

“War is God”: Cormac McCarthy’s Early Fiction

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Cormac McCarthy’s characters are typically outsiders—isolatoes, orphans, desperadoes, and lunatics—who make their lives along the margins of society. They are outcasts either because society has rejected them or because they have rejected society, or both. Arthur Ownby, a central figure in McCarthy’s first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), is a good example. He lives alone in a remote cabin, values his solitary independence above all things, possesses a kind of pre-Christian knowledge of the natural world, and, when he runs afoul of the law, rejects out of hand the ministrations of the social worker who visits him at the county jail. “That old man’s ornery enough,” observes the guard on duty. Yes, the social worker replies, “definitely an anomic type” (222).¹ Technically accurate, this analysis fails to recognize that Ownby’s condition issues from a clear-eyed reckoning with the blankly anomic face of reality as it is represented in the novel. Ironically, the social worker is out of touch, not the client.

The word “anomic” stands out. It is the kind of arcane, academic

term rarely found in McCarthy's work. The noun "anomie" is most familiarly associated with Durkheim's famous sociological study of *Suicide*, published in 1897. It is more recently prominent in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), the classic treatise on the sociology of knowledge by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. While I am not suggesting that McCarthy took time out from fiction writing to study sociology, I am struck with certain marked similarities between his approach to reality and that of Berger and Luckmann. In both, most crucially, the social and moral and spiritual worlds are human constructions. In both, it follows, the threatened encroachment of anomie—of disorder, chaos, literally lawlessness—is real and ever-present.

The Orchard Keeper opens with a brief episode in which an iron fence that once enclosed a cemetery is found embedded in a tree. Random natural process here overruns constructed boundaries separating the sacred and the profane; human designs are swept away by a potent and relentless nonhuman ordering. McCarthy writes copiously and eloquently about nature, but there are no sermons in his stones. "Old dry leaves rattled frail and withered as old voices, trailed stiffly down, rocking like thinworn shells downward through seawater, or spun, curling ancient parchments on which no message at all appeared" (3). Arthur Ownby seems intuitively to grasp that conventional human constructions of reality are devoid of metaphysical foundations and inattentive to the harsh facts of natural life. "Cats is smart," he observes (244), clearly implying that most humans—people like the educated, data-gathering, well-meaning social worker—are not. Cats will "tear up anything they come up on, a cat will. Housecats is smart too. Smarter'n a dog or a mule. Folks think they ain't on account of you cain't learn em nothin, but what it is is that they won't learn nothin. They too smart" (227).

My perspective here is influenced by Vereen M. Bell's incisive and eloquent *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (1988), which surveys the five early novels (*The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark* [1968], *Child of God* [1973], *Suttree* [1979], and *Blood Meridian* [1985]) published before the more famous Border Trilogy (*All the Pretty Horses* [1992], *The Crossing* [1994], and *Cities of the Plain* [1998]) began to appear in 1992. In each

of these early novels, Bell argues, "existence not only precedes but precludes essence." There is some evidence of

a residual yearning for ontological certainty. . . . But this nostalgia is subordinated forcefully to the opposing conviction, implied everywhere, that absolute certainty is always a form of unfreedom; that an administered world is, for the individual, a deprived one; that ideas and systems, the pursuit of essences and of first principles, are as dangerous and reifying as imposed social orders. (8)

It follows that the early novels make scant room for religion and religious values, which are suspect precisely because they contribute so massively to the pernicious illusion of ontological certainty. To live honestly and freely, it is clearly implied, is to endure with stoical resolve the fundamental anomie of the human condition.

Berger and Luckmann share McCarthy's assumption that reality is inherently chaotic and meaningless, and that humans characteristically respond by constructing an elaborate, all-embracing fictional order which shields them from chaos. The constructed order, or *nomos*, thus stands between humans and anomic reality. But Berger and Luckmann do not share McCarthy's sense that we are necessarily diminished and endangered by the certainties that our constructed order affords us. To the contrary, they regard the nomic artifice as both essential and inevitable. "All social reality," they insist, "is precarious. All societies are constructions in the face of chaos." To be deprived of the constructed social order—that is, to be anomic—is hardly a threshold on freedom. Rather, it is "to be exposed, alone, to the onslaught of nightmare." Anomie numbers among its horrors the agony of isolation in a meaningless void, the dissolution of identity, and most terrible of all, unsheltered exposure to the specter of death. Freedom of any kind, it follows, must have its foundation in liberation from anomic terror, a condition achieved through the varieties of world-construction to which humans are constitutionally disposed (100–03).

