

‘Carrying the Fire’:

Cormac McCarthy’s Moral Philosophy

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that the question of ethics, despite claims to the contrary, is a central concern in Cormac McCarthy's fiction. My principal contention, in this regard, is that an approach that is not reliant on conventional systems of meaning is needed if one is to engage effectively with the moral value of this writer's oeuvre. In devising such an approach, I draw heavily on the 'immoralist' writings of Friedrich Nietzsche.

The first chapter of the study contends that good and evil, terms central to conventional morality, do not occupy easily definable positions in McCarthy's work. In the second chapter, the emphasis falls on the way in which language and myth's mediation of reality informs choice. The final chapter focuses on the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road*, in which normative systems of value are completely absent. It argues that, despite this absence, McCarthy presents a compassionate ethic that is able to find purchase in the harsh world depicted in the novel.

Finally, then, this study argues that McCarthy's latest novel, *The Road*, requires a reconsideration of the critical claim that his work is nihilistic and that it negates moral value.

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Introduction

My engagement with Cormac McCarthy began with a reading of *The Road*. In a bleak, post-apocalyptic setting, a father and son must not only struggle to stay alive, but also to discover what meaning may be found in such a world. My initial response to the novel was conflicted. It is impossible to escape from its often overbearing violence, and yet, amongst the chaos, there is a deep sentimentality in the relationship of father and son. I found that it was quite difficult to reconcile these two experiences, particularly as much of the dialogue between the pair also has an ethical undertone. To some extent, what troubled me about McCarthy's portrayal of violence is also what concerned one of Blake G. Hobby's students, in an Honours course at the University of North Carolina. Hobby describes how the student in question struggled to identify the moral worth of McCarthy's work. The question that was repeatedly raised was "what moral value does [his] literature have?" ("Cormac McCarthy Project").

In an attempt to come to terms with my experience of this novel, I delved into criticism of McCarthy's writing in general. Much recent material, I found, explored areas other than the violence portrayed in his fiction. For instance, Jay Ellis examines gender and the importance of location in the author's oeuvre, arguing that landscape is often more important than character in driving plot (*No Place for Home*). Dianne C. Luce, in an attempt to trace the historical and philosophical influences on his writing, examines, among other things, local history and newspaper accounts from the period McCarthy spent in Tennessee (*Reading the World*). By contrast, Megan Riley McGilchrist and Georg Guillemain adopt an ecocritical approach to his work (*The Pastoral Vision*).

While these responses to McCarthy's writing are often accomplished, and never less than interesting, they did not help me to explain my ambivalent response to the strange combination of violence and compassion in *The Road*. On reading more material, I soon found that the prevailing issue in McCarthy criticism has, in fact, always been this writer's treatment of violence, and the ethical issues attendant on it. Early responses to the fiction tended to read its portrayals of violence as a negation of ethics. In one of the first full-length explorations of its nihilism, Vereen Bell, for instance, says that "nothing can be taken to stand as truth" in McCarthy's fiction (*Achievement* 135). As Nathan P. Carson notes, many scholars see McCarthy as a wholesale nihilist whose characters are unable to transcend the violence

and depravity that they encounter (“Transformation”). In similar vein, Mathew Quinn argues that this author’s characters are primitive and inhuman (108).

Such responses suggest that McCarthy’s work is devoid of ethical concerns and therefore resistant to an ethical analysis. While it is highly unlikely that anyone would disagree with Quinn’s assertion that McCarthy’s writing is often bleak, it is nonetheless interesting to note that some recent criticism falls short of labelling him a nihilist. Sara Spurgeon observes that an alternative response to this charge has been to see his violence as “a vehicle through which he examines metaphysical questions about the capacity for good and evil in human nature and the place of humanity in what appears to be an uncaring universe” (“Cormac McCarthy” 3). Similarly, in her assessment of McCarthy criticism, Cooper convincingly argues that the reluctance of some critics, even though they recognise the violence and depravity of his fictional worlds, to label this writer a nihilist, in itself suggests the presence of a very complicated ethic in his work (*No More Heroes*).

Ambivalent responses to McCarthy’s writing, such as my own and that of Hobby’s student, are, I now think, inevitable because we tend to read and classify literature within the normative codes of traditional moral frameworks, which is exactly what his fiction resists. Cooper suggests as much when she observes that “a complex dialectic between despair and idealism runs through McCarthy’s corpus, making any attempt to identify a unifying worldview in the novels a challenging, if not impossible, task” (*No More Heroes*). Quinn, too, recognises that this author “subverts the myths upon which culture rests, calling all certainty into question” (109). Identifying a unifying value system in McCarthy’s oeuvre is further complicated when we consider, as does Luce (*Reading the World*), that his work engages with a multiplicity of worldviews, as is evident from the simple fact that his characters encounter manifold religious, existential, individualistic, and philosophical ways of experiencing reality.

While McCarthy may present violence as an objective truth of the human condition, it does not follow that it is the only truth that he presents in his writing. Although Edwin T. Arnold is perhaps a little optimistic in his claim that, in McCarthy’s work, there is “a profound belief in the need for moral order” (qtd. in Parrish, 74), this writer’s characters, as Parrish notes, do not “live in a moral void” (74). Some critics thus argue that, if there is not an inherent order in his novels, then there is, at least, in some form, a search for order. Spurgeon even contends that his novels echo with a “bittersweet, futile longing for connections between characters and their often lost families, and between characters and their

often lost home and communities” (“Cormac McCarthy” 6). Many of McCarthy’s characters, for example, the kid in *Blood Meridian*, John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*, and the son in *The Road*, do indeed search for meaning. Perhaps it is due to the fact that this quest for purpose and meaning so often ends in failure that it is overlooked in this writer’s work. Simply because the success of the search itself is often in doubt, does not, however, detract from its importance (see Luce, “The Cave of Oblivion” 175).

Significantly, in this regard, the failure of the search for value of many of McCarthy’s characters says more about the traditional systems of meaning that often inform it than about the search itself. So, for instance, one finds that the kid, in *Blood Meridian*, is unable to derive significance from a Bible he carries with him but which he cannot read; John Grady, in *All the Pretty Horses*, cannot find his place in the world within traditional mythic Western frameworks, and the Sheriff’s Christian morality, in *No Country for Old Men*, fails to explain the evil he encounters. Is McCarthy arguing that normative value systems are incapable of investing human experience with meaning? Or, as Cooper asks, are his “novels merely nonempathetic depictions of humanity” (*No More Heroes*), in which goodness and decency are only defined by their absence? Cooper’s conclusion, like mine, is that McCarthy’s texts do not merely negate value. I would add to this that it is pointless to ask whether or not moral value informs his writing, as his work rejects precisely the uniform and universal moral paradigm assumed by this question and by the kind of reading that posits it. If traditional forms of morality are unsuccessful in McCarthy’s fictional worlds, the question that should be asked must surely pertain to the kind of ethic that informs this writing. On what values is this ethic premised, and where is it to be located in his work?

An answer of sorts to the questions I have just posed is implicit in the intersection between McCarthy’s exploration of normative systems of meaning and that of Friedrich Nietzsche. The latter devoted much of his life to a study of ethics, and sought to create a new value system that would transcend the inadequacies of those that had preceded it. Just as much of Nietzsche’s work questions traditional morality, so too does McCarthy’s work critique such moral paradigms through its creation of worlds that seemingly lack any defensible moral code.

Critical responses to McCarthy have long since recognised the presence of Nietzschean ideas in his writing, and several essays and monographs have been published on the subject. With good reason, many of these responses have focused on McCarthy’s Border fiction. The Judge, in *Blood Meridian*, is a character who, in word and deed, seems directly to

personify ideas central to Nietzsche. Ellis, Carson, and Willis Leitner are among several recent critics who have commented on the way in which this character embodies Nietzschean concepts. Carson even argues that he is an incarnation of the *Übermensch* (“Transformation”), which, for Nietzsche, is the highest level attainable by humanity. Linda Woodson, in particular, has written several articles outlining the relevance of this philosopher’s concerns to McCarthy’s fiction. As will become apparent later in this study, I have found particularly illuminating and useful her treatises on the role of language and narration in constructing what we term reality.

Critical opinion on the applicability of Nietzsche’s philosophy to *The Road* is varied. Carson outlines John Cant’s argument that McCarthy, in this novel, invokes the Nietzschean ideal of the ardent-hearted individual who is able to create meaning through the exertion of his or her own will. In his response to this thesis, Carson contends that, while there is charity and goodness in the world of the novel, Nietzsche’s extreme theories do not provide an adequate framework for analysing such values (“Transformation”). By contrast, Daniel Luttrull, after likening Nietzsche’s Zarathustra to Prometheus, applies this analogy to the man and boy in *The Road*. His contention is that the father becomes a Promethean figure who delivers the truth of the world, the possibility for goodness, in the form of his son (“Prometheus Hits the Road”).

My own critical intervention into the debate on the relationship between McCarthy and Nietzsche is premised on the argument that he presents an alternative ethic to Christian morality in his fiction. While this is not to say that one may find a unifying ethic that holds true for all of his novels, I would, and do, argue that McCarthy, through particular characters, explores various ethical forms, in what is almost an attempt to test their validity and endurance in the unwelcoming landscapes of his fictional worlds. Nietzsche’s emphasis on an ethic based on the individual is repeatedly mirrored in McCarthy’s own work, and is the starting point for my examination of this author’s ethic as it develops through several of his novels, in particular *Blood Meridian*, The Border Trilogy, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*.

