149)

According to the ex-priest, the man dreamt of an “occupied” God, a God concerned only with the task of “weaving the world.” When taken literally, this idea of an “indifferent” and “unhearing” God certainly relates to the story being told by the heretical ex-priest. In my opinion, however, this paragraph can also be interpreted as a metaphor for McCarthy himself. As author of the novel McCarthy is the creator or “God” of the story. And like the God in the heretic’s dream, McCarthy is the ultimate “weaver” of the tale as he chooses both what and what not to reveal to his readers.

In the ex-priest’s tale, the former preacher states, “Rightly heard all tales are one” (143). In a sense, this statement gives the “teller” of a tale a certain advantage over the

“listener.” The ex-priest claims that the narrator’s task as “teller” of a story is a “difficult one” (155). He also states that it is up to the listener to “hear” the story correctly, ultimately making “all tales one” (155). However, because readers are unique and interpret information differently, it becomes challenging if not impossible for the reader to combine the lengthy and complex tales found in the novel into one and the same tale. Perhaps this is why Billy questions the rancher at the end of the story: “You think most of what a man hears is right?” (418). When the man responds, “That’s been my experience,” Billy interjects, “It aint been mine” (418). From personal experience Billy has learned not to accept as truth many of the tales shared by others. Ironically, the rancher agrees with Billy’s interjection and quickly changes his response: “It aint been mine neither. I just said that” (418). According to Linda Woodson, “through multiple investigations into the relationship of the word and the real, the reader finally stands alongside Billy [at the end of the novel] when he declares that it has not been his experience that most of what one hears is right” (206). Because the majority of the narrators Billy encounters on his three journeys in and out of Mexico prove to be unreliable to some extent or another, both Billy and the reader are often left confused and wondering what is to be taken literally and what is expressed merely as tale.

Readers often become confused when narrators embellish or exaggerate tales. Embellishments can distort reality, but this is not always the primary intent of an author or narrator when he/she chooses to exaggerate or embellish a tale. In *The Crossing*, the narrator and others regularly use exaggerations with the primarily goal of entertaining the audience.

One of the most fantastic tales in the novel is related to Billy by a traveling gypsy. The fact that McCarthy chooses an entertainer to relate this tale is clearly not accidental. Prior to telling the story of the lost airplane, the gypsy relates, “Con respecto al aeroplano, . . . hay tres historias. Cuál quiere oír?” (403) (With respect to the airplane, . . . there are three histories. Which do you want to hear?). This statement shows that the man’s central focus isn’t that of telling the “correct” version of the story (if in fact a “correct” version of the story even exists), but it is instead to tell a tale that will be interesting to Billy and the others present. The narration continues: “Billy smiled. He said that he wished to hear the true history” (404). When asked for the “true history” the gypsy’s reactions are telling. The dialogue reads: “The gypsy pursed his lips. He seemed to be considering the plausibility of this” (404). Before the actual tale even begins, both Billy and the reader are alerted by the gypsy’s words and actions. The gypsy states that three separate histories exist regarding the airplane[s], but the storyteller questions the existence of a “true history,” telling Billy and the reader that the story about to be told is more likely an “art” work than a “factual” tale. As the story progresses, any doubts regarding the tale’s authenticity are further dispelled. The tale begins with the gypsy noting, “certain facts were known” (404) regarding the lost airplane[s]. According to the gypsy, “certain facts” are clear, but the term “certain” by all means doesn’t include each and every fact that may or may not exist in the “true” tale of the lost airplane[s]. Even if the gypsy were to attempt to relate the tale in a factual manner, he admits that he does not know all the facts and therefore his reliability is questionable at best.

The gypsy storyteller smokes a number of cigarettes as he relates his tale to Billy and his fellow travelers. This act may appear to be inconsequential to the novel, but a

close reading reveals that each time the man smokes he buys himself much needed time to further “create” his tale. The narration reads,

He [the gypsy] drew carefully at the stub of the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, one dark eye asquint against the smoke rising past his nose in the motionless air. Finally Billy asked him whether it made any difference which plane it was since there was no difference to be spoken of. The gypsy nodded. He seemed to approve of the question although he did not answer it. (404)

In this paragraph, the gypsy “draws carefully” on his cigarette. With each puff, the clock continues to tick until Billy “finally” interrupts the scene to ask the gypsy a question. As related in the text, the gypsy approves of Billy’s question, but for some reason or another neither he nor the narrator chooses to answer it. Later in the tale, the act of smoking is again referred to by the narrator:

He [the gypsy] smiled. He smoked the last of the cigarette to an ash and let the ash fall into the fire and blew the smoke slowly after. He licked his thumb and wiped it on the knee of his trousers. He said that for men of the road the reality of things was always of consequence. (404)

The narrator continues to speak of smoking a few pages later: “The gypsy in the meantime had rolled another cigarette and lit it. He considered how to continue” (406). Before revealing additional information regarding the history of the airplane[s], the gypsy is said to “smoke a cigarette to an ash”, “slowly” blow smoke toward the fire, and “consider how to continue” his tale. These and other instances describing the gypsy’s use of cigarettes proves that the man smokes not just out of habit or for pleasure, but perhaps



most importantly he smokes to gain the valuable time needed to create and deliver his tale in an exciting and believable fashion.

It is also ironic that the gypsy chooses to discuss the “reality” of things (404). The narrator speaks for the gypsy:

He said that the strategist did not confuse his devices with the reality of the world for then what would become of him? El mentiroso debe primero saber la verdad. . . . De acuerdo? (The liar must first know the truth. . . . Do you agree?). 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. (404-05)

The gypsy speaks truth when he states that the liar must first know the “real story” in order to lie, but his intentions in telling the tale are never revealed, leaving the reader to question whether or not the gypsy has chosen to relate the “true” story. The gypsy also invites Billy to question the tale, advising him not to assume that all that one hears is truth. The gypsy relates, “men assume the truth of a thing to reside in that thing without regard to the opinions of those beholding it” (405). McCarthy’s gypsy gives this advice with both Billy and the reader in mind, and ironically, after having just invited his “audience” to closely examine the tale about to be told, the gypsy next proceeds to relate one of the biggest whoppers found in the entire novel.

Throughout the gypsy’s tale, subtle clues exist (like the many references to smoking) to support my claim that the tale is more fabrication than reality. For the casual reader who may have overlooked such subtleties in the narration, McCarthy also gives

direct clues in the gypsy's tale making it virtually impossible for even the most careless of readers to miss certain faults in the narration. The tale begins, for instance, with the gypsy explaining to Billy how he and his men had ventured into the mountains to retrieve a lost airplane:

There with rope and windlass they would lower the thing to the river and there build a raft by which to ferry it carcass and wings and struts all down to the bridge on the Mesa Tres Rios road and from there overland to the border west of Palomas. Snow drove them from the high country before they ever reached the river. (406)

The gypsy's detailed description of both where and how he and his men initially secured the airplane makes it difficult for the reader to doubt the validity of the story. The sentences immediately following this description, however, force the reader to question the reliability of the tale. The narration continues: "The other men about that pale dayfire seemed to attend his words closely. As if they themselves were only recent conscriptees to this enterprise" (406). It is certainly possible and even likely that the traveling gypsies enjoy telling stories and are genuinely interested in hearing the man's tale, but the words of the primary narrator force the reader to question the reliability of the gypsy. The narrator states that the men "seemed to attend his words closely. As if they themselves were only recent conscriptees to this enterprise" (406). The word, "seemed" and the phrase, "as if" clearly shows doubt on the narrator's part. Furthermore, if the men actually are "recent conscriptees" to the gypsy's storytelling "enterprise," then there is no question but that the story contains falsified or even invented information. As the tale continues, the gypsy speaks of a God who would never permit man to know the future

(407). Perhaps attempting to defend this statement, the man next speaks of a sorcerer and a dreamer and how neither of these two could ever come to know God's intentions without first being destroyed. This dialogue sounds logical, but as a gypsy the man is hardly authorized to speak for God. Furthermore, and directly following the gypsy's words concerning the ways and designs of God, the narration reads, "He [the gypsy] paused that all might contemplate this. That he might contemplate it himself" (407). The gypsy's statements on the power of God and His will sound logical, but if the narrator is correct that the gypsy also paused to "contemplate" his own words, it becomes clear that the gypsy is far from having all the answers. This fact may not directly tie to the history of the airplane[s], but because the gypsy attempts to speak of a subject beyond his reach and/or comprehension, the audience is forced to question if the gypsy can be trusted, and if so, to what extent.