The sacred, which Berger juxtaposes to both the profane and the chaotic, is the ultimate shield in the human arsenal of defenses

against anomie. He develops this idea in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion* (1967), which may be read as a sequel to *The Social Construction of Reality*. The principal antagonist in the crusade against disorder is death, which poses a radical challenge to all social constructions of reality. "Every human society," Berger generalizes, "is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death." It follows that "the power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it" (26, 28, 51). For Berger, anomie is the horror from which we reflexively retreat into fictions of order, the sacred order principal among them. Because "men are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality" (22), and because death interposes such a towering obstacle to their designs, religion and the values to which it gives rise are a prominent feature of any social order. In the early novels of Cormac McCarthy, by contrast, anomie is the liberating truth toward which his protagonists—whether marginal, insane, or heroically stoical—are drawn. It is an attraction invariably bound up with the rejection of conventional values, religious and secular, and with the embrace of fear, disorder, violence, and death—above all, death. McCarthy is our great prose-poet of death. Death is cruel, inexorable, annihilating, and fatally seductive. McCarthy's leading and often most attractive characters are consumed by death, by fear of it and by an equally urgent attraction to it.

Berger and McCarthy are at one in construing anomie as a condition most characteristically observed in those living on the margins. For it is from the outside that the constructed nature of the insider's social order is most conspicuous. While Berger and Stanley Pullberg concede in their 1964 essay that individuals may seek marginality as a way of penetrating the taken-for-granted assumptions of their societies, they are far from romanticizing such departures (210). By contrast, McCarthy represents the margins as hard but privileged ground, occupied by those with the honesty and courage to face life without illusions. Living the truth is at once heroic and miserable, though the misery is more evident in the first three novels and the heroism in the two that

immediately followed. The mortal predicament is gathered up in an image from *The Orchard Keeper* of an old, abandoned, and doomed dog who appears as "some atavistic symbol or brute herald of all questions ever pressed upon humanity and beyond understanding" (205). The title of McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, recalls Matthew 8:12, in which Christ describes hell as "the outer darkness" where "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Arnold 44). The reference is entirely apt for a blood-drenched narrative featuring (among other regional delights) incest, infanticide, and lynching, in which a hard-hearted tinker aptly observes: "I've seen the meanness of humans till I don't know why God ain't put out the sun and gone away" (*Outer Dark* 192). Bell observes that McCarthy "seems most concerned" in the novel "to deny the world of the grids of understanding we habitually impose upon it—ethical, psychoanalytical, cultural—in order to force us to renew our acquaintance with it as . . . an incoherent and unrationalized gestalt of mass and process, without design or purpose" (38). Quite so! Lester Ballard, the protagonist in *Child of God*, is marginal man par excellence, "a practitioner of ghastliness" and "part-time ghoul" who lives in caves where he hides the decaying victims of his necrophilia. Despite his ghastly excesses, Lester is evidently one of us, a "child of God," the narrator muses, "much like yourself perhaps" (4).

Suttree, McCarthy's fourth novel, arguably his most ambitious and his best, is a powerful, evidently autobiographical exploration of marginality and madness. The novel's eponymous hero, Cornelius Suttree, is educated and tormented, a lapsed Catholic who has willfully exiled himself from family and privilege to live among the downtrodden and degraded in the slums of Knoxville, Tennessee. He chooses this desperate existence because of its authenticity, what he takes to be the dark truth of the human lot; and herein lies his heroism, his stoical refusal to retreat into consoling illusions. He rejects with contempt the "christian witchcraft" that he was brought up to, accepts that "there are no absolutes in human misery," and that the idea of redemption is a groundless illusion (304, 372, 306). At the same time that he acknowledges his fear of death, Suttree longs for release into oblivion. "How surely are the dead beyond death," he reflects. "Death

is what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of a bitter memory. But the dead do not remember and nothingness is not a curse. Far from it" (153). Though the novel ends with brief, tentative gestures of affirmation, they do little to relieve the accumulated weight of disenchantment. Suttree may glimpse some final, huddled human solidarity, but there is no evidence that the light penetrates his settled nihilism. There are no resurrections in his Knoxville.