What follows is a brief outline of the principal concerns of each of my chapters. The first focuses, in the main, on *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*. Through a close reading of these novels, I trace the ethic that informs the actions of their antagonists, Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh respectively, and argue that conventional forms of morality, which would position them as ‘evil’ due to their excessive violence and cruelty, cannot

provide an adequate framework for understanding McCarthy's work. By contrast, Nietzsche's critique of absolute value systems and his theories of the Will to Power and *Übermensch* allow greater access to themes central to these texts, and, indeed, elucidate their resistance to readings based on a normative ethical approach. My contention throughout is that good and evil, terms so central to conventional morality, do not occupy easily definable, fixed positions in McCarthy's work. In examining the ways in which *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* evince and depart from various Nietzschean precepts, this chapter therefore begins to answer the question of the kind of ethic that may be found in McCarthy's oeuvre.

In my second chapter, I discuss McCarthy's Border Trilogy, which consists of *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*. While these novels are different in content from those dealt with in the previous chapter, they do provide evidence of a development in McCarthy's writing from a concern with metaphysics to a preoccupation with epistemology. So, where my first chapter examined conventional systems of meaning, this one outlines the role that language and myth play in the human creation of reality, and also explores a recurrent theme in McCarthy's oeuvre, namely the nature of choice, and the role and relationship of fate and free will in the processes that inform it. As is evident in his theory of Eternal Recurrence, Nietzsche was himself preoccupied with perceptions of reality, and with the extent to which they influence choice. In this chapter, then, I establish the relevance of his ideas on these issues to The Border Trilogy by tracing John Grady Cole and Billy Parham's responses to what they perceive to be reality.

The final chapter of this study draws together the concerns of the previous two by focusing on the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road*, which stages the ultimate breakdown of conventional systems of meaning. Shorn as it is of what is ordinarily deemed civilised value, this novel's setting enables a meditation on the kind of ethic that may be formulated and sustained in a world without intrinsic value. In the text, this ethical exploration is grounded in the relationship between the man and the boy, who struggle to maintain some semblance of value in a world that is antipathetic to the very notion thereof. Central to this chapter's argument is a comparison of the ethic of the boy to that of both the kid, in *Blood Meridian*, and John Grady Cole, in *All the Pretty Horses*. Through this comparison, I argue that the boy, though similar in moral outlook to these other two characters, differs from them in that his ethic survives in the bleak landscape in which he finds himself. I examine these ethical concerns by drawing on Nietzsche's theories of master moralities and slave moralities, and also his complicated appraisal of pity and compassion.

Chapter One

Ethics in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*

Introduction

There will come a day when my name will recall the memory of something formidable – a crisis the like of which has never been known on earth, the memory of the most profound clash of consciences, and the passing of a sentence upon all that which theretofore had been believed, exacted, and hallowed.

(Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* 131)

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about a crisis of morality that he perceived in the world, one that, as he described it, was characterised by the destabilisation of what had largely been accepted as immovable moral certainties. The concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, were given positions of permanence that were clearly defined and neatly opposed to each other. In such a system, good is universally distinguishable from evil. However, what Nietzsche highlighted was the paradox in trying to universalise ideals that are, by their very construction and use, specific to particular cultures. Concepts like good and evil are merely attempts to encapsulate, through language, what we cannot definitively know or understand, and, once defined, they take on a solidity that covers up the fact that they are neither universal nor absolute.

This chapter will trace the signs of this “crisis” in McCarthy’s writing. There is no doubt that the philosophy of Nietzsche enjoys a prominent position in several of McCarthy’s novels, most notably in *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, The Border Trilogy and *The Road*. It is precisely for this reason that I have elected to focus on these specific texts. This being said, it would be wholly inaccurate to believe that McCarthy’s writing is merely a direct application of Nietzsche’s theories. While it is true that Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh, two of McCarthy’s most memorable villains, are at times terrifying embodiments of ideas central to Nietzsche’s writings, at other times they depart drastically from the ideas of the German philosopher. Since the relationship between McCarthy’s and Nietzsche’s work is complex, I shall dedicate parts of this chapter to an examination of the philosopher’s writing. As it would be impossible to examine fully Nietzsche’s philosophy in one chapter, I shall explore certain of the key concepts that inform it: specifically, the Will to Power and the

nature of truth in the world, religion and morality, the creation of the *Übermensch*, and the movement towards a morality that is not based on restrictive religious ideals or absolute truth. Where necessary, I shall elaborate on these concepts later in this study.

No Absolutes, No Common Good

A metaphysical, religious, moral or rational statement can be called true only for the perspective of the mind which views it: viewed absolutely, any statement of this sort is false.

(Hollingdale 10)

Nietzsche was heavily concerned with exposing the falsity inherent in any system of meaning that claimed to be absolute. Theological institutions, in particular, came under scrutiny as systems that falsely tried to create a totalising morality. As Reg Hollingdale eloquently asserts in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary on Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, the chief effect of this thinker on the twentieth century was a “tremendous loosening up of moral certainties, and intellectual certainties. People no longer know for sure what is good and evil, what is right and wrong.” Nietzsche constantly reiterates that it is necessary to move beyond such static binary definitions, and therefore asks us to question man-made normative value systems. In so doing, we come to see that good and evil are merely perspectives through which to view the world rather than immovable certainties. In McCarthy’s novels, one encounters precisely such a destabilisation of normative definitions of good and evil, right and wrong.

It is often difficult to discuss moral codes outside of their religious contexts, and both Nietzsche and McCarthy address this nexus between religion and morality in their writings. For Nietzsche, in particular, absolute moral order was exemplified by religion, particularly Christianity. Leslie Chamberlain, in *Human, All Too Human*, makes the claim that in the past the church had been the arbiter of morals, “the giver of moral truth.” In *The Gay Science* (and later, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), Nietzsche would famously claim that

God is dead. And God remains dead. And we have killed him. 'How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us?'

(181)

For him God was "dead," and religion was no longer the only way to make sense of the world. The 'death of God' gave birth to something new, the idea of absolute freedom, of humankind as the sole measure of the universe. In other words, the 'death of God' marked the end of the moral interpretation of the world under the signature of God. Fred Ulfers explains the "horizonlessness" of human existence that followed this axiological collapse:

The idea that the universe is without a fixed star that would be both the signifier of a grounding and a horizon to which one can orient oneself spells disaster. I mean disaster in the sense Blanchot uses it, it's the dis-aster, i.e. the vanishing of the guiding star that leaves us without orientation, without the idea of where from and where to. It's that horizonlessness that Nietzsche of course alludes to in the parable of the death of God.

("Nietzsche's Ethics")

Through his theories of the Will to Power and the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche attempted to offer an alternative to this "horizonlessness," or void of uncertainty.

Since religion, and many codes of ethics, traditionally equate what is good with what is in the best interests of the many, they militate against individualism. As Jeffrey Alexander states, "to be moral is to move from selfishness to the categorical imperative, from self-reference to a collective orientation resting on the ability to put yourself in the place of another" (158). This "collective orientation" is something of which Nietzsche is extremely critical:

One has to get rid of the bad taste of wanting to be in agreement with many. 'Good' is no longer good when your neighbour takes it into his mouth. And how could there exist a 'common good!' The expression is a self-contradiction: what can be common has ever but little value.

("Philosophy" 40)

The form of morality to which he refers celebrates the sacrifice of the individual for the ‘common good,’ indeed demands the “weakening and suppression of the individual” (*Dawn of Day* 140). In terms of this idea, there is an ideal good that is applicable for one and all, an absolute ideal. However, on a practical level, it is abundantly apparent that it is impossible to have any system that is in the best interests of every living person. Zarathustra, often used by Nietzsche as a symbol for reason, destabilises the binary of good and evil in the following statement: “Much that passed for good with one people was regarded with scorn and contempt by another: thus I found it. Much found I here called evil, which was there decked with purple honours” (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 112). While this is a simple sentiment, it powerfully illustrates that there is no ‘common good,’ only the illusion thereof.

What Nietzsche describes, then, is no less than a radical change in humankind’s relationship with truth; a change concomitant on the realisation that metaphysical truths, religious truths, even rational truths, are in fact errors brought about by the “pretension of such truths to absoluteness” (Hollingdale 9). He describes Christian faith as a sacrifice “of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of the spirit, at the same time enslavement and self-mockery, self-mutilation” (“Religion” 179). A religious morality is one that demands that the individual subvert his or her own importance in favour of the ‘common good.’ Such a proposition supposes a universality that does not exist in the world, or perhaps it is more accurate to say one that does not exist outside of the human mind. We try to create absolute systems of meaning by affixing a capital letter to ideas such as ‘Truth,’ ‘Morality’ and ‘Knowledge.’ However, the only absolute ‘Morality’ is that which we have created, a false idealism that exists only at the level of metaphysics.

Nietzsche does not discount the possibility of a metaphysical realm, a world beyond our own. The point, though, is precisely that, in being beyond our own world, it would have to be entirely inaccessible. So, for instance, he argues as follows: “It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it is hardly to be disputed. We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head” (“Logic” 54-5). In other words, the existence of the metaphysical is not the issue; what is, is how we would access such a world, even if it were to exist. Nietzsche argues that the human mind is ill-equipped to perceive the metaphysical, that which lies beyond this world, and that its existence is therefore irrelevant. The best we can do is to recognise that its existence is a possibility. This, however, brings us no nearer to touching it or experiencing it. Thus, for Nietzsche, “one

could assert nothing at all of the metaphysical world except that it was a being-other, an inaccessible, incomprehensible being-other” (“Logic” 55).

In *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden gives voice to precisely this idea:

Even in this world 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)

The individual’s mind is simply one fact among many, unable to comprehend the grand tapestry that weaves the world together. This being the case, how could anyone hope to found any system of values on such a realm? In articulating this sentiment, Judge Holden performs a function for McCarthy similar to that of Zarathustra for Nietzsche. He is constantly aware of the human desire to find a meaning that exists beyond mundane reality, to search for an all-encompassing ‘Truth’ that will give the hardships of life a greater purpose. It is precisely this awareness that enables him to manipulate those around him.