Perhaps the most damaging statement regarding the validity of the gypsy's tale occurs after the actual story has been told. With the gypsies gone and his horse now "healed," Billy continues his journey towards America and soon meets a man traveling in the opposite direction towards Mexico. According to this man, the airplane had not come "out of the sierras and down the Papigochic River" as the gypsy storyteller had said, but it had "come out of a barn on the Taliafero Ranch out of Flores Magón" (418). Ironically, just as Billy and the reader have reasons to doubt the gypsy's reliability, there are also reasons to doubt the tale of the passing rancher. As I discussed earlier, when Billy asks the rancher if he thinks that men generally tell the truth, he initially answers, "That's been my experience" (418). Billy's response, "It aint been mine," (418) elicits a change in the man's answer, and he quickly interjects: "it aint been mine neither. I just

said that” (418). Perhaps feeling guilty for lying to Billy in the first place, the rancher continues to retract statements: “I wasn’t over yonder like I said neither. I’m a four-F. Always was, always will be” (418). The man admits to several lies in a matter of minutes, leaving Billy with no reason to trust him. After hearing the man’s claim that he had been shot twice during his lifetime, it is not a surprise that Billy questions, “Did that happen or did you just say it?” (419). With both the gypsy and the rancher acting as unreliable narrators, McCarthy leaves the “true” history of the airplane[s] uncertain or perhaps even untold and the reader is left alone with Billy to unscramble the tale.

In part one of *The Crossing*, the early scenes revolve around the Parham family’s attempt to capture the wolf. As is common throughout the novel, the narrator uses extreme detail when describing the manner in which Mr. Parham sets the first wolf trap:

He [Mr. Parham] took the deerhide gloves out of the basket and pulled them on and with a trowel he dug a hole in the ground and put the drag in the hole and piled the chain in after it and covered it up again. Then he excavated a shallow place in the ground the shape of the trap springs and all. He tried the trap in it and then dug some more. He put the dirt in the screenbox as he dug and then he laid the trowel by and took a pair of c-clamps from the basket and with them screwed down the springs until the jaws fell open. He held the trap up and eyed the notch in the pan while he backed off one screw and adjusted the trigger. Crouched in the broken shadow with the sun at his back and holding the trap at eyelevel against the morning sky he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. (22)

Such detailed narration suggests that exacting precision is necessary in setting a trap correctly and also aids in convincing the reader that the narrator knows what he/she is talking about. In contrast to the narrator's words, however, Mr. Parham tells his son, "Echols used to pull the shoes off his horse. . . . Oliver told me he'd make sets and never get down. Set the traps from horseback" (23). These sentences are spoken just three short paragraphs after the scene outlining the delicate nature of setting a wolf trap. Mr. Echols may be a legend in the trapping business, but after witnessing the precision necessary to place a trap correctly, can the reader believe that Mr. Echols actually set his traps while on horseback? Furthermore, Mr. Parham states to Billy that "Oliver" was the one that "told me" that Echols could set his traps without first dismounting (23). This seemingly inconsequential bit of information forces the reader to question Oliver's identity. Up to this moment in the narration, Oliver had never been mentioned in the novel. Because the reader knows nothing but the man's name he/she has no way of knowing whether or not Oliver can be trusted. Mr. Echols is certainly a better trapper than Mr. Parham, but the idea that Mr. Echols actually set his traps while on horseback is likely an embellishment.

The blind revolutionary's tale also shows how exaggerations cause confusion for the listener as "reality" is mixed with the "art" of storytelling. Patrick Shaw writes, "the blind man is quite articulate, yet he remains speechless while the wife patiently and fluently conveys most of his dark tale to Billy Parham" (260). As the tale of the blind man unfolds, the husband listens more than speaks. When he does speak, however, the man is both articulate and profound. In fact, one of the most thought provoking statements in the entire tale is related by the blind man. Speaking on the importance of

listening, the blind man relates to Billy, “En este viaje el mundo visible es no más que un distraimiento. Para los ciegos y para todos los hombres. Ultimamente sabemos que no podemos ver el buen Dios. Vamos escuchando” (292) (In this journey, the visible world is nothing but a distraction. For the blind and for all men. We ultimately know that we cannot see the good God. But we must listen). This metaphorical statement proves the intelligence and verbal capabilities of the blind man. True to the unreliable nature of *The Crossing*, however, most of the blind man’s tale is not related by the articulate gentleman who actually experienced the tale, but is instead related by the wife, a mere third-party observer. According to the tale, shortly following the loss of his eyes the man wanders from city to city seemingly without purpose or destination. The man’s wife describes the events and actions of one of these wanderings:

He’d made his way north along the road as told until in nine days’ time he reached the town of Rodeo on the Río Oro. Everywhere he attracted gifts. Women came out to him. They stopped him in the road. They pressed upon him their own possessions and they offered to attend him some part of the way along the road. Walking at his elbow they described to him the village and the fields and the condition of the crops and they named to him the names of the persons who lived in the houses they passed and confided to him details of their domestic arrangements or spoke of the illnesses of the old. They told him of the sorrows in their lives. The death of friends, the inconstancy of lovers. They spoke of the faithlessness of husbands in a way that was a trouble to him and they clutched his arm and hissed the

names of whores. None swore him to secrecy, none asked his name. The world unfolded to him in a way it had not before in his life. (285)

The precision and detail used by the wife when speaking of the man's history supports Patrick Shaw's statement: "Such verbal adroitness suggests that wanderers before Billy have had to play audience to the tale and that the wife has embellished it in the retelling" (260). The fact that the wife had yet to meet the man when this account had supposedly taken place further supports Shaw's argument. Because the blind man's wife is sharing the story of another, the possibility becomes even greater that details are added and subtracted in the telling. Ironically, as the wife embellishes certain parts of the tale, she both leaves out and fails to explain certain things that would further clarify the meaning for the reader. For instance, the final line of the above quoted paragraph reads, "The world unfolded to him in a way it had not before in his life" (285). Perhaps the wife knows how the world of her husband had "unfolded" in new ways following the loss of his eyes, but the reader is only told that the blind man is now trusted more than ever before. Except for this small insight, the reader is left to wonder and guess at the possible meaning or meanings behind the wife's statement. This sentence also parallels a statement made by the narrator earlier in the novel. In the beginning of the third section, Billy stumbles upon the naked primadonna bathing in the river. According to the narrator, this incident changes Billy forever: "The sun rose and the river ran as before but nothing was the same nor did he think it ever would be" (220). As in the case of the blind revolutionary's tale, further explanation is not given directly and the reader is left to wonder if Billy's life has indeed been changed by the experience or if the narrator is simply embellishing the story for reasons yet unknown to the reader. Many months and

more than a hundred pages later, Billy again encounters the primadonna and her band of traveling gypsies now involved in a carnival scam. Prior to being chosen as the winner of the shill's strange card game, Billy learns the true identity of the man and his associates.