A fuller analysis of *Suttree* would yield ample confirmation of the existential heroism on display in the suffering of its protagonist. But focusing here specifically on the literary West, I hasten to shift ground from the mountain country of eastern Tennessee to the arid borderlands of the remote southwest, and thus to the last and best known of McCarthy's early novels, *Blood Meridian*. Having made this move, I am half-willing to concede that geography alone doth not a western novel make. For in spite of its setting and demonstrable attention to regional history, *Blood Meridian*, with its graphic extremes of violence and bloodshed, its gothic tone and thematics, and its literary consanguinity with the work of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, may appear to some readers a southern novel somewhat arbitrarily displaced onto a western geography. The narrative recounts the ensanguined exploits of a band of American outlaws who make their living, and meet their destruction, slaughtering Indians along what would in time become the Mexican border. The ostensible return on their barbarous labor is the large bounty guaranteed by the Mexican authorities for Indian scalps. But the indiscriminate killing has a deeper and darker motive: it carries its agents to the remote margins of human experience, to a land "whose true geology was not stone but fear" (47), where all ties to conventional values—love, sacrifice, charity—are severed and where the nihilistic embrace with death may be consummated. The outlaw leader, Judge Holden, a bizarre figure—enormous, white, hairless, antic (often observed naked), learned, ruthless, and the sole survivor—presides over the ferocious quest and formulates its rationale. Like Melville's Ahab, he catechizes his men in a religion of war and death, baptizes them in blood, and thus produces "the disciples of a new

faith" (130).

Though forcefully articulated and largely compelling for his followers, the Judge's philosophical justification for a life of ceaseless carnage is evidently contradictory. On one side, he presents himself as an unflinching advocate of the truth that war is the unvarying essence of human history: "War was always here," he declares. "Before man was, war waited for him." It must therefore be counted as sacred. For "if war is not holy," he reasons, then "man is nothing but antic clay." Like the old orchard keeper, Arthur Ownby, the Judge aligns himself with the predatory cats who refuse instruction in conventional values because it would conflict with their true vocation, which is killing. Echoing (or anticipating) Nietzsche, the Judge dismisses the "moral law" as "an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn." And at the bar of history—the record of unending human warfare—"there can be no special pleading. Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void." Dismissing as he does all moral constraints, the Judge's appeal to history thus serves as the foundation for his declaration that "war is god" (248–50, 307).

But even as he presses his case, the Judge appears to undermine it. For running sharply against the grain of his historical determinism is the erstwhile admission that all knowledge is transient illusion. "The truth about the world," he declares,

is that anything is possible. . . . More things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others. (245)

But while the Judge acknowledges that the phantom of life is ungraspable, he is far from surrendering to the mystery. The task, as he sees it, is to elaborate a structure, a unique string in the maze, not as an unridling of reality, which is impossible, but as a way of defining the terms

by which the world is understood. As he puts it, “that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate” (199). It does not occur to those of his followers who occasionally resist the Judge’s religion of war that his theology may itself be the kind of self-serving “string in the maze” that he here describes, one among many possible threads of order seized upon as a way of dictating “the terms of his own fate,” and, as it happens, their fates as well. To the considerable extent that he defines the reality which his followers inhabit, the Judge rules their lives. It is a measure of his boldness and self-confidence that he is willing to reveal to his men the cynical means by which he manipulates them; for in doing so the Judge clearly concedes that there *are* alternatives to his nihilistic religion of war.