One must, however, be careful of claiming too many similarities between the Judge and Zarathustra. The latter, like Nietzsche, does not want disciples because he is trying to get people to free themselves, to think independently. His goal is merely to bring news of the way humanity may free itself, from itself. This is in contrast to the Judge, whose purpose is the opposite: that is, to manipulate those that listen to him. Consequently, in an irony that is certainly not lost on him, the Judge comes to represent, to his followers, the very things that he exposes as illusory. At one point in the novel, the Judge recounts how he had once drawn an old Hueco’s portrait, in the process chaining the man to his own likeness:

He could not sleep for fear an enemy might take [the painting] and deface it and so like was the portrait that he would not suffer it creased nor anything to touch it and he made a journey across the desert with it to where he’d heard the judge was to be found and he begged his counsel as to how he might preserve the thing and the judge took him deep into the mountains and they buried the portrait in the floor of a cave where it lies yet for aught the judge knew.

(141)

The various stories recounted about the Judge, his past and his deeds, all contain grand elements that shroud him in mystery and elevate him to a position not unlike that of a priest or prophet. Herein lies the Judge's power: even while he is exposing the chaotic nature of the world, his words and his order simply replace it. Instead of denouncing order altogether, that is, the Judge comes to replace what order there is with his own. This is, of course, exactly what he wants. His very first appearance in the novel sees him denouncing a priest as a paedophile, despite the fact that he has never met the man and cannot truthfully make such a claim. The Judge most aligns himself with Nietzsche in his deliberate attack on (and overcoming of) religion, particularly Christianity. In the Judge's case, though, this subversion does not simply assert a lack of order in the world: it enables him to create a new order out of the chaos.

The Will to Power

The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.

(Conrad, *Lord Jim* 130)

Nietzsche begins the second essay in his *Untimely Meditations*, that is, "Schopenhauer as Educator," with an anecdote in which a traveller is asked what he has found to be the most common trait of humanity. His initial answer is laziness, but Nietzsche hypothesises that the answer should instead be that men and woman are all timid (127). In his writing, there is a constant tension between society and the individual's place therein. It is out of this tension that the aforementioned timidity, or fear, is born. But what is it that all humanity fears? Put simply, Nietzsche argues that the individual is afraid of himself or herself, or, more accurately, of individuality. Rather than see himself or herself as a completed and independent fact, the individual chooses to hide "behind customs and opinions" (*Untimely Meditations* 127). Furthermore, rather than being tricked or coerced she or he *willingly* hides. Why, though, would the individual willingly submit to a self-inflicted subjugation? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand how such fear originates.

Nietzsche's argument is that, while it is our greatest quality, individuality is also our greatest burden, as it requires of us "unconditional honesty and nakedness" (*Untimely Meditations* 127). It is because we lack the necessary endurance fully to develop our individuality that we choose to remain in the comfort of society. Ultimately, then, a fear created out of our idleness, which instils in us what Nietzsche describes as a "bad conscience," compels us to reduce our individuality. We choose to act like members "of a herd," and our resultant "bad conscience" precludes us from having joy (127). Nietzsche condemns our "bad conscience," because it obstructs the true image we should have of ourselves, in terms of which each of us is a "unique miracle" with the potential to be beautiful and worthy of regard (127). The desire to remain 'comfortable' stops the individual from listening to his or her conscience, which cries out "be yourself! All that you are now doing, thinking, desiring is not you yourself" (127).

My summary of Nietzsche's argument on this point has thus far highlighted the difficulties inherent in the relationship between individual and society. The question that inevitably arises from this argument is, of course, why it should be that membership of a society should lead to the subjugation of the individual. The answer is to be found in the way each society creates its values. As I mentioned in the section of this chapter on absolute systems, a society is underpinned by a value system that has as its defining feature the 'common good'; in other words, actions that bring about the most good for the largest group of people are privileged above others. As individuals within such a society, we are taught to privilege this 'common good' over other concerns, including our own. In such a moral code, certain acts are universally labelled good or bad.

By investing actions with universal values, we, in effect, attempt to create an absolute system of meaning that holds true for every individual in our community. Nietzsche is contemptuous of any system that claims absoluteness, and describes powerful societies, governments, and religions as a form of "tyranny" (*Untimely Meditations* 139). It is in this context that he condemns the 'common good':

[In societal systems] the ultimate goal is seen to lie in the happiness of all or of the greatest number, there in the development of great communities; and though one may be ready to sacrifice one's life to a state, for instance, it is another matter if one is asked to sacrifice it on behalf of another individual. It seems to be an absurd demand that one man should exist for the sake of another man; 'for the sake of all others, rather, or at least for as many as possible!' O worthy man! as though it were less

absurd to let number decide when value and significance are at issue! For the question is: how can your life, the individual life, receive the highest value, the deepest significance? How can it be less squandered? Certainly only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars, and not for the good of the majority [. . .].

(*Untimely Meditations* 162)

If life is not to be squandered, one must live for the rarest exemplar: the individual. Hence, for Nietzsche, the attempt to create an absolute value system amounts to little more than an abstraction that disperses “the individual to the four winds” (155). Furthermore, if the individual is *aware* of his own fearfulness, it can be concluded that he or she must also be aware of his or her subjugation in favour of the ‘common good.’ Why then does the individual not seek to break free of this subjugation? As I have already suggested, the answer is that we are “timid,” and afraid that “when we are alone and quiet something will be whispered into our ear, and so we hate quietness and deafen ourselves with sociability” (159). What will be whispered to us is simply that society, to which we sacrifice ourselves, is a construct designed to distract us from our true selves.

In a hypothetical world, one in which Nietzsche’s wish has been granted, and society no longer advocates the good of the many, how would good or bad originate? Is it possible, that is, to explain our decisions and actions outside of the societal value system? With his theory of the Will to Power, Nietzsche attempted to answer exactly such questions. He sought to replace the social rhetoric of the ‘common good’ with one that explained the basic impulses or drives of human nature: nothing is real “except our world of desires and passions” and we can “rise or sink to no other ‘reality’ than the reality of our drives” (“Will to Power” 228). For him, the world is made up of not absolute truth or order, but individual Will. Where we encounter ‘morality,’ we find “valuations and an order of rank of human impulses and actions” (*The Gay Science* 174). Morality, then, is simply the ordering of the Will’s desires and passions. What we consider good is what we value highly, and what we term bad is what we value least. It should be obvious that something one values highly need not be accorded the same value by someone else. By the same token, there is often a marked difference between an individual’s sense of what is good or bad and that of the society in which he or she lives. Indeed, social convention plays a large role in determining which actions are deemed good and which bad.

Importantly, too, social convention changes as we encounter different societies, and it is precisely because of this phenomenon that we can experience different moralities or truths. For Nietzsche, the error inherent in all these moralities lies in their motives:

Moral actions are actions performed out of sympathy for others [. . .]. This instinct sets forth as its supreme, most important, and most immediate principle that life shall be relieved of all the dangerous characteristics which it possessed in former times [. . .]. It is for that reason that only those actions which keep in view the general security and the feeling of security of society are called 'good.'

(*Dawn of Day* 177)

It follows that moral actions go hand in hand with socially accepted actions. They uphold the conventions and norms of a particular society. Examples of this are all around us. In the United States of America, the state of Texas upholds the death penalty as an appropriate means of punishment for certain offences deemed serious enough. Yet the same socially accepted convention is treated as barbaric and inhumane in other states. This example underlines the difference between an individual's sense of good and bad and that of the society in which he or she lives. There are undoubtedly people living in the state of Texas who do not agree with the death penalty, yet their own sense of 'moral goodness' is overridden by the law and social convention.

I have already discussed the ways in which Nietzsche undermines the notion of a 'common good.' The Will to Power is merely the next step in this line of thought. It needs to be borne in mind, though, that this notion is not simply Nietzsche's invention; it is a truth-claim about the real nature of the world as he saw it. Consequently, it is not a novelty that he presents as an alternative to other value systems, but an explanation for the way the strongest individuals have manifested their own power throughout history. For him, the idea that "the state is the highest goal of mankind and that a man has no higher duty than to serve the state" is a doctrine in which he recognises "a relapse not into paganism but into stupidity" (*Untimely Meditations* 148). So, if traditional morality is aimed at upholding the 'common good,' Nietzsche's explanation of the Will to Power attempts to do the opposite. If we all have our own hierarchy of values, which in other terms could constitute a kind of morality, or code of ethics, then Nietzsche's argument is that the only logical course is to act in the best interests of these values, which are themselves a manifestation of the individual's Will to

Power. Once one gets past the old normative conception of absolute morality or truth, one is left with only the Will.

The Judge, Chigurh and Religion

In Nietzsche's understanding of the Will to Power, an individual impresses himself or herself on the soul of another, "changing its form and dominating it according to his [or her] will" (*Dawn of Day* 113). Anyone who has read McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* or *No Country for Old Men*, will have noted that this theme of domination is personified in the antagonists of each novel: Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh. I would go so far as to argue that *Blood Meridian*, in particular, is a narrative about the Judge's Will. As his following pronouncement indicates, his goal is to become no less than suzerain over the world and everything in 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). At the very least it cannot be disputed that this character's presence dominates the novel from beginning to end.

Chigurh, too, though not as overbearing as the Judge, is an ever-present Will in *No Country for Old Men*; even in his absence, the plot is often driven by the mere possibility of his appearance. Like the Judge, he too is driven by his own personal moral code; unlike the Judge, though, he does not care to persuade men. In *No Country for Old Men*, the lengthy monologues of the Judge thus give way to the dialogue and actions of Chigurh, as it is largely through the latter's actions that we gain some sense of his motives. Nevertheless, he does occasionally offer an explanation of sorts for what he does. Near the beginning of this novel, when he is taken into custody, he explains how he willingly gave himself up to capture: "I'm not sure why I did this but I think I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will" (174-75). Although he may play a more understated role than the gregarious and loquacious Judge, Chigurh's Will is every bit as resolute.