According to the narrator,

Billy had already seen bleeding through the garish paintwork old lettering from a prior life and he recognized the caravan of the traveling opera company that he'd seen standing with its gilded wheelspokes in the smoky courtyard of the hacienda at San Diego when he and Boyd had first ridden through the gates there in that long ago and the caravan he'd seen stranded by the roadside while the beautiful diva sat beneath her awning and waited for men and horses to return who would not return ever. (377)

These sentences refresh the reader's memory regarding Billy's past experiences with the caravan and also set the stage for the dialogue that directly follows. Ironically, Billy is the only person amongst the many in the crowd "chosen" to see the shill's grand "espectaculo" (377). The shill grabs Billy by the shirt sleeve and to his amazement hears, "No quiero ver. . . . Oiga, hombre. . . . No quiero verlo, me entiende?" (377) (I don't want to see. . . . Hear me, man. . . . I don't want to see it. Do you understand?). Billy does not reveal his reasons for not wanting to see the great "espectaculo;" but because the narrator chooses to alert the reader that Billy recognizes the carnival workers for who they really are, the reader can assume that Billy wants nothing to do with a fraudulent production. Whether or not this scene entirely clarifies the narrator's statement that upon seeing the primadonna naked, "nothing was the same [for Billy] nor did he think it ever would be," (220) it at least gives the reader some sort of answer to this peculiar statement made



much earlier in the novel. In this sense, the reader begins to understand the ex-priest's claim that "rightly heard all tales are one" (155). For this statement to be possible, however, the reader first must piece together small snippets of information often given at random and somehow create a coherent tale out of the many parts.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONFUSION ABOUT MORAL AND SPIRITUAL PROBLEMS

As I discussed earlier, McCarthy addresses the “art” of narration and storytelling a number of times in *The Crossing*. Because the author regularly chooses to speak on these and other related issues it appears at times that McCarthy writes his novel primarily with the goal of producing a work of “art for art’s sake.” A close reading of the novel proves, however, that McCarthy is not only interested in producing a well-written and structurally challenging “artwork,” but he is also and perhaps equally interested in creating a novel that questions both moral and spiritual truths. Because this duality of purpose exists in the novel, it is often difficult if not impossible for the reader to know the author’s intents when expressing certain themes and ideas. For these and other reasons, reading McCarthy’s *The Crossing* can be a complicated and even frustrating endeavor. I agree with Wayne Booth, however, that the reader must be “le[ft] to choose for himself, and force[d] to face each decision as the hero faces it” (293). Then only will the reader feel the “value of truth when it is attained, or its loss if the hero fails” (293).

The large opening section of the novel revolves around Billy’s attempt to return the captured shewolf to Mexico. Regarding this episode, Dianne C. Luce writes, “Billy is a hunter, but not a killer. He has no wish for the wolf to disappear from the world. Instead, he has the philosopher’s desire to know the wolf herself, even to grasp what Don

Arnulfo has said is essentially unknowable” (134). Prior to capturing the wolf and embarking on a journey that Wade Hall calls, “a pilgrimage of mercy,” (192) Billy leaves his home late one evening and connects with the wolves on a special, even spiritual level:

They [the wolves] were running on the plain harrying the antelope and the antelope moved like phantoms in the snow and circled and wheeled and the dry powder blew about them in the cold moonlight and their breath smoked palely in the cold as if they burned with some inner fire and the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire. . . . He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air. They bunched and nuzzled and licked one another. Then they stopped. They stood with their ears cocked. Some with one forefoot raised to their chest. They were looking at him. He did not breathe. They did not breathe. . . . When he got back to the house Boyd was awake but he didnt tell him where he’d been nor what he’d seen. He never told anybody. (4-5)

According to the narrator, the wolves “burned with an inner fire” and “seemed of another world entire.” The narrator also states that Billy felt the “electrical presence” of the wolves. It is not clear how the narrator knows this information, but the terms used in describing this scene makes it clear that the boy has indeed connected with the wolves on a highly spiritual level. Perhaps because of this experience, Billy feels morally obligated to return the captured wolf to Mexico, and on a number of occasions he risks his own safety to do so. Upon entering Mexico for the first time, for instance, Billy encounters

five armed men who wish to buy the wolf. In response to being asked to sell the wolf, the narrator states for Billy, “He said that the wolf had been entrusted into his care but that it was not his wolf and he could not sell it” (90). A few pages later, the wolf is seized as contraband in a small Mexican town and Billy attempts to reclaim her. According to the narrator, “The boy said that the wolf was not contraband but was property entrusted into his care and that he must have it back” (99). In another instance, Billy is offered a coin from the town mayor in exchange for the wolf, but again, Billy defends his “property.” The narration reads:

The boy said that he wanted the wolf. He said that he could not sell her. He said that if there was a fine that he would work to pay the fine or if there was a fee for a permit or a toll to cross into the country he would work for that but that he could not part with the wolf because the wolf had been put in his care (110).

In each of these instances, Billy is less than honest when stating that the wolf had been “entrusted into his care.” Nevertheless, Billy shows great resolve and strong moral character by taking a stance and verbally committing himself as the wolf’s caretaker. In perhaps the most suspenseful scene in the entire novel, Billy carries his commitment to the wolf a huge step further. In the heat of the wolf-baiting scene, Billy enters the ring and physically takes hold of the angry and terrified wolf. This act is dangerous for many reasons as attack dogs, an injured wolf, and hundreds of bloodthirsty Mexicans stand in Billy’s path. This scene emotionally connects the reader to the story’s protagonist and paves the way for the two different tales that result from Billy’s morally charged act. The discussion between Billy and the hacendado’s son is related by the narrator as follows:

The boy repeated what he'd said to the riders he'd met with on the Cajón Bonita in the mountains to the north. He said that he was custodian to the wolf and charged with her care but the young hacendado smiled ruefully and shook his head and said that the wolf had been caught in a trap in the Pilares Teras which mountains are barbarous and wild and that the deputies of Don Beto had encountered him crossing the river at the Colonia de Oaxaca and that he had been intent on taking the wolf to his own country where he would sell the animal at some price. (118)

According to the narrator, the hacendado's son speaks "in a high clear voice like one declaiming to the crowd" (118). Extremely confident that his tale is the only tale that matters, the narrator continues to speak for the young hacendado: "When he was done he stood with his hands folded one across the other before him as if there were no more to be said" (118). To the young man's surprise, however, Billy counters the young hacendado's words:

He looked at the young don and he looked at the ring of faces in the light.

He said that he had come from Hidalgo County in the state of New Mexico and that he had brought the wolf with him from that place. He said that he had caught her in a steel trap and that he and the wolf had been on the trail six days coming into this country and had not come out of the Pilares at all but were in the act of attempting to cross the river and enter those same mountains when they were turned back because of the swiftness of the water. (118)

Both Billy's tale and that of the young hacendado are boldly spoken and resonate as believable, and the existence of the two tales creates a confusing moral dilemma for all involved. From the beginning of the dialogue, Billy makes it clear that his only purpose in saving the wolf is to release her back into the Mexican mountains. His tale is emotionally charged, but neither the reader nor the men witnessing the tale are ever given an explanation as to why Billy so desperately wishes to save the wolf. Realizing this fact, the hacendado's son next questions Billy: "Para qué trajo la loba aquí? De que sirvió?" (118) (Why did you bring the wolf here? What did it serve you?). The answer to this question would certainly bring clarity to the wolf episode, but not surprisingly, the answer is never given. According to the narrator, "All waited for him to answer but he had no answer" (118). Not only does Billy's tale ring strange to the men, but he also fails to answer the young hacendado's questions. The young hacendado closes his remarks by reminding the crowd that Billy is a foreigner and reiterates that it is perfectly logical that a young boy might want to sell the animal for a price. For these reasons, and regardless of the fact that Billy's tale is the "truer" of the two tales, the Mexican witnesses side with the hacendado's son and the brutal "sport" is allowed to continue.

Just as he cares for the wolf, Billy also feels morally obliged to care for and protect his brother Boyd. The narrator states in the novel's opening page:

He [Billy] carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both Spanish and English. In the new house they slept in the 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. (3)

A few pages later, the narration again shows Billy acting in a parental role:

[Narrator] What are you doin? said Boyd.

[Billy] I got up to mend the fire.

[Boyd] What are you lookin at?

[Billy] Aint lookin at nothin. There aint nothin to look at.

[Boyd] What are you settin there for.

[Narrator] Billy didnt answer. After a while he said: Go back to bed. I'll be in there directly. Boyd came on into the kitchen. He stood at the table.

Billy turned and looked at him. What woke you up? he [Boyd] said.

[Billy] You did.