Toward the very end of the novel, the Judge describes the encounter with the existential abyss from which religions take rise:

That feeling in the breast that evokes a child’s memory of loneliness such as when the others have gone and only the game is left with its solitary participant. . . . You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness and the despair. It is that which we take arms against, is it not? (329)

He begins, then, as Berger does, on the assumption that social constructions of reality, and most especially religions, are the universal human response to anomic terror. There is agreement as well that the terror has death at its dark epicenter. But here the similarities end and the paths radically diverge. The Judge’s religion of war is not, as critic Tim Parrish has observed, sacred violence of the type described by René Girard, in which we prevent total surrender to murder and ultimate extermination by performing sacrifices for which responsibility is shared. Though the Judge describes the murder of “the kid,” his last follower, as a sacrifice, the blood is spilled “not in the name of redemption, but *in the name of unending violence*” (Parrish 37). This

is random, ceaseless killing for its own sake, the kind of murderous rage often ascribed to children when they are deprived of the bliss afforded them by their mother's attention and nourishment. The Judge's religion, in other words, is the reflex of a snot-flying rage. McCarthy seems to gesture in this direction with his final description of the Judge, exulting in the bloody sacrifice of his last victim: "Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant" (*Blood Meridian* 335).

The Judge is a striking figure, to be sure; but there is nothing admirable about him, nothing in his rather sophomoric, if lethal, ruminations that we need to take seriously or to emulate. Certainly, I cannot assent to Steven Shaviro's view that *Blood Meridian* "is a euphoric and exhilarating book" from which, as our "pulses quicken" in sympathetic response to the slaughter, "there is no pulling back." Nor can I accept his notion that the novel is a political allegory of "the American dream of manifest destiny [which] must be repeated over and over again, ravaging the indifferent landscape in the course of its lemmings' march to the sea." But then I recoil most vigorously from what appears to be Shaviro's grounding assumption, that "we all end up like the kid, violated and smothered in the shithouse" (154-55). If you believe that, then it's likely that *Blood Meridian* will speak powerfully to your condition. For myself, though I readily acknowledge the book's energy and color and distinctive style, I find its characters quite two-dimensional and its preoccupations extreme. Its action is the stuff of nightmare and madness; its warriors, Indians included, are deranged sociopaths. True, the Judge and his men share with the rest of us a vulnerability to visitations of anomie; they face the abyss, and they shrink from the mystery of death, as we all do from time to time. But they do not cope with the universal human predicament, as virtually all other people do, by taking shelter in the social constructions of reality available to them. Rather, the bounty hunters follow the Judge to the "outer dark," where they disappear into the void that awaits them there. They reject, in a way that most adults would not, even if they could, the social, moral, and cosmic order that they were given at

birth. They choose to be infantile. Though I doubt that it was written with such things in mind, *Blood Meridian* may be read as a cautionary tale about the dire consequences of straying too far from the ordered center. McCarthy's outlaws may suppose that their rebellion has its reward in freedom from social convention and restraint; but as Bell has observed, their decision to follow the Judge in fact "indentures them to death" (118).

If Berger and Luckmann are right about it, such freedom as we enjoy as humans has its foundation in our largely unspoken agreement to accept the basic terms of life as they are delivered to us in our early years. This is the order that shields us from anomie and thus frees us to make meaningful choices. It must be obvious that some constructions of reality are more conducive to justice and freedom than others. The Judge's religion of war is a good illustration of how not to proceed; Nazism is another. But the constructive answer to oppressive orders is resistance and reform, not recoil into disorder. Why the leading characters in McCarthy's early fiction do not seek the consolations of entry into the social order is a mystery. It is a *donnée* of much American literature, of course, that society is inherently corrupt and corrupting. But McCarthy's protagonists are not motivated by a principled rejection of social injustice. In some cases, their marginality has its explanation in madness. For example, Lester Ballard, the necrophiliac protagonist in *Child of God*, keeps to the outside because he is insane. In the case of Cornelius Suttree, on the other hand, or of Judge Holden and his followers, the willful pursuit of violent disorder and death is much harder to explain. "My life is ghastly," Suttree quite correctly observes, but then takes none of the obvious steps to change it (348). The same is basically true of the leading characters in *Blood Meridian*, whose untoward and finally unexplained rejection of ordered and life-enhancing sociality makes them seem alien, abstract, and unaffectionate. Their barbarism makes no human sense.