In *No Country for Old Men*, the Sheriff is used by McCarthy to question the power of morality when faced with the likes of Chigurh. Although a thoroughly moral man (in the normative, traditional sense), the Sheriff's ethical system, as has been mentioned, does not

enable him to understand Chigurh's actions. Accordingly, this ethic, rather than reinforcing the opposition between good and evil, ultimately leads him to question the existence and role of God: "I always thought when I got older that God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didn't. I don't blame him. If I was him I'd have the same opinion about me that he does" (267). Later in the novel, he asks his uncle whether he thinks that God is aware of the chaos in the world, and, though his uncle answers positively, he too asserts that there is nothing that God can do about it (269). Throughout the novel, then, religion is undermined. Characters seek God, but never find him; they pray, but are left forsaken. In the following passage, which again comments on the failure of the Sheriff's ethical system to provide him with a meaningful way of dealing with evil in his world, this critique of religion is particularly apparent:

Someone out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I don't want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once. I won't do it again. I won't push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him. It ain't just being older. I wish that it was. I can't say that it's even what you are willin to do. Because I always knew that you had to be willin to die to even do this job. That was always true. Not to sound glorious about it or nothin but you do. If you aint they'll know it. They'll see it in a heartbeat. I think it is more like what you are willing to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I won't do that. I think now that maybe I never would.

(4)

Significantly, this passage precedes the emergence of Chigurh, and the Sheriff's inability to confront him. The closest he comes to doing so is when he returns to the scene of a crime and only briefly senses Chigurh's presence.

Religion is similarly undermined in *Blood Meridian*, where the kid, once grown up, wanders the country carrying a Bible with him, "no word of which he could read" (312). From this symbol of religious futility, we gain a sense that the evil facing the world is beyond the reach of God. This is again apparent in the ease with which the Judge turns the congregation against the priest. The priest is no match for the accusations of paedophilia levelled at him by the Judge, and while he calls the Judge "the devil," the ultimate incarnation of religious evil, this holds little value in McCarthy's landscape. Sin and redemption are quite simply beyond the realities of most of the characters that walk through the pages of this

writer's novels. Only the strongest, those with the Will to dominate, survive. And it is the Judge's need to dominate that drives him to destroy any power the priest holds.

Importantly, though, the Judge seeks not simply to denounce, but to replace the priest and his religion with a faith of his own. Instead of being based on religious temperance and sympathetic understanding, this is a faith in the Will to Power. The Judge becomes a prophet of this new faith, assuming the role of meaning-maker for his new congregation. As much is evident in the following description of his followers: "Then he turned and led the horse he had been riding across that terrain of black and grassy slag, treacherous to man and beast alike, and us behind him like the disciples of a new faith" (130). Those without the Will to oppose him follow him to the end:

The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools.

(116)

The Judge laughs at the squatters for being too easily led, for clinging to the need for order, and it is simplicity itself for him to replace one system of faith with his own. As Sara Spurgeon notes, the Judge's "new myth has long ago swallowed" any symbols of religion and morality ("The Sacred Hunter" 94). The Judge laughs at his followers because they look to him for order without realising the truth, which is that what he offers is the antithesis of order. What he offers is an unravelling of order, a chaotic breakdown of meaning systems through strength of Will alone.

From my discussion thus far, it should be clear that the Judge is a manipulator of others. Accordingly, it ultimately proves difficult to liken this character to Zarathustra, and thus also Nietzsche. As I have already mentioned, while there are similarities between the Judge and Zarathustra, there are also unavoidable differences. It becomes increasingly obvious that the Judge's goal is to dominate those around him, and so to lead them into subservience. This runs counter to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, whose goal it is to destroy any form of subservience to anything other than one's own Will. So, while in several instances, the Judge exhibits many of the traits of Nietzsche's Will to Power, one needs to be wary of taking this comparison too far. In his most extreme violence, the Judge becomes more of a parody, or distortion, of this philosopher's writings, than a direct exemplar. In fact, the

representation of the Judge highlights some of the ways in which Nietzsche's writings have been historically misunderstood. That is, the Judge, through his malevolent actions, demonstrates what would happen if Nietzsche's writings were to be applied literally and out of context. Such a misunderstanding can be linked, in part, to this philosopher's own extravagant and excessive style of writing, as is evidenced in the following passage discussing strength and weakness:

The *sick* are the great danger of man, *not* the evil, *not* the 'beasts of prey.' They who are from the outset botched, oppressed, broken, those are they, the weakest are they, who most undermine the life beneath the feet of man, who instil the most dangerous venom and skepticism in our trust in life, in man, in ourselves [. . .]. Here teem the worms of revenge and vindictiveness; here the air reeks of things secret and unmentionable; here is ever spun the net of the most malignant conspiracy – the conspiracy of the sufferers against the sound and the victorious; here is the sight of the victorious *hated*.

(*Genealogy of Morals* 128)

It is not difficult to see why it is that Nietzsche's ideas of the weak, dangerous man, overcome by the "beasts of prey," have been read as an exhortation to the kind of violence and domination in which McCarthy's Judge engages.¹ Given that his words and actions contain elements of the Will to Power, it is possible to see the Judge's extreme violence as a reduction ad absurdum of Nietzsche's extreme language. In other words, this character may be read as a critique of the ways in which Nietzsche's rhetoric has been used to sanction atrocity. The extreme language of Nietzsche is often reflected in the extreme violence of the Judge, and the latter's words and actions do contain elements of the Will to Power.

¹ Nazism in particular adopted Nietzsche's rhetoric of hatred as its own. The irony, as many have observed, is that Nietzsche was bitterly opposed to German nationalism.

Beyond Good and Evil

At the present time there is perhaps no more widely spread prejudice than that of thinking that we know what really and truly constitutes morality.

(Nietzsche, *Dawn of Day* 139)

One of Nietzsche's principal reservations about conventional morality is related to its need to distinguish between good and evil. The Will to Power attempts to remove the need for a binary opposition, which, for Nietzsche, is inscribed by religious doctrine and predetermines actions by investing them with value. Moreover, the Will to Power requires that we look beyond metaphysical and religious contexts to perceive the human, rather than divine, agency in the construction of what we know as good and evil. What I am particularly interested in here is the way in which traditional moral codes seek to promote what is perceived as good while actively suppressing anything that is considered evil. It must be remembered, though, that this suppression does not render absent the Will to Power. Given that the Will, for Nietzsche, is universal and always present, it follows that it is perverted, rather than annulled, by the act of suppression. Christianity, in particular, he argues, is the Will to Power of the weak, who seek the oppression of the strong. It is because they lack the strength to oppose the strong that the weak have devised the ingenious strategy of making them feel guilty, thereby weakening themselves through suppressing their dominant desires. If, however, we see the world as being made up of competing wills seeking power, with each will consisting of the drives and passions of a particular individual, it becomes unnecessary to stifle a part of that will. Put differently, if good and evil lose their religious or metaphysical connotations, what significance or meaning are they left with?

In answering this question, it may be prudent to qualify the difference between moral systems and Nietzsche's ethic. When one talks of morals, it is almost impossible to escape from the markers of good and evil, in terms of which to be evil is not "to act in accordance with custom," to practise things not sanctioned by custom, to resist tradition, however rational or stupid that tradition may be" (Nietzsche, "Morality" 75). According to Ulfers, Nietzsche sees an "almost unbridgeable differentiation between ethics and the code of conduct which is run under the morality of good and evil" ("Nietzsche's Ethics"). It is even possible to say that

for Nietzsche, morality is unethical, in that it seeks to create a singularity amongst men and women that does not exist. By contrast, he describes his ethic as one in which:

nothing is any longer forbidden, unless it be weakness either as a vice or a virtue. Such a spirit, *become free*, appears in the middle of the universe with a feeling of cheerful and confident fatalism; he believes that only individual things are bad, and that as a whole the universe justifies and affirms itself – *He no longer denies* [. . .].

(*Twilight of the Idols* 110)

Nietzsche called the pursuit of such an ethic the highest of all faiths. The individual must be liberated from the constraints of vice or virtue, good or evil (in the forms in which they presently exist). In order to obtain such liberation, humankind would need to affirm its own totality of existence, something Nietzsche hints at in *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which he adopts the terms Apollonian and Dionysian, to represent the qualities inherent in every individual. The Apollonian qualities are temperance, rationality, and logic, all of which are anchored in the form and structure of the world, whereas the Dionysian qualities are their opposites. While Apollonian characters seek form and unity, Dionysian characters seek disorder and chaos. In essence, normative conceptions of morality seek to uphold Apollonian qualities and to restrict their Dionysian counterparts.

Since the individual is made up of both Apollonian and Dionysian qualities, one has to recognise both in order successfully to embrace one's Will to Power. The one who embraces the Dionysian needs to go "beyond pity and terror, *to realise in oneself* the eternal joy of becoming – that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction* (Nietzsche, "Eternal Recurrence" 261). It follows that to call impulses pivotal to this process of 'becoming' good or evil is meaningless. In fact, for Nietzsche, those impulses that we call evil are just as useful, indispensable even, as those we call good. What he advocates is a union of the Dionysian and Apollonian that will create a whole being, with particular emphasis on the importance of the individual's perception of himself or herself as a "complete and perfect" fact (*Dawn of Day* 389). This complete individual, the *Übermensch*, is an attempt to harness the Will to Power and so to escape the constraints that Nietzsche perceives in traditional moral systems.