[Boyd] I didn't make a sound.

[Billy] I know it. (20)

These paragraphs prove that Billy is genuinely concerned about his brother's welfare, so concerned in fact that at times he cannot sleep. Ironically, however, when speaking to his brother Billy is rarely cordial, and more often than not the two boys argue over even the most trivial of topics. At one point in the novel, for example, the boys bicker somewhat comically for a number of minutes over whether or not their horses know where they are (189). Certainly, neither of the boys can speak on a horse's behalf, but this fact does not seem to matter. The argument finally comes to an end with Billy stating, "Why don't you go to bed" and Boyd responding, "Why don't you" (189-90). Similar cases of sibling rivalry occur throughout the novel and while the narrator never fully explains the reasons

for such arguments, the reader is not surprised that the two teenaged brothers speak to one another as they do. The relationship between Boyd and Mr. Parham is equally rocky but this father/son relationship is certainly more confusing for the reader. Early in the story, for instance, the narrator makes an unexpected and somewhat awkward transition when the story shifts from how the wolf had cleverly tripped the traps to Boyd being in trouble with his father. The dialogue reads:

[Narrator] They went up to the cabin and got six more of the traps and took them home and boiled them. In the morning when their mother came into the kitchen to fix breakfast Boyd was sitting in the floor waxing the traps. You think that will get you out of the doghouse? she said.

[Boyd] No.

[Mother] How long do you intend to stay sullied up?

[Boyd] I aint the one that's sullied up.

[Mother] He can be just as stubborn as you can.

[Boyd] Then I reckon we're in for it, aint we? (27)

At this point in the story the reader can only guess as to why Boyd is in trouble with his father. The preceding pages make it appear that Boyd had refused to join the family on the last few wolf hunts, but the reader can only speculate that this is the primary cause for the contention between Boyd and his father. The narration continues:

[Billy] You want me to say somethin to him?

[Boyd] No.

[Billy] All right. I wont then. Probably wouldnt do no good noway.



[Narrator] When his father came back from the barn ten minutes later

Boyd was at the woodpile in his shirtsleeves splitting stove chunks.

You want to go with us? his father said.

That's all right, said Boyd.

His father went on in the house. After a while Billy came out.

What the hell's wrong with you? he said.

[Boyd] Aint nothin wrong with me. What's wrong with you?

[Billy] Dont be a ass. Get your coat and let's go. (28)

The dialogue begins with Billy's attempt to mediate between Boyd and his father.

Initially, Billy listens to his brother and respects his wishes when deciding not to talk to his father. But when Boyd chooses not to accompany them on the wolf hunt, Billy states authoritatively, "Dont be a ass. Get your coat and let's go" (28). This scene shows the stubborn character of the Parham family and further illustrates Billy's caring and paternal nature. These scenes also show that the narrator is not concerned about revealing the reasons for why Boyd and his father fight, but he/she certainly wants the reader to understand that Boyd and his father rarely if ever get along. Unfortunately for the boys, Mr. and Mrs. Parham are murdered early in the novel leaving both Billy and Boyd feeling guilty and the reader confused as to what extent such strained relationships figure into the overall message of the novel.

Confusion about moral and spiritual truths is also found in the novel in the form of the "corrido." The main narrator and many of the characters in the novel speak of the "corrido" a number of times in *The Crossing*. For most non-Spanish speaking readers,

the exact meaning of the term “corrido” is likely unclear. Dirk Raat successfully outlines some of the ways the term is used in the novel:

Corridos function as barometers of the Mexican’s attitudes towards events.

The corrido is a kind of collective diary, an ethnohistorical document containing facts about society and history. Most corridos depict the Mexican as either victim or hero and often have themes of intercultural conflict. Many express frustration and anger over Anglo and North American dominance, and are, at times, a call to action. (48)

True to this definition, all of the “corridos” found in the novel are shared by Mexican characters or others who have deep Mexican ties. Raat is correct when he writes that the “corrido contain[s] facts about society and history,” (48) but in *The Crossing*, as time passes and stories travel from one mouth to another, the truth often becomes clouded as narrators add to and take from the actual tales. Raat is also correct when writing that “corridos” commemorate “conflicts,” because in times of extreme sadness and turmoil emotions such as “frustration” and “anger” are both common and expected. When such heightened emotions are elicited, however, the “truth” is often altered as personal biases enter in to take the place of the actual occurrence. For these and other reasons, the “corrido” plays an important role in this discussion of unreliable narration.

Speaking of the “corrido,” Edwin T. Arnold writes, “The ‘corridos,’ the stories of the country: these are the messages, the lessons, the parables McCarthy tells” (16).

Arnold notes that McCarthy uses the “corrido” to express certain feelings and messages, but when the delicate and volatile nature of the “corrido” is mixed with the unreliability of the narration the reader is rarely comfortable and seldom convinced that he/she has

interpreted the tales correctly. Speaking of the “corrido,” for instance, the primadonna gives the following advice to Billy: “Listen to the corridos of the country. They will tell you. Then you will see in your own life what is the cost of things. Perhaps it is true that nothing is hidden. Yet many do not wish to see what lies before them in plain sight” (230). According to the primadonna, the “corridos of the country” play an all-encompassing role in Billy’s quest to find meaning and truth in life. The wise Quijada, however, shares a different opinion concerning the role of the “corrido.” When asked by Billy, “What does the corrido say,” Quijada shakes his head and replies, “The corrido tells all and it tells nothing” (386). The words of Arnold and the Primadonna seem to complement each other as both claim that through the “corrido” all things are revealed. Quijada does not necessarily disagree with the views of Arnold and the Primadonna, but as he sees it, the “corrido” plays multiple roles, on one hand telling all and on the other telling nothing (386). Each of these three statements concerning the “corrido” contain certain truths, but again, much depends on the listener as he/she attempts to understand and interpret the information correctly.

The “corrido” is first mentioned in the novel as Billy leaves the carnival bearing the carcass of the wolf. According to the narrator,

As he [Billy] rode he sang old songs his father once had sung in the used to be and a soft corrido in spanish from his grandmother that told of the death of a brave soldadera who took up her fallen soldierman’s gun and faced the enemy in some old waste of death. (126-27)

In this particular instance, Billy sings the song “of a brave soldadera” as a means of venting his frustration, sadness, and anger towards those who used “his” wolf as sport.

Billy's tale and that of the soldadera revolve around armed conflicts and in both cases the protagonists of the tales are victims. Unlike in the "corrido" of the "brave soldadera," however, Billy is forced to back down from the crowd, which ultimately leads to the wolf's demise. The animal's death ends Billy's quest to return the shewolf to her Mexican home, but through the "corrido" the memory of the wolf lives on in Billy's mind.

Later in the novel, Billy again uses the "corrido" when he attempts to comfort his traumatized horse. In an effort to escape his would-be murderers Billy is forced to run his horse harder and longer than ever before. Having spent the night running and hiding on the desert prairie Billy's horse is visibly exhausted the following morning: "The horse faltered behind him . . . so crusted with white salt rime it shone like some prodigy embarked upon the darkening plain" (274). The narration makes it clear that Billy has dismounted and now leads his exhausted horse on foot. Without water or shelter anywhere in sight Billy next begins to talk to his horse: "When he'd [Billy] said all he knew to say he told it stories. He told it stories in Spanish 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). This scene reminds the reader that Billy finds strength in his grandmother's stories, and although not directly stated, it is likely that he sang to his horse the "corridos" learned in his youth. These and other instances make it appear that Billy understands the purpose and value of the "corrido." Ironically, however, Billy adamantly fights against the "corrido" sung on his brother's behalf. As is often the case in *The Crossing*, just as the reader begins to detect a certain pattern in the work, the narration takes a drastic turn

forcing the reader to question not just the “corrido” at hand, but each and every “corrido” shared to this point in the novel.