In upshot, then, religion and religious values have virtually no part to play in the early fiction of Cormac McCarthy. This is because received constructions of reality play no part in the lives of the leading

characters in these novels. Rather, McCarthy's narratives explore the social margins, where the consolations of the taken-for-granted are either unavailable or rejected. McCarthy's marginal settings and actors are the literary expression of a gravitation to metaphysical and epistemological questions—questions about the true nature of reality and about the social fictions that obstruct our view of that truth. Ironically, the lack of self-reflexivity in his writing—most markedly missing in the early novels—signals a reluctance to acknowledge that his elaborate and highly stylized narratives are themselves fictional constructions. As the result, there is little play in the novels; save for scattered moments of very dark humor, it is a solemn business of getting down to the awful, inexorable truth of our condition. Little wonder that there is so little room in McCarthy's writing for growth and change, for love, for laughter, for redemption. There is no God in McCarthy's early fiction, only a dream of Him, and a very bad dream at that.

If McCarthy's five early novels are *Paradise Lost* (almost on purpose), then the more recent *Border Trilogy* is *Paradise Regained* (at least partially). Life in the latter novels is still harsh and unjust; death, fearsome and final, continues to dominate the foreground. But life is nonetheless affirmed. In the first volume of the *Border Trilogy*, *All the Pretty Horses*, it is passionate abandon—ardent-heartedness—which the hero, John Grady Cole, admires in men and horses. Because a horse lives fully in the moment, an old sage explains, it “had no need of heaven” (111). For ardent-hearted men and women, however, it is not so simple, for to passion (which is instinctive in horses) they bring the burden of consciousness. They come to recognize that passionate abandon in love always ends in tragedy; passionate ideals always end in disillusionment. It is thus the fate of the ardent-hearted to suffer the inevitable fall from love and idealism. John Grady Cole learns that “the world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting” (238).

Along the way, however, they have the support of such institutions as law and morality and religion, which the novel affirms at intervals of justice and goodness and saving faith. These are fragile supports, to

be sure; they are fallible human constructions, while “the order in the horse’s heart,” as John Grady Cole learns in a dream, “was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it” (280). Trust your heart above all, but trust God, too. “You think God looks out for people?” asks Lacey Rawlins, John Grady Cole’s faithful friend.

Yeah. I guess He does. You?

Yeah. I do. Way the world is. . . . You don’t know what’s going to happen. I’d say He’s just about got to. I don’t believe we’d make it a day otherwise. (92)

Here, then, are the basic elements of an argument for the construction and careful maintenance of “the sacred canopy.” There is a good deal more of this in *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, a kind of bending to the human that has earned McCarthy a vastly expanded audience and no little fame and fortune. There is no accounting for the change, though it seems possible that *Blood Meridian* transported him to the absolute outer limit of darkness, from which there was no way to turn except back toward the light. What he has come around to, as the brief dialogue from *All the Pretty Horses* clearly suggests, is a much more favorable view of human social constructions, religion among them. This development is another story, a topic that falls outside the limits of this essay. Suffice it to say that the warming trend in McCarthy’s work has been widely observed, and will be readily—and even gratefully—acknowledged by many in his expanding audience of admirers. The trend is nowhere more emphatically on display than in his recent play *The Stonemason* (1994). At the play’s conclusion, Ben Telfair, a middle-aged family man and craftsman, has a vision of his dead grandfather, in which the old man’s ideals, as they were expressed in his masonry, are affirmed as a model for all human endeavor.

Ben recognizes, perhaps for the first time, how much the living are in debt to those artisans of reality who have gone before them, shaping the ordered social constructions which shield their descendants from the terror of disorder and death. “He was just a man,” Ben re-

flects,

naked and alone in the universe, and he was not afraid and I wept with a joy and a sadness I'd never known and I stood there with the tears pouring down my face and he smiled at me and he held out both his hands. Hands from which all those blessings had flowed. Hands I never tired to look at. Shaped in the image of God. To make the world. To make it again and again. To make it in the very maelstrom of its undoing. Then as he began to fade I knelt in the grass and I prayed for the first time in my life. I prayed as men must have prayed ten thousand years ago to their dead kin for guidance and I knew that he would guide me all my days and that he would not fail me, not fail me, not ever fail me. (132-33)

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