McCarthy's Landscapes

The man who has overcome his passions has entered into possession of the most fertile ground; like the colonist who has mastered the forests and swamps.

(Nietzsche, "Superman" 233)

In McCarthy's writing, the otiose nature of traditional systems of value is perhaps most apparent in his landscapes, which are usually indifferent to the struggles of humankind. Fred Ulfers, as I have noted, speaks of a "horizonless" world that comes into being with the 'death of God,' a world with no guiding star or sense of orientation. Nietzsche's response to this abandonment is to assert that whatever 'horizon' humankind thought existed merely increased its own illusions of importance in the world. However, as he argues, the world "does not by any means strive to imitate man. None of our aesthetic and moral judgements apply to it" (*The Gay Science* 168). McCarthy's landscapes are in a very real sense a physical manifestation of this abandonment. In his novels, the characters, for the most part, wander through dangerous terrain without any sense of purpose. Indeed, their goal is often to find such a purpose. This is explicitly the case in *The Road* and in much of The Border Trilogy. McCarthy is intensely interested in exploring what happens when people are no longer bound by the rules and regulations of society. According to John Grammer, what we find in this writer's work is "a 'hyperrealistic' rendering of the physical world in all its dense, vivid specificity – and particularly the power of that world to upend whatever conceptual grids are imposed on it" (10). In his fiction, McCarthy creates a space in which his characters are forced to confront the world beyond society's normative values and moral codes, and it is in such settings that we fully see the transitory and at times arbitrary nature of these codes.

From the lawless desert of *Blood Meridian* and the hostile mountains and wilderness of The Border Trilogy, to the barren apocalyptic wasteland of *The Road*, McCarthy's characters are left to fend for themselves. In these landscapes, the characters frequently fall into one of two groups: firstly, there are those who are unable successfully to overcome the disorder of the world, and consequently have very little control over their destiny, a category into which John Grady Cole, in *All the Pretty Horses*, falls. For the most part, his fate is decided by not himself but the actions and decisions of those around him, a point to which I shall return in my second chapter. The second of the two categories into which McCarthy's characters fall is that of the wilful individual. Characters in this group are able to turn the

chaos and disorder of the world around them to their advantage by acts of sheer Will. Judge Holden, who has an insatiable desire to dominate, is an example of such a Nietzschean willed individual. The boy, in *The Road*, is also able to overcome the devastation of the nightmarish world he encounters, though, interestingly, he does so without the dominating and overbearing will that characterises the Judge. This interesting variant on the Will to Power will be discussed at length in the third chapter of this thesis.

The *Übermensch*

Once did people say God, when they looked out upon distant seas; now, however,
have I taught you to say, Superman.

(*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 137)²

Nietzsche sought a reinvention of morality or, as he called it, the ‘Transvaluation of all Values’ (*Umwertung aller Werte*). He was attempting to create a system of meaning that would exist outside of metaphysical parameters. In this system, the individual would have mastery over his or her self and would put his or her needs above those of others. Any individual able to accomplish this would be on the road to becoming what Nietzsche would come to term the *Übermensch*. This was not a state that had yet been attained, but rather a journey, a process that he believed humanity needed to work towards. It is through his self-created prophet, Zarathustra, that he questions how humankind should go about surpassing itself, overcoming its own nature. The *Übermensch* is an ideal created by Nietzsche to represent the individual who is able to break free from the constraints and restrictions of morality, and who can work outside definitions of good and evil. As I have noted, an individual who can harness the Will to Power is one who can impress himself or herself on the soul of another, ruling over it as if it were his or her own Will. Such an individual begins to embody the spirit of the *Übermensch*, the ultimate transcendence of humanity as far as Nietzsche is concerned.

² Only when quoting translations of Nietzsche’s texts, will I retain the terms ‘Superman’ or ‘Overman’ (as they appear there) in reference to his *Übermensch*. In all other cases, I will use the original German term, simply because there are no adequate English translations. I prefer, as do scholars such as Walter Kaufman, to connect the *Übermensch* with the German idea of *Überwindung* (overcoming).

Cormac McCarthy is clearly interested in the power that can be gained through the exertion of one's Will, as can be seen in *Blood Meridian*, where the Judge's Will has the strength to bend the chaos around him to his bidding, to impress itself upon the very landscape. Throughout the novel, this character is able to orchestrate events to his liking. For Nietzsche, a philosopher is tasked with not only theorising about the human condition, but also creating value. Of philosophers, he states the following:

With creative hands they reach towards the future, and everything that is or has existed becomes their means, their tool, their hammer. Their 'knowing' is *creating*, their creating is lawgiving, their will to truth is – *will to power*. Have philosophers like these ever existed? Don't philosophers like these *have* to exist?

(*Beyond Good and Evil* 105)

In a perverse sense, the Judge is such a philosopher. His ledger contains a history of all the plant and animal life that he comes across. Crucially, this character does not simply record; he destroys the original once he has understood and assimilated it, thereby becoming the sole proprietor of the world he walks through. He grasps control over history and re-creates it as he sees fit. Indeed, his words, "whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent" (198), echo Nietzsche's assertion that one must do violence to history in order to bend it to one's Will:

Because men really respect only that which was founded of old as has developed slowly, he who wants to live on after his death must take care not only of his posterity but even more of his *past*: which is why tyrants of every kind (including tyrannical artists and politicians) like to do violence to history, so that it may appear as preparation for and step-ladder to them.

("A Short Lexicon" 273)

By taking possession of the past, the Judge gains power. In order fully to know the world, he cannot allow anything to exist without his knowledge. And it is in this relentless pursuit of mastery over the world and everything in it that the Judge comes to embody the traits of Nietzsche's warrior philosopher, a precursor of sorts to his *Übermensch*.

In questioning the dynamics of good and evil, Nietzsche concluded that what is good is "all that enhances the feeling of power, the Will to Power, and power itself in man"

(*Twilight of the Idols* 128). The *Übermensch* is the pinnacle of the Will to Power: it is an overcoming of limitations. Such an overcoming requires of the individual to create value out of his or her own Will, as emerges in Zarathustra's question, "canst thou give unto thyself thy bad and thy good, and set up thy will as a law over thee? Canst thou be judge for thyself, and avenger of thy law?" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 117). It is no coincidence that the character Holden is given the title of Judge in *Blood Meridian*. When the kid asks Tobin what Holden is the judge of, he never receives an answer. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that Holden is judge of everyone and everything around him – including himself. As Rothfork notes, "Holden presumes to play the part of a primitive god who judges all" ("Language and the Dance of Time"). Instead of taking for granted that there is order in the world, Holden creates his own: one based not on good and evil, but on life and death. As much is implicit in his following claim: "It makes no difference what men think of war [. . .]. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him" (248).

Given that the *Übermensch* is at once aware of both the importance of life and its frailty, it celebrates life as well as death. This individual thus comprehends the totality of life and recognises the inevitable "suffering entailed in living" (Hollingdale 11), which ends only in death. The Judge places the highest value on the unity that death brings to us all, and even creates a 'brotherhood of death' in the form of Glanton and his gang, whose code is one of strength and survival. Since their singular purpose is to further their collective Will to Power the only sin within the 'brotherhood' would be to jeopardise that Will (which is precisely what the kid does). Where normative moral codes would deem the Judge and Glanton evil, Nietzsche's theories provide another way of understanding them. In fact, he writes that the only evil that can come out of us lies in the denial of the passions we once called evil: "Once hadst thou passions and calledst them evil. But now hast thou only thy virtues: they grew out of thy passions" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 93). So, while we once suppressed our passions, Nietzsche would have us embrace them.

Given that the *Übermensch* does not deny inner desires or passions, he is neither good nor evil. For him, these terms have no point of reference. The only evil or weakness that can befall him or her is to jeopardise the Will to Power, a point to which I have already alluded. In *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, neither the Judge nor Chigurh permits this to happen. As much becomes evident in the latter novel in the scene in which Chigurh waits for Llewelyn's young wife Carla Jean to return home so that he can kill her. As Llewelyn is

already dead, it would seem to follow that Chigurh has very little reason to harm her. She says as much to him, and he readily agrees with her: “I know. But I gave my word [. . .]. We’re at the mercy of the dead here. In this case your husband” (255). Carla Jean fails to understand his response. She cannot comprehend that he has to kill her in order to keep his own sense of principle intact, that it is irrelevant whether Llewelyn is dead or alive. Chigurh made the promise to kill her when her husband was still alive, and his death does not erase that act: “my word is not dead. Nothing can change that” (255). In other words, Chigurh kills Carla Jean not out of any sense of revenge or justice, but to keep intact his own ethic, his own table of values. So strong is his adherence to his own Will that he submits to its consequences completely. At one point in the novel, he decides whether or not to kill a shop clerk by flipping a coin. The coin lands in favour of the clerk, and Chigurh spares his life.

It is now necessary to highlight a crucial difference between the Judge and Chigurh, which, indeed, is implicit in what I have just said. The Judge, in *Blood Meridian*, cannot abide weakness in himself, just as he will not abide it in anyone else. For him, the ultimate goal is for humankind to pull itself up with its own hands, to stand above the chaos and claim dominion over all:

The smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men’s knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth [. . .]. A keeper. A keeper or overlord.