In the last section of *The Crossing*, Billy enters Mexico for the third and final time in an attempt to find and rescue his brother Boyd. Because the two had been apart for a number of years, Billy begins his search by returning to the area in which the two boys were first separated and asks if anyone had seen or heard from Boyd. Because of these efforts to locate and save his lost brother, the questionable “corrido” of a heroic Boyd is revealed to Billy and the reader through the mouths of many different narrators.

The tale that develops into the novel’s greatest and arguably most tainted “corrido” begins innocently enough in the third chapter of *The Crossing*. Shortly after being shot, Boyd is cared for by a small group of women in the Mexican town of Mata Ortiz. Still unsure as to whether or not his brother is alive, Billy enters the town and inquires of Boyd’s condition. After being reassured that Boyd lives, a young girl approaches Billy, hands him a “small silver heart” and states, “Un milagro. . . . Para el güero. El güero herido” (298) (A miracle. . . . For the blond. The injured blond). Baffled by the girl’s words and gift, Billy responds, “No era herido en el corazón” (298) (He wasn’t injured in the heart). Billy’s statement makes it appear that he does not understand the true meaning behind the gift and also that certain pieces of information have been excluded from the narration. The girl’s mother adds to Billy’s confusion when stating, “Que jovén tan valiente” (298) (What a valiant young man). As a witness to his brother’s shooting, Billy agrees with the woman but changes the word “valiant” to “brave” (298). In Billy’s mind, Boyd was indeed “brave” and perhaps lucky to have survived the barrage of bullets. But unaware of the “corrido” already circulating on his

brother's behalf, Billy is confused by the actions and words of the Mexican family. Boyd's "corrido" is again mentioned a few pages later as Billy speaks with the "Muñoz woman" (316). In reference to Boyd, the narrator speaks for the woman: "She [Muñoz woman] said that life was dangerous. She said that for a man of the people there was no choice" (317). Somewhat amused and again confused by the woman's words, Billy smiles and asks, "Mi hermano es un hombre del pueblo?" (317) (My brother is a man of the people?). Mrs. Muñoz responds emphatically: "Sí, . . . Claro" (317) (Yes, . . . Clearly). A few lines later Billy again hears of his brother's heroism, this time from the very group of Mexicans that pulled Boyd onto their truck bed saving him from certain death: "They [the Mexican men] spoke of his brother lying with the pistol under his pillow and spoke in a high whisper. Tan joven (So young), they said. Tan valiente. Y peligroso por todo eso. Como el tigre herido en su cueva" (317) (So valiant. And dangerous through all of this. Like the tiger wounded in his cave). The men speak of Boyd in a "high whisper," paying respect to Boyd and the "sacred act" supposedly performed shortly following his wounding. As the narration and Billy's confusion intensifies, Boyd's mysterious "corrido" is revealed in its entirety:

The workers believed that his brother had killed the manco in a gunfight in the streets of Boquilla y Anexas. That the manco had fired upon him without provocation and what folly for the manco who had not reckoned upon the great heart of the güerito. They pressed him for details. How the güerito had risen from his blood in the dust to draw his pistol and shoot the manco dead from his horse. They addressed Billy with great reverence

and they asked him how it was that he and his brother had set out upon  
their path of justice. (317-18)

As an eyewitness to Boyd's wounding and the event that ultimately leads to the death of the manco, Billy knows that the "corrido" shared on his brother's behalf is nothing more than a fabricated tale. Billy also knows that he and his brother had not entered Mexico with the intent of aiding the rebels in their fight for "justice." For these and perhaps other reasons, Billy tells the men "that the accounts of the conflict were greatly exaggerated and that his brother was only fifteen years and that he himself was to blame for he should have cared better for his brother" (318). As in the dialogue concerning the "true" history of the wolf, Billy's version of the story is clearly the "truest" version, but his tale is all but ignored by the audience.

Boyd's "corrido" offers hope to the Mexican men seeking justice but Billy cannot allow the "false" story of his brother's death to exist. According to Linda Woodson, "McCarthy's use of multiple voices and genres reinforces the very point that language becomes reality for us as we exist in a world of many voices that assimilate to form meaning" (201). Mark Busby supports this idea and directly relates it to Billy's struggle regarding the "corrido" of Boyd: "Although Billy believes he knows the truth about Boyd's life and death, now that Boyd has entered history, his story has a life and truth of its own in the corridos" (242). Clearly, and regardless of the narrators' intentions, Boyd's "corrido" replaces the actual events experienced by Boyd during his lifetime and Billy's fear of "language becoming reality" forces him to fight against the tale. Both Billy and the reader know the "true" causes of Boyd's wounding and also the events leading to the manco's death, but because the character of Boyd has been absent from the

novel for a time, one can only speculate as to what his character may or may not have been doing during this period. The mystery of Boyd's "corrido" continues to unfold as Billy hears the song of the "young güero" sung a number of times late in the novel. According to the narrator, "In a bodega in the mountain town of Temosachic he [Billy] first heard lines from that corrido in which the young güero comes down from the north. Pelo tan rubio. Pistola en mano" (375) (Hair so blond. Pistol in hand). Further in the novel, the "corrido" is sung as follows:

Pueblo de Bachiniva  
 Abril era el mes  
 Jinetes armadas  
 Llegaron los seis  
 Si tenía miedo  
 No se le veía en su cara  
 Cuantos vayan llegando  
 El güerito les espera  
 Town of Bachiniva  
 April was the month  
 Armed horsemen  
 Came upon him [six of them]  
 If he was afraid  
 You couldn't see it on his face  
 Many were arriving  
 The young blond man waited for them



(381).

The words of the “corrido” speak of a heroic blond and complements the story told earlier by the Mexican men. Curious to learn more of the tale, Billy asks the young girl if she knows additional verses to the “corrido.” The narrator answers for the girl: “She said that it was an old corrido. She said that it was very sad and that at the end the güerito and his novia die in each other’s arms for they have no more ammunition” (381). The answer given by the young girl supports Billy’s claim that Boyd’s “corrido” contains more fiction than fact. The “corrido” of the “young güerito” may stand as a symbol of hope for many, but because Billy seeks truth more than any other virtue he will never accept this particular tale. Perhaps a number of the stories and “corridos” found in *The Crossing* support the novel’s thematic statement that “rightly heard, all tales are one,” but the reader must not forget that the author never claims that all tales are true.

## CHAPTER V

### SECRET COMMUNION, COLLUSION, AND COLLABORATION

Factors such as culture, language, and religion contribute to a reader's understanding of a story. Because no two people share identical backgrounds or life experiences it is natural for readers to interpret things distinctly. It is also true that characters in novels exist only in writing. For this reason, readers must rely solely on the text when making determinations as to whether or not a character understands a particular statement or action. Wayne Booth writes:

All of the great uses of unreliable narration depend for their success on far more subtle effects than merely flattering the reader or making him work.

Whenever an author conveys to his reader an unspoken point, he creates a sense of collusion against all those, whether in the story or out of it, who do not get that point. (304)

Booth notes that an author can “create a sense of collusion” both against the characters found in the novel as well as against the readers of the story. A reader may believe that he/she understands a particular character or message shared in a text, but as mentioned above, many important and necessary factors must be considered when determining whether or not a reader correctly understands the “unspoken” or even “hidden” message expressed by the author. For these and other reasons, it is common and perhaps even

expected for authors of unreliable texts to secretly withhold information from characters and readers alike.