(198)

The Judge cannot betray his own Will to Power, nor permit others to betray theirs. While much of this is true of Chigurh, I would argue that his ethic is, in a sense, just as restrictive as the religious value systems of which Nietzsche is so critical. Chigurh undoubtedly deviates from traditional morality, and his Will dominates those of other characters, and yet, crucially, his actions are not always of his own agency. Someone truly uninhibited would do just as he or she pleased, with absolute disregard for all other considerations. The Judge often seems to act in just such a way: in one of the most chilling passages in *Blood Meridian*, he bargains with a young boy over the sale of two puppies. He purchases them, only to kill them shortly afterwards: “He crossed upon the stone bridge and he looked down into the swollen waters and raised the dogs and pitched them in” (192). It is the impulsiveness of the Judge’s actions

that is truly terrifying; he neither second-guesses himself nor rationalises such actions. The same cannot be said of Chigurh, who does seem to need some form of justification for his actions. In his decision not to kill the shopkeeper, he diminishes his own agency by tossing a coin. Being a servant to his word, as he tells Carla Jean, further negates his agency. So, while he very clearly works outside any recognised moral code, his self-created ethic is one that is restricted by the very values it is premised on. In this respect, then, his ethic is not wholly different from other value systems: it deprives the individual of agency.

Silent Resistance: The Kid and the Judge

In *Blood Meridian*, it is the kid who opposes the Judge in both action and ideology. The portrayal of this character in the novel is interesting: he is, initially, part of the gang, and so presumably is not only present at, but also participates in, many of the atrocities it perpetrates. However, this is something that the reader has to assume, because, as Yoojin Grace Kim notes, despite his apparent involvement, the kid “appears in only a few of the novel’s ceaseless scenes of violence, essentially disappearing from the narrative after his recruitment into Glanton’s murderous gang” (173). Even so, the reader is not given any evidence to suggest that he is not complicit in the acts of the gang, and this, I would argue, complicates the standard critical response to this character, namely that if there is moral maturation of any kind to be found in the novel, it is in him. Harold Bloom, for instance, argues that “McCarthy subtly shows us the long, slow development of the [k]id from another mindless scalper of Indians to the courageous confronter of the Judge” (3). Similarly, John Rothfork argues that the character in the novel with whom we identify and who provides moral instruction is the kid (“Language and the Dance of Time”).

The kid is certainly the most decent character in the novel (though this is not a tremendous feat), and the only one who shows genuine concern for others. When Brown, a fellow gang member, has a serious leg wound, the kid is the only one to help pull the arrow out (162). In another instance, the kid is tasked with killing an injured man, Shelby, in order to spare him from the approaching enemy (an odd form of ‘mercy’ in the novel). He chooses not to kill the man, however, and even leaves some supplies with him (207-208). Moments like these aside, I am not convinced that the kid provides moral instruction in the novel.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, if he is a source of moral instruction, it is one that the world of the novel completely fails to notice. His good deed, in choosing not to kill Shelby, is evidence enough of this: despite having been spared, the latter will die when the pursuing Mexicans find him.

Sarah Spurgeon's following observation points towards the ineffectual nature of the kid's moral sentiments:

[The kid] ignores the judge's warning, and over the final section of the book, covering the last fifteen years of his life, he attempts to return to the previous order . . . Most significantly, he begins to carry a bible, a book already made defunct by the judge as a false book and a symbol of the empty moral laws thrown down before the force of human wills in war.

(“The Sacred Hunter” 96)

So, although the kid occupies a position in opposition to the Judge in the novel, it is grounded in passive silence. If he does try to seek a “previous order,” it only serves to indicate that such an order is incapable of challenging the philosophy of the Judge.

In contrast to the Judge, who possesses an unshakable resolve, the kid is never quite sure of where he is heading or why, and eventually ends up with Glanton's gang. Despite having participated in many atrocities, or at least having borne silent witness to them, he later revolts against the Judge and deserts the gang. The Judge goes in search of him, and after organising for him to be arrested, tells him that he is a “witness” against himself:

You came forward [. . .] to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise.

(307)

For the Judge (as for Nietzsche), to fight against one's own drives is the ultimate betrayal of strength. The kid does not know his own heart, and therefore works against his own Will to Power. Nowhere is this more evident than in the passages in which he is presented with clear opportunities to kill the Judge, and chooses not to do so. As he well knows, his own survival depends on this. Chigurh, in *No Country for Old Men*, kills Carla Jean because not doing so

would violate his own code of ethics. Similarly, in *Blood Meridian*, the Judge cannot allow the kid to exist after he has shown such an unforgivable weakness, as emerges from his following words: “No assassin, called the judge. And no partisan either. There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart” (299). It is these flaws that cost the kid his life: when dealing with a Will as strong as the Judge’s, there is no room for pity, remorse, guilt, uncertainty. Evidently, then, the Judge would agree with Nietzsche’s contention that one’s enemy can be allowed no weakness:

How much respect for his enemies does a noble man already feel! – and such respect is already a bridge to love . . . For he wants his enemy for himself, as his distinction, he can indeed endure no enemy but one in whom there is nothing to despise and *very much* to honour!

(“Morality” 114)

The Judge *needs* an enemy in whom there is nothing to despise because without a worthy enemy, his power is untested and remains unfulfilled. By implication, then, power without opposition is no power at all. Since the kid fails to offer the Judge decent resistance, he is treated in the same manner as the entries in the latter’s ledger: that is, he is studied and then destroyed.

The absorption of the kid into the Judge’s Will is represented in one of the novel’s closing scenes. Now a young man, the kid has wandered, with no particular purpose, for several years. Yet there is a sense, even after this passage of time, that the Judge is never far behind him. And so it proves when the kid encounters the Judge in one of the towns he wanders into. It is shortly after this that he is killed: “[The Judge] was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him” (333). In killing the kid, the Judge affirms his Will to Power, in terms of which nothing can exist without his consent. In a figurative sense, the kid is absorbed into the Judge, consumed by his immense Will.

Although his destruction of the kid affirms the Judge’s individual ethic, and so foregrounds its Nietzschean dimension, this character’s pursuit of the kid also indicates how he differs from Nietzsche. While he judges the kid on a Nietzschean standard, that the weak pose a danger to the strong by corrupting them with their false values, the Will to Power is not something that can be logically enforced in others. Nonetheless, the Judge attempts to do

just this when he accuses the kid of having a “flawed” place in his heart which leads him to be critical of his own deeds. Suppressing one’s own actions belongs, for Nietzsche, to moralities of weakness, in terms of which the strongest weaken themselves through guilt. So, while the Judge is right to condemn this, he cannot make the kid, through force of will, embrace his own Will to Power. Secondly, and most importantly, the Judge’s pursuit of the kid, spanning over a decade, departs from Nietzsche’s ideal of the *Übermensch* by investing the latter with a deep significance. The appropriate response for the *Übermensch*, upon recognising another person’s weakness, would simply be to dismiss him or her. In other words, the weaker opponent is simply not worthy of the *Übermensch*’s attention. Though the judge clearly recognises that the kid is inferior to himself, and poses no threat as an adversary, he cannot seem to forgive the latter for his desertion.

Given that the motives for the Judge’s various actions are often provided to the reader by his own lengthy monologues, it is noticeable that this is not the case in his pursuit of the kid. Clearly, though, he is not driven by revenge or retribution. The likely answer, as I have argued, is simply that he is unable to forgive the kid for having a “flawed heart” and deserting the gang, thereby betraying its collective Will to Power. Implicit in this argument is the suggestion that the Judge is *unable* to let the kid live out of principle. Like Chigurh, he is bound, *restricted*, by the principles of his own ethic. Although this does not detract from the strength of either of these characters’ Wills, it does suggest that their ethics, while opposing normative value systems, are not limitless or unbounded.

No Place for Good or Evil

And what ye have called the world shall first be created by you: your reason, your likeness, your will, your love, shall it itself become!

(Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* 138)

What should be apparent from my argument thus far is that neither the Will to Power nor the *Übermensch* is inherently good or evil; in fact, they actively work against such classification. Both the Judge and Chigurh embrace the violence and chaos of their realities, and bend them towards to their respective Wills. Violence plays a pivotal role in *Blood Meridian* and *No*

Country for Old Men, and these two characters are often at the heart of each novel's most violent scenes. The Judge, for example, is at his most sinister in his nonchalant scalping of the young boy for whom he initially appears to care:

The Judge sat with the Apache boy before the fire and it watched everything with dark berry eyes and some of the men played with it and made it laugh and they gave it jerky and it sat chewing and watching gravely the figures that passed above it. [. . .] Toadvine saw [the Judge] with the child as he passed with his saddle but when he came back ten minutes later leading the horse the child was dead and the Judge had scalped it.

(164)

As is the case with the scene in which he drowns the puppies, what is unsettling in this one is the Judge's apparent lack of motive.

Scenes such as these two, and for that matter the one in *No Country for Old Men* in which Chigurh seemingly needlessly murder's Llewelyn's young wife, nevertheless resist attributions like evil. Neither of these characters allows for such conventional binaries; both recreate the world according to their reason and Will. For this reason, in the worlds depicted in the novels, good and evil, usually such loaded terms, become blunted and ineffectual. The Will of each of these characters has created a world that resists normative codes, and to define either of them as good or evil is the same as asking whether lightning is evil for striking down a child. Both Chigurh and the Judge have a code of ethics that transcends good and evil, right and wrong, and exists and answers only to the strength of their Will. Moral justification is replaced with a vindication of the Will. In *Blood Meridian*, Irving confronts the Judge about his philosophy on war with the words, "might does not make right [. . .]. The man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally" (250), to which the Judge replies as follows: "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favour of the weak" (250). The Judge's sentiment is informed entirely by Nietzschean concerns, and Irving's argument, together with the normative structures of morality that inform it, is powerless against the former's Will.

The Judge's assertion that morality is a tool with which to enslave the strong is analogous to Nietzsche's own view, one that Zarathustra voices when he says that the "evilest [sic] is necessary for the Superman's best" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 327). What is the evil to which Nietzsche refers? It is certainly not that he believes the *Übermensch* to be evil. Instead,

he is alluding to the fact that any attempt to view the *Übermensch* through the lens of morality cannot see him as anything but evil. He is evil because he goes against the ‘common good,’ because the welfare of others is not his prime concern, because he celebrates the strength of his individual Will. Nietzsche revels in this inverse relationship because the more evil his *Übermensch* becomes the more freedom he attains:

The free man is immoral, because it is his *will* to depend upon himself and not upon tradition [. . .]. Any action performed – *not* because tradition commands it, but for other reasons (*e.g.* on account of its individual utility) [. . .] is termed immoral [. . .].

(*Dawn of Day* 14-5)

In this context, then, it means little to call the Judge or Chigurh evil or immoral. At most, it means that the closest we can come to their otherness is through recognising that they are in fact other. In the opening scene of *No Country for Old Men*, the Sheriff is confronted with the murderer of a fourteen-year-old girl, and tries but fails to understand the act: “They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. I don’t know what them eyes was the window to and I guess I’d as soon not know” (4). He is unable to quantify the actions of the murderer, and those of Chigurh, within his ethical framework.

Nietzsche’s Immoral Morality

When men no longer believe themselves to be evil, they cease to be so.

(*Dawn of Day* 159)

There is an inevitable paradox that arises from Nietzsche’s writings. On the one hand, we have his attempt to abolish morality – the result of which is that morality itself becomes an evil and immorality a good. However, this abolition of morality does not in itself explain the central principles of Nietzsche’s ethics. After all, he clearly states that his goal is ultimately the ‘Transvaluation of all Values.’ What this means is that he is not simply seeking to do away with values but to transform them, even replace, them. Some of this uncertainty regarding Nietzsche’s ethics is resolved if one is mindful that his ‘attacks’ on morality are

focused almost entirely on Western (especially Christian) morality, and *not* the distinction between right and wrong. He, then, is not interested in abolishing morality per se, but only a particular form of it. Although Will Self, in the aforementioned BBC documentary *Human, All Too Human*, claims that Nietzsche was aiming for the “systemised destruction of all systems,” I would argue that this view overlooks Nietzsche’s own attempts to create meaning. Indeed, at times, he is clearly suggesting that specific virtues should replace their traditional counterparts. In terms of my discussion thus far, what we have here is an impasse of sorts: how can Nietzsche call morality evil, on one hand, and, on the other, seek to recreate it?

The tension between Nietzsche’s condemnation of morality and his attempt to create his own system of meaning is reconciled when one remembers that, for him, as discussed earlier, systems of morality are not absolute but located in particular cultures. As such, it is not the idea of morality itself that he condemns, but a particular instance thereof, that is, Christianity. This is apparent in his division of morality into two distinct groups: a master morality and a slave morality. Each of these has unique characteristics and virtues, especially in regard to the creation of good and evil. Of particular importance, is the emphasis that Nietzsche places on the opposition between good and either ‘evil’ (*Böse*) or ‘bad’ (*Schlechtheit*). Ultimately, it is this distinction that separates master and slave moralities, an issue I will explore in more detail in my third chapter.

What is at issue here, then, is Nietzsche’s ‘immorality’; his resistance to forms of conventional morality. Indeed, he calls himself the “first immoralist” (*Ecce Homo* 133). However, it would *not* be accurate to claim that he is unethical; his goal is merely to place ethics in a different framework. Furthermore, it would also be incorrect to assume that he condemns acts of kindness. It is not the acts themselves that he condemns, but rather the reasons for and intentions of such actions. In *Dawn of Day*, he recognises that certain actions should be encouraged or avoided. However, they should be encouraged or avoided for reasons other than those put forward by normative values. The crucial consequence of this is that the provision *is* made for acts of kindness and generosity in Nietzsche’s ethic of the *Übermensch*. This is an issue that will be discussed at length in my final chapter.

For the purposes of the present discussion, slave morality may be equated with Christianity, which Nietzsche would call a morality of weakness, or, as Vereen Bell describes it, “a nihilism of affirmation” (*Nihilist as Hero* 2). Such a morality advocates humility, meekness, the good of the many, or, as I have discussed at length, the subjugation of the

individual. By contrast, master morality is the morality of the *Übermensch*. It advocates pride, individualism, conquest and excellence – all qualities necessary to walk the path of the *Übermensch*. It follows that the *Übermensch* is not based on an absence of morality, but on a re-imagined one that is explicitly centred on the individual as master. In my final chapter, which focuses on *The Road*, I examine this re-imagined morality in greater detail.

Conclusion

Mathew Quinn describes McCarthy's vision as an "unsettling one," occupied by characters with "primitive drives and simian shapes, more homunculi than human beings" (108). While there is little doubt that this writer's visions can be very unsettling, I do not agree with Quinn's assertion that his characters are "homunculi" that have no ethical concerns. This critic's view, not an uncommon one, is grounded in a traditional moral framework in which good and evil are easily discernible. Following a similar line of thought, Georg Guillemin claims that "nowhere in the novel [that is, *Blood Meridian*] does the narrative voice devote itself to the question of ethics, not even by pointing out the conspicuous absence of moral positions" ("See the Child" 240). Neither of these points of view acknowledges the ability of McCarthy's texts to reject such systems of value. In Denis Donoghue words, they do not recognise that McCarthy's "episodes are produced not to be interrogated or understood within some system of value" (qtd. in Parrish 74). This chapter has attempted to elaborate on the pertinence of this last statement. McCarthy's texts do not yield to any attempt to place them in a system of value. While Guillemin argues that *Blood Meridian* lacks moral positions, I have argued that moral indifference here is not analogous to immorality. To be immoral presupposes a moral position, which is not the case in McCarthy's writing. So, while many of his texts are indeed morally indifferent, it needs to be borne in mind that a conventional moral system cannot explain their inner workings. Guillemin goes on to suggest that *Blood Meridian* does not address the question of ethics (6). I would argue that exactly the opposite is true: the novel may not be interested in upholding morality, but it is certainly concerned with the nature of ethics, more precisely an ethic not constrained by a system of moral absolutes. To call McCarthy's worlds amoral, then, is ultimately just as futile as calling the Judge evil. The worlds created by the Judge and Chigurh are as principled as those based on

conventional ethical systems. The difference is simply that they are founded on different pillars.

This chapter has therefore sought to demonstrate that McCarthy's novels stage the absence of traditional systems of moral value. In these works, the characters and landscapes are presented in ways that remove moral certainties. Accordingly, this writer's fictional project intersects with Nietzsche's philosophical one. As I have shown, Nietzsche's writings offer insight into precisely such a loosening of moral certainty. After all, they describe a world experiencing a change in its relationship with truth, be it metaphysical truth, religious truth or even rational truth. Like Nietzsche's, the world depicted in McCarthy's fiction is one in which there is no comfort to be had from the metaphysical notion of a pre-ordained order, or of a higher power guiding the actions of humanity. It is the individual's Will alone that determines his or her fate. As I have suggested, though, neither Nietzsche nor McCarthy argues for the non-existence of a metaphysical world. The harsh landscapes in McCarthy's novels intimate, just as Nietzsche's writing does, that the real absolute truth is that we cannot escape the reality that is in front of us. In *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, survival is dependent on belief in one's own strength rather than in the existence of a metaphysical force.

In this chapter, I have argued that aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy may be discerned in the characterisation of both the Judge and Chigurh. This is by no means to say that these two characters are physical embodiments of Nietzsche's theories: I have shown that they evince some of his most valued traits, but also depart quite drastically from this paradigm in other respects. While both possess an individualistic Will and create an ethic premised on these Wills, neither can lay claim to being Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Indeed, at times, the characterisation of the Judge comes across as a parody, almost a perversion, of Nietzsche's writing. To read either of these characters as direct exemplars of qualities inherent in Nietzsche's *Übermensch* would be to ignore the provision for goodness and decency in the philosopher's work. Consequently, whether intentional or not on McCarthy's part, his characterisation of these two antagonists has the effect of highlighting some of the more controversial aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Ultimately, then, this chapter has demonstrated the value of Nietzsche's philosophy in refuting claims that McCarthy's writing lacks an ethic, enabling one to discern, in this writing, the presence of an ethical framework that resists conventional morality. In this system, the individual Will defines the relationship between self and other, and no drives are

suppressed because they are evil. When one talks of morality, it is impossible to escape from the markers of good and evil, and it is precisely for this reason that traditional morality must be absent from a study of McCarthy's writing.

Chapter Two

Choice and Consequence in The Border Trilogy

Introduction

Commenting on *All the Pretty Horses*, Vereen Bell writes that “the overpowering ratio of evil to good that we have come to expect from McCarthy’s fiction has been pretty much reversed” (“Between the Wish and the Thing” 44). Broadly speaking, this is true. In The Border Trilogy, McCarthy seemingly leaves behind the extreme violence that was so evident in *Blood Meridian*. Where *Blood Meridian* is concerned with perceptions of ethics, morality, and Nietzsche’s Will to Power and *Übermensch*, The Border Trilogy has as its focus the binaries of fate and free will, myth and reality, choice and responsibility. However, despite these changes, there is still a sense of thematic unity between *Blood Meridian* and The Border Trilogy. After all, the binaries with which the latter is preoccupied all have a definite Nietzschean dimension. Instead of a drastic change in theme between these two texts, what we have is a shift from truth and metaphysics to epistemology. More specifically, while *Blood Meridian* challenges the existence of absolute religious or metaphysical systems, The Border Trilogy is concerned with knowledge and belief, often distinguishing what its protagonists know from what they believe. This difference between fact and belief is important in a reading of the Trilogy, as its characters use their beliefs to create their perceptions of reality.