In *The Crossing*, there are many instances where McCarthy secretly communes, colludes, and collaborates both with and against the reader. Early in the second chapter, for example, Billy speaks to an old man in a small Mexican town. According to the narrator, the man “addressed him [Billy] in a spanish he could scarcely understand” (133). This man not only speaks a dialect of Spanish foreign to Billy, but he is also dressed in a peculiar manner: “He was dressed in odd and garish fashion and his clothes were embroidered with signs that had about them the geometric look of instructions, perhaps a game” (133-34). The narrator makes it clear that this man is unique, but he/she never reveals just who or what the man is. The man’s clothes are “embroidered with signs,” but the reader is never told whether or not the “signs” actually reveal a “hidden” secret or message. Having spurred the interest of both Billy and the reader regarding the true identity of this figure, the narrator continues to speak for the man:

He [the old man] told the boy that although he was huérfano (an orphan) still he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself. (134)

Readers later learn that Billy actually is an orphan, but because Billy “scarcely understands” the Spanish spoken by this man the reader initially wonders if Billy has simply misunderstood the man’s message. This argument is short lived, however, because moments later the man repeats his words: “Eres. . . Eres huérfano” (134) (You

are. . . . You are an orphan). Because neither Billy nor the reader have been given information as to what has or has not been happening back in New Mexico during Billy's absence, this dialogue signals the first time something has been said concerning the deaths of the boy's parents. The text ultimately proves the man's words to be true on all accounts, and therefore, the argument can be made that the oddly dressed man is one of the most reliable figures in the entire novel. At the same time, however, the man's language, dress, and unexplainable knowledge make him appear suspect and leave the reader wondering if, just like the peculiar "signs" found on the man's clothes, the author is hiding something from the reader or perhaps even playing a "game."

According to Booth, "Irony is always in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded" (304). In *The Crossing*, McCarthy uses Spanish as a tool to both include and exclude readers as he secretly communes with those familiar with the language. Most of the characters found in the novel speak Spanish fluently, but this may or may not be the case as far as individual readers of the novel are concerned. The novel is written primarily in English, but ironically, in many of the important scenes, much of the dialogue is related in Spanish. The third chapter of the novel begins, for instance, with Billy attending a play performed by a band of traveling gypsies:

He [Billy] watched the play with interest but could make little of it. The company was perhaps describing some adventure of their own in their travels and they sang into each other's faces and wept and in the end the man in buffoon's motley slew the woman and slew another man perhaps

his rival with a dagger. . . . There was no applause. The crowd sat quietly on the ground. Some of the women were crying. (219)

The narrator's summary makes it clear that the play is both confusing and disturbing for Billy and many of the others present at the production. Being the inquisitive person that he is, Billy asks the primadonna to explain certain portions of the play. In response to his inquiry as to why the clown kills the primadonna, the dialogue reads:

Díganos, Gaspar. Por qué me mata el punchinello?

He looked up at her. He looked at the riders. Te mata, he said, porque él sabe tu secreto.

Paff, said the primadonna. No es porque yo sé el de él?

No.

A pesar de lo que piensa la gente?

A pesar de cualquier.

Y qué es este secreto?

The man raised one foot before him and turned his boot to examine it. It was a boot of black leather with lacing up the side, a kind seldom seen in that country. El secreto, he said, es que en este mundo la máscara es la que es verdadera. (229)

In this instance, the narrator switches from English to Spanish as if the two languages are somehow connected. This difficult writing style may not bother the bilingual English/Spanish speaking reader, but all others are quickly left behind as the story unabashedly rolls on. To make matters worse for the non-Spanish speaker, the narrator continually adds bits and pieces of unrelated information to the English/Spanish

dialogues. In the dialogue quoted above, for instance, the final line reads, “El secreto, he said, es que en este mundo la máscara es la que es verdadera” (229) (The secret, he said, is that in this world the mask is that which is true). The sentence that immediately precedes this statement reads, “It was a boot of black leather with lacing up the side, a kind seldom seen in that country” (229). Again, while the bilingual reader has no problem with the translation, the non-Spanish speaking reader not only misses the point, but he/she may also be misled into thinking that the Spanish speaks of nothing important. In this sense, the author communes with his Spanish speaking readers but collaborates against those who do not speak the language.

The argument can also be made that McCarthy attempts to collude against even those who speak the Spanish language. Shortly following the boys’ first encounter with the Mexican horse thieves, for example, Billy and Boyd enter “the pueblito of San José” and “a few women” are said to “warily” look them over:

What do you think’s wrong here? said Boyd.

I dont know.

Maybe they think we’re gypsies.

Maybe they think we’re horsethieves.

A goat watched them from a low roof with its agate eyes.

Ay cabrón, said Billy.

This is a hell of a place, said Boyd. (267)

The dialogue begins with the Parham boys speculating on how they are being regarded by the townspeople. As the boys nervously speak of being perceived as gypsies or horse thieves, a goat interrupts the scene and “watche[s] them from a low roof.” Following this

sudden and curious break in the dialogue, the narrator speaks for Billy: “Ay cabrón.”

Literally translated, this Spanish phrase means, “oh, billy goat.” Because the narrator speaks of a goat prior to Billy’s statement, both Spanish and non-Spanish speaking readers may dismiss the word as nothing but a reference to the watching animal.

Ironically, the word “cabrón” also means “bastard” in Mexican slang. Because the scene ends with Boyd stating that the town “is a hell of a place,” it is possible that the author uses the Spanish phrase in reference to the difficult situation at hand rather than in reference to the goat that peers with “agate eyes.”

The author also uses Spanish as a tool to secretly exclude readers at the end of the novel. Billy’s final “quest” in *The Crossing* concerns his struggle to rescue the bones of his brother from a Mexican grave. True to the unreliable nature of the novel, Billy is first told that his brother was killed in the town of Ignacio Zaragosa, but he soon discovers that Boyd was actually killed in the town of San Lorenzo. Convinced that he had finally found the town in which his brother had been killed, Billy asks, “Where is my brother buried?” (384). In answer to Billy’s question, Quijada responds, “He is buried at Buenaventura” (384). Billy receives the answer to his question uncharacteristically fast, and because the narrator says nothing more regarding the matter but instead launches into Billy’s next question, few readers catch the irony masked in the Spanish name. When translated into English, the phrase, “Buenaventura” means “Good adventure.” Clearly, Boyd’s sad and untimely death in no way represents a “good adventure.” The hidden irony found in this name is detected by only the closest of readers; and while this bit of information is perhaps not vital to a correct understanding of the novel, such instances of

secret collusion forces the reader to wonder if other, perhaps more important cases of irony continue to remain hidden in the text of the novel.

Another example of irony challenging the reliability of the narration in *The Crossing* is found in many of the references to eating. Granted, in lengthy “realistic” novels such as *The Crossing*, it is not surprising that the author would periodically choose to mention food. What is surprising, however, is the timing in which the narrator chooses to speak of eating throughout the novel. Shortly after leaving the home of the expriest, for instance, Billy is mysteriously fed breakfast by a person thought to have “mistaken him for someone else” (160). The narrator states:

He [Billy] ate alone in the kitchen. There seemed no one about. . . . He mounted up and rode out down the little dusty street nodding to those he passed on his way. . . . Carrying in his belly the gift of the meal he’d received which both sustained him and laid claim upon him. For the sharing of bread is not such a simple thing nor is its acknowledgement.

(161)

In this paragraph, the narrator speaks of Billy’s meal almost sacredly when he/she calls the breakfast a “sustaining gift.” The narrator also states, “the sharing of bread is not such a simple thing.” These sentences make it clear that the act of eating is important to the narrator, and the reader has no reason to doubt that at this particular moment Billy is in fact desperately in need of the meal. This paragraph is ironic, however, because food is rarely represented in such a positive light, and more often than not, the act of eating takes place at the most inopportune times. In the heat of the wolf-baiting scene, for instance, Billy leaves his dying wolf tethered to a pole. Prior to this moment, he enters



the fighting ring, stands alongside a number of wild dogs and his injured wolf, and stares down the barrels of countless guns. With his battle temporarily lost, Billy leaves his wolf, mounts his horse, and begins to leave the town:

He [Billy] crossed the courtyard horseback and nodded to the women and leaned from the saddle and took an empanada from a platter and sat eating it. The horse leaned its long nose down over the table but he pulled it away. The empanada was filled with seasoned meat and he ate it and leaned down and took another. . . . He finished the empanada and then took a sweet pastry from a tray and ate that, putting the horse forward along the tables. The women moved away before him. He nodded to them again and wished them a good evening. He took another pastry and rode the circuit of the courtyard eating it while the horse shied at the passing bats. (121)

During arguably the most suspenseful moment of the entire novel, the narrator pauses to give a detailed description of Billy's meal. More ironic still, however, is the fact that Billy somehow enjoys two meat empanadas along with two pastries at the very moment that his shewolf is losing the battle for her life. Similarly, at the end of the novel Billy pauses in the middle of burying his brother's bones to eat his lunch:

He'd [Billy] taken off his hat and after a while he took off his shirt and laid it across the wall. By what he reckoned to be noon he'd dug down some three feet and he stood the shovel in the dirt and walked back to where he'd left the saddle and the bags and he got out his lunch of beans

wrapped in tortillas and sat in the grass eating and drinking water from the canvascovered zinc bottle. (391)

During both the wolf-baiting episode and the burial scene, Billy finds time to eat. The discussion of eating during these and other emotionally charged moments weakens the power of the narration and leaves the reader wondering if Billy's seemingly important actions are perhaps not as important as they had first appeared.

In *The Crossing*, the narrator often speaks of food and eating in such subtle ways that only the closest of readers are invited to share in the irony. During Billy's visit with the blind revolutionary and his wife, for instance, Billy quietly sits and eats:

They sat at a pine table painted green and the woman brought him milk in a cup. . . . She struck a match to the circular wick of the burner in the kerosene stove and adjusted the flame and put on a kettle and when it had boiled she spooned eggs one by one down into the kettle and put the lid back again. . . . When the eggs had boiled the woman brought them steaming in a bowl and sat down to watch the boy eat. (275)

Because Billy's meal of boiled eggs is related prior to the actual tale of the blind revolutionary, most first-time readers are likely to miss the hidden irony buried in the narration. The actual tale of the blind revolutionary begins with the wife stating that her husband had "lost his eyes in the year of our Lord nineteen thirteen in the city of Durango" (275). As the tale continues, Billy and the reader are told that during a difficult yet defining moment in the man's life, the brave revolutionary had lost his eyes at the hands of a German Huertista. Speaking for the wife, the narrator relates the gruesome event: "He [Wurtz] seized him by the face . . . and suck[ed] each in turn the man's eyes

from his head and sp[at] them out again and left them dangling by their cords wet and strange and wobbling on his cheeks” (276). A few paragraphs later, more details are given: “They tried to put his eyes back into their sockets with a spoon but none could manage it and the eyes dried on his cheeks like grapes” (277). As the horrific tale of the revolutionary’s blinding unfolds, Billy calmly sits, peeling and eating boiled eggs. The boiled eggs referred to throughout the narration appear to symbolize the lost eyes of the revolutionary. Because Billy continues to eat the eggs throughout the tale, some might argue that Billy does not understand the importance of the tale or the sacrifice made by the now blind man. It is equally possible, however, that Billy simply does not see the connection between the boiled eggs and the man’s eyes. Before these and other possibilities can even be discussed, however, the reader must first make the connection between the two objects and include his/herself in the author’s “secret.”

Certain mysteries surround the deaths of Billy’s parents and the question of whether or not the Parham boys are actually responsible for the murders is a hot topic for many critics. In his summary of the novel, Charles Bailey writes that because Billy had led the Indian to his home, and because he later takes the family gun with him to Mexico, the boy actually “kills” his parents (60). On the other end of the argument, Dianne C. Luce writes, “he [Billy] is no more responsible for his losses than is the heretic hermit for the deaths of his parents and little boy, the revolutionary for his blinding at the hands of a madman, or the pilot’s father for the death of his son” (197). Robert Jarett takes a neutral stance, seemingly in-between the statements of Bailey and Luce when writing that Billy feels guilty for his parents’ deaths: “as if [his] act of humanity makes [him] somehow responsible for the murders” (102). Regardless of how a reader chooses to interpret this

particular topic, the narrator succeeds in creating ambiguity and confusion in the minds of readers and scholars alike. The narrator makes it clear that the Parham boys are haunted by the deaths of their parents but he/she never reveals to what extent the murders drive the actions of the boys. As the novel progresses, Billy and Boyd continue to journey in and out of Mexico but the reader is never directly told to what extent the deaths of their parents guide their motives and actions. In many instances, just when the boys appear ready to reveal additional information concerning their deepest feelings, the narration abruptly ends. Upon being reunited with Boyd shortly after the murder of their parents, the following dialogue takes place:

[Billy] You and Pap ever get your differences patched up?

[Boyd] Yeah. About half way.

[Billy] Which half?

[Narrator] Boyd didn't answer. (172)

A day later, Billy tries a second time to learn more of his parents' deaths and the events leading up to the brutal act. According to the narration, shortly after crossing the boundary line into the state of Arizona, "Billy watched his brother until his brother raised up and looked at him" (175). Feeling uneasy because of his brother's staring, Billy picks up the conversation he had begun the night before:

[Boyd] It aint no use you askin me a bunch of stuff.

[Billy] I wasnt going to ask you nothin.

[Boyd] You will.

[Narrator] They sat in the water. The dog sat in the grass watching them. He's wearin daddy's boots, ain't he? Billy said.

[Boyd] There you go.

[Billy] You're lucky you aint dead too.

[Boyd] I dont know what's so lucky about it.

[Billy] That's a ignorant thing to say.

[Boyd] You dont know.

[Billy] What dont I know?

[Narrator] But Boyd didnt say what it was he didnt know. (176)

In both of these conversations, Billy does his best to learn the facts surrounding the murders of his parents. For some reason or another, however, Boyd chooses to withhold the information that his brother and the reader so desperately seek. Because the author chooses to collaborate in secret with Boyd, leaving Billy, the reader, and perhaps even the narrator out of the loop, the mystery behind the Parham family murders is never fully revealed.

Most critics agree that the Mexican Revolution plays a vital role in a comprehensive reading of *The Crossing*. Various narrators speak of the Mexican Revolution in the novel and as quoted earlier in this work, John Wegner states, "In McCarthy's Border Trilogy the story that contains all other stories is the Mexican Revolution" (67). Wegner continues, "Madero's failure is seminal to understanding Mexican history and understanding the Mexico that [Billy] Parham enters in the early-to-mid 1900's" (68). Unfortunately, few contemporary Americans know much about the Mexican Revolution, and fewer still know of Francisco I. Madero and his role in Mexican history. Because *The Crossing* takes place in the mid-1940's along the Mexican border, the character of Billy is perhaps expected to know more about these topics than the

average, modern-day American. But the text proves on many occasions that he too is far from understanding all there is to know about the Mexican Revolution. As Billy begins his third and final journey into Mexico, for example, he enters a Mexican bar for a drink and a short rest. For some reason not revealed by the narrator, Billy chooses to buy drinks for the barman and his friends. Perhaps because of this gesture of goodwill, the men seated at the table invite the boy to join them. Upon sitting at the table, Billy quickly notices that the men are drinking “mescal,” and also that the oldest of the three is very drunk. The narrator describes the scene as follows: “He [Billy] looked at the bottle standing on their table. It was slightly yellow, slightly misshapen. There was no stopper to it nor label and it held a thin lees of fluid, a thin sediment. A thinly curved agave worm” (357). The narrator’s description of the drink makes it clear that Billy does not find the mescal to be appetizing. The bottle is described as being a dingy yellow color and “misshapen.” In direct contrast to the Mexican “mescal,” Billy offers the men “Waterfills and Frazier” whisky (356). The bartender and the two youngest men gladly drink, but the oldest man refuses. Confused by the drunken man’s refusal to drink, Billy asks, “No le gusta el whisky?” (360) (You don’t like whisky?). In response to Billy’s question the narrator and the youngest of the men states, “Es el sello (It’s the seal). . . . He said that he objected to the seal which was the seal of an oppressive government. He said that he would not drink from such a bottle. That it was a matter of honor” (360). This explanation seems logical, but as proven by the drunken man’s retort, Billy’s question is not so easily answered: “Es mentira. . . . No es cuestión de ningún sello” (360) (It’s a lie. . . . It’s not a question of any seal). Perhaps in youthful arrogance, or perhaps in plain stupidity, Billy challenges the old man: “You want to drink that stinkin

catpiss in favor of good american whiskey, you be my guest” (361). To make matters worse, Billy next mocks the man by spitting a mouthful of mescal onto the floor. The scene continues with Billy leaving the bar, wondering if he is about to be shot in the back. The boy is told not to turn if called, but again, Billy disregards the advice he is given and does just this when called by the old man. The climatic scene is related by the narrator as follows:

He [the old Mexican] clawed at his shirt and ripped it open. It was fastened with snaps and it opened easily and with no sound. As if perhaps the snaps were worn and loose from just such demonstrations in the past. He sat holding his shirt wide open as if to invite again the trinity of rifleballs whose imprint lay upon his smooth and hairless chest just over his heart in so perfect an isoscelian stigmata. No one at the table moved. None looked at the patriot nor at his scars for they had seen it all before. (363)

The drunken man’s actions make it clear that the Revolution continues to play a large part in the man’s life. Ironically, however, the old man is not regarded as a hero by his peers but is instead viewed as just another drunk, lost somewhere on the Mexican border.

The scene closes with the narrator words:

What he [Billy] saw was that the only manifest artifact of the history of this negligible republic where he now seemed about to die that had the least authority or meaning or claim to substance was seated here before him in the sallow light of this cantina and all else from men’s pens would

require that it be beat out hot all over again upon the anvil of its own enactment before it could even qualify as a lie. (363)

According to the narrator, the revolutionary represents “the only manifest artifact of the history of [a] negligible republic” (363). Proof is given throughout the novel that Billy’s Mexico is in fact “a negligible republic,” but it is interesting that the narrator states that the Mexican Revolutionary represents “the only manifest artifact” of such a republic. Prior to this point in the novel, Billy has witnessed many acts of brutality and sickness, and poverty has accompanied him throughout his travels. If the narration is correct, however, none of these acts actually classify as “artifacts” of the broken Mexican Republic. The narrator also claims that the revolutionary “had the least authority or meaning or claim to substance” (363). Again, it may be true that the drunken Mexican is seriously lacking in power, but the narrator seems to have overlooked his/her tale concerning the blind revolutionary and his loss of sight at the hands of the German Huertista. Both the drunken revolutionary and the blind man have suffered because of the revolution, and while both stories attempt to prove that the revolution did little but cripple the Mexican people, because the narrator momentarily disregards his/her tale of the blind revolutionary, the reader is left to question the narrator’s motives when he/she states, albeit indirectly, that one tale is greater than the other.

Wayne Booth writes, “In the literature of moral quest there are many works in which the quest is a failure. In some, the confusion is never resolved: the reader is intentionally left baffled about one or more questions raised by the work” (297). As is previously mentioned, most critics agree that *The Crossing* can be read as a quest novel, and few if any would argue that Billy’s “quests” end successfully. After all, his wolf is



butchered, his parents are murdered, his horses are stolen, and his brother's bones are kicked about as if he were nothing but an animal. In these and other instances, both Billy and the reader are left baffled and searching for answers to why things so commonly end in tragedy.

As the novel unfolds, confusion becomes the norm rather than the exception and the reader is hardly surprised with the story's difficult and ambiguous conclusion. Shortly following his encounter with the gypsy, Billy enters "his own country" (421) and begins digging a grave for his dead brother Boyd. As he digs, a sheriff enters the scene and speaks to the boy: "The sheriff shook his head. He looked off out over the country. As if there was something about it that you just couldnt quite lay your hand on" (422). In the last of these sentences, the narrator uses the word "it" to replace the term "country." The narrator wishes to remind the reader that the country is a wild and unpredictable place, and it is no mistake that he/she speaks these words in the very moment that Billy buries his brother. Boyd's senseless death represents another "something" that Billy, the sheriff, and even the reader can't entirely understand. Perhaps most importantly, however, Boyd's burial sets the tone for the dark and mysterious ending which immediately follows.

Shortly after Boyd's burial, Billy is confronted with strong winds and rain, forcing him to seek shelter. Billy finds an abandoned building and soon discovers that he is sharing a roof with a mangy dog. According to the narrator, "It [the dog] had perhaps once been a hunting dog, perhaps left for dead in the mountains or by some highway side. Repository of ten thousand indignities and the harbinger of God knew what" (424). Instead of leaving the dog alone or trying to help the dog as he had done with the wolf,

Billy throws rocks at the animal and chases it out of the building with a pipe. The narrator states:

As it went it raised its mouth sideways and howled again with a terrible sound. Something not of this earth. As if some awful composite grief had broke through from the preterite world. It tottered away up the road in the rain on its stricken legs and as it went it howled again and again in its heart's despair until it was gone from all sight and all sound in the night's onset. (424-25)

The detailed description of the dog Billy encounters in the closing moments of the novel is far from ordinary. The animal is broken and battered, a “harbinger” of disease and “something not of this earth” (424). Ironically, both the wolves spoken of in the novel’s opening pages and the dog introduced in the final pages are said to be “supernatural,” but the young wolves are healthy and fleet of foot while the dog is “twisted” and “stricken” in old age. Similarly, Billy is introduced to the novel as a happy and confident youth, but as the novel concludes, he finds himself alone and dejected and perhaps the mangy dog, not the beautiful wolf symbolically represents the final state of the protagonist. The narrator speaks of Billy’s condition shortly following Boyd’s death: “He [Billy] seemed to himself a person with no prior life. As if he had died in some way years ago and was ever after some other being who had no history, who had no ponderable life to come” (382). To this point in the narration, Billy had always battled adversity, hoping to right the wrongs of others. But with his family now gone, Billy surrenders for a brief moment when realizing that he no longer has a “witness” to tell his tale. The penultimate chapter closes with the protagonist morally and spiritually defeated and the reader perhaps

wondering what is to be gained from the last few days of reading. McCarthy, however, has no intention of ending the story in such a nihilistic fashion.

The closing section of *The Crossing* both literally and figuratively ends with a bang. On the final page of the novel, the narration reads:

He [Billy] woke in the white light of the desert noon. . . . The shadow of the bare wood windowsash stenciled onto the opposite wall began to pale and fade as he watched. As if a cloud were passing over the sun. . . . The road was a pale gray in the light and the light was drawing away along the edges of the world. . . . He looked out down the road and he looked toward the fading light. Darkening shapes of cloud all along the northern rim. . . . He looked again at the road which lay as before yet more dark and darkening still where it ran onto the east and where there was no sun and there was no dawn . . . that noon in which he'd woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark. (425)

According to most scholars, the strange light Billy sees in the novel's closing pages is actually the "white light" from the Trinity test detonation. This event is historically documented as taking place in New Mexico on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1945, about the same time that *The Crossing* ends. Disturbed by this strange occurrence, Billy leaves the adobe building wherein he had spent the night and immediately begins to look for the dog he had chased away the night before. The novel closes as follows:

He [Billy] called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness.

Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind. After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him

and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. He sat there for a long time and after a while the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction. (426)

Alex Hunt writes of the novel's closing paragraph: "Billy's sadness as expressed in the novel's final paragraph is a direct cause of alienation of humanity from the natural world. . . . Billy mourns not only the loss of his murdered family but also the birth of the atomic age" (32). Billy certainly has many reasons to weep at the end of the novel, and it is possible that the protagonist weeps for the very reasons outlined by Hunt. It is also possible, however, that Billy has no idea that the strange light seen early in the morning was a direct result from the testing of an atomic bomb. Similarly, only readers familiar with New Mexican or bomb testing history can be expected to make the connection between the "white light" and the Trinity explosion. The narrator makes it clear that something big and out of the ordinary has taken place somewhere out on the desert plain, but he/she never directly mentions the cause. Perhaps Booth best sums up both the final scene and *The Crossing* as a whole when he writes: "One of the frustrations of criticism is that many of the effects that require explication are of a kind that lose their savor in being made explicit. Their authors left them implicit in the first place because open discussion threatened to destroy them" (307). *The Crossing* certainly ends with many unanswered questions, but because "the right and godmade sun" is allowed to "rise again," (426) hope for a better day exists as the tale lives on to be told another day.

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