As with much of his other work, one of McCarthy’s main concerns in the Trilogy is the process of choice. For this reason, I examine both the choices that the characters in these narratives make, and their consequences. I also discuss how these choices are affected by the ways in which myth and language influence the characters’ perception of reality. As in the previous chapter, my aim here is to show the relevance of key Nietzschean concepts to an understanding of some of the core themes that McCarthy deals with in The Border Trilogy. In particular, I focus on Nietzsche’s theories regarding fate and free will, Eternal Recurrence, and the role of language in determining the ‘real.’

Nietzsche's Personal Fate and Free Will

Free will without fate is just as unthinkable as spirit without reality, good without evil.
Only antithesis creates the quality.

(Nietzsche, "Fate and History" 14)

A dichotomy between fate and free will is readily apparent in The Border Trilogy, and serves to unify the three novels, despite the fact that each of them has an independent protagonist and story line. In the course of the narratives McCarthy stages the relationship between fate and free will by foregrounding the choices that his characters have to make. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the nature of the Will is one of Nietzsche's principal preoccupations: he pondered at length whether the individual is predestined by fate before he or she even sets forth on the road of life, or whether choices and actions alone determine what the road holds next. The following section of my chapter outlines Nietzsche's views in this regard, and thereafter establishes their relevance to McCarthy's novels.

While Nietzsche argues that his ultimate ideal, the *Übermensch*, is capable of attaining complete freedom, it is interesting that his theory of fate, on the surface, seems to negate this possibility. When he maintains that we "have been influenced. And we lack the strength to react against this influence or even to recognise that we have been influenced" ("Fate and History" 14), he is suggesting that we have been conditioned since birth, that our circumstances and upbringing play crucial roles in determining our fate. Nel Grillaert summarises this argument as follows: "from birth on, humans do not begin life as a *tabula rasa*; their personality and activity are already partially conditioned by factors prior to their existence. Man's destiny is to some extent sketched out; the outlines of the personal fate are drawn in the soul" ("Determining One's Fate" 52). What is important here is Grillaert's invocation of the term 'personal fate.' Notions of fate often reference an absolute metaphysical force that determines the outcome of events. By contrast, when Nietzsche uses the term, he does so in order to refer to each person's 'personal fate.' It is equally important to remember that, in his use, this term is devoid of metaphysical connotations. Rather than an unknown force, it is the personal circumstances of each individual that create his or her fate.

Seemingly, then, this view is at odds with the idea of the apparently limitless freedom of the *Übermensch*. As discussed in my previous chapter, Nietzsche's vision of the *Übermensch*, the free individual, who is able to shape the world to his Will, is for him the

ultimate goal of humanity. His theories point to a future in which humankind, collectively, can reach such a state of freedom. The “philosophers of the future,” as he puts it, will attain a new level of freedom:

After all that has been said, must I still make a special point of mentioning that they too will be free, *very* free spirits, these philosophers of the future – just as surely as they will not be free spirits merely, but something more, higher, greater, and fundamentally different, something that would not go unrecognised or misidentified?

(*Beyond Good and Evil* 40)

On the one hand, then, he emphasises that we will be “very free,” and, on the other, that we are conditioned from birth by our ‘personal fate.’

A solution to this apparent contradiction is implicit in Nietzsche’s refusal to treat fate and free will as opposing forces with no commonality. Instead, he sees them as being intrinsically related, with the one contained in and limited by the other. Thus, for instance, he explicitly states that free will is unfettered, “boundlessly free, wandering,” and in the very next sentence adds that fate is a necessity that is utterly unavoidable (“Fate and History” 14). Clearly, he is attempting to integrate two forces that are usually considered to be antinomial. A corollary of his primary ambition, in his philosophical writings, namely to transform all systems of meaning, is precisely a refusal to use terms normatively. So, while conventional conceptions of fate and free will are not easily reconciled, this is not necessarily the case in Nietzsche’s writings, as can be seen in his following conceptualisation of free will as being encircled by ‘personal fate’:

Freedom of will, in itself nothing but freedom of thought, is also circumscribed in a similar way as is freedom of thought. Thoughts cannot go beyond the boundary of the circle of ideas. But the circle of ideas is based upon mastered intuitions that can, with amplification, grow and become stronger without going beyond the limits determined by the brain. Likewise, freedom of will is capable of enhancement within the limits of the same farthest point.

(“Freedom of Will” 16)

Free will is *bound* by fate, contained in it. That is, fate is both the “circle of ideas” and the “farthest point,” and our freedom to make choices cannot extend beyond this boundary. How can Nietzsche’s philosophers of the future be “very free,” if that very freedom which sets

them apart is bound? Since he at no point suggests that these ideal human beings will be able to transcend these limitations, how is one to explain the postulation that they will be freer than their present-day counterparts?

Nietzsche hints at an answer to these questions in his statement that, although we cannot escape the limitations of ‘personal fate,’ we can, by mastering “intuitions,” expand fate’s boundary. I would argue that these intuitions principally refer to an understanding of our choices as limiting actions. Nietzsche’s use of the term “very free” does not at any point suggest absolute freedom: we will always be restricted by the labyrinth of our previous choices. Paradoxically, then, by mastering our limitations, we can transcend them to an extent. Essentially what Nietzsche is suggesting is that the choices that we, as individuals, make are limited by our cultural upbringing, previous decisions, and current circumstances. Consequently, an individual needs to recognise that there is a balance between his or her own agency, and the limits placed on that agency by outside factors. In other words, we are “very free” when we realise that our freedom is not absolute. It is this understanding of limits and limitation that John Grady Cole, in *All the Pretty Horses*, fails to come to terms with, as he continually believes that he can successfully make choices irrespective of the constraints placed on him by his circumstances and previous decisions. The following section of this chapter considers the role choice and consequence play in The Border Trilogy.

Fate and Free Will in The Border Trilogy

Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I’d made before it.

(*All the Pretty Horses* 79)

Throughout The Border Trilogy, the emphasis falls on the choices characters have to make and the extent of their freedom in making those choices. In *All the Pretty Horses*, for instance, this emphasis is apparent in the scene that follows the one in which John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins join up with the impulsive Jimmy Blevins. The two older boys play a trick on Blevins, with Lacey tossing a coin to decide the boy’s fate: “The coin spun in the air. Rawlins caught it and slapped it down on top of his wrist and held his wrist where they

could see it and lifted his hand away” (*All the Pretty Horses* 41). This light-hearted use of the coin almost seems to parody similar scenes in *No Country for Old Men*, in which Chigurh’s very strict and violent views on fate and free will are often symbolised by the outcome of a coin toss. As in Lacey’s toss of the coin, the outcome of decisions in *The Border Trilogy* may not necessarily be a matter of life or death (which they frequently are in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*). Yet the significance that McCarthy attaches to these decisions is exactly the same.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, it is the Dueña Alfonsa who becomes the voice of fate and free will. Though vastly different in motive and circumstance, she has the same force and presence in this novel that the Judge has in *Blood Meridian*. While she could not be described as an advocate of the Will to Power, the Dueña is most certainly the antithesis of the naivety and blind optimism of John Grady Cole. It is during her conversations with the latter that her views on fate and free will are first voiced openly. In the course of a discussion on the future of her granddaughter, for instance, she articulates the following sentiment:

If there is a pattern [in life] it will not shape itself to anything these eyes can recognise. Because the question for me was always whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact. Because otherwise we are nothing.

(*All the Pretty Horses* 230)

This idea of the ‘shape’ each life takes is a metaphor that extends throughout the three novels that make up the *Trilogy*, and, as the above passage suggests, characters are often left to ponder where that ‘shape’ comes from. For the Dueña, it is important that it “was there from the beginning,” which would seem to suggest a conventional form of fate that presupposes a pre-existent plan for us, a ‘shape’ that is already decided. This view, which renders free will insignificant, leads to one of the major conflicts in the novel, namely that between the Dueña and the idealistic and stubborn John Grady, who feels that he can achieve anything if he believes in it enough. I deal with this topic at length in the subsequent section of this chapter that deals with myth.

Later in the conversation, when the Dueña recalls her father’s views, the reader is offered a contrasting view of fate:

My father had a great sense of the connectedness of things. I'm not sure I share it. He claimed that the responsibility for a decision could never be abandoned to blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences. The example he gave was of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mind and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed [. . .].

(230-31)

Like his daughter, the Dueña's father argues for a form of fate; however, he conceives of one not grounded in "blind agency." Though both views see an already existent pattern that shapes our lives, they differ at their source. The Dueña rules out free will almost entirely, as becomes apparent when she responds to her father's conception of fate:

My father must have seen in this parable the accessibility of the origins of things, but I see nothing of the kind. For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on.

(231)

While there is never a clear attempt by the Dueña to posit a metaphysical force behind the puppets of which she speaks, the gist of this metaphor is clear: we are not in control of our actions. Her father's view, by contrast, places fate very much in the human sphere by locating it within the choices we make, and is therefore closer to Nietzsche's idea of a 'personal fate,' in terms of which the circumstances of each individual create the 'shape' of his or her life. In this instance, our circumstances are formed by the choices we make, and the far-reaching consequences of those choices. Because our choices point to a future that is unknown in the moment in which they are made, we can never know the effect that the smallest act may have, nor how far into the future its consequences may reach. Although this understanding of choice also places limits on an unbounded free will, it does not do so to the same extent that the Dueña's theory does. Free will is here limited only by the circle of choices we have made.

All the Pretty Horses gives no indication as to which of these understandings of choice is correct. However, in *The Crossing*, the second novel in the Trilogy, the ideas of both the Dueña and her father are combined. After Billy has killed and buried the wolf, he comes across an old man in a derelict church who gives him food and shelter. The man tells

him of his life, and reveals his theory that life is itself a narrative that is continuously being told:

For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them. So everything is necessary. Every least thing. This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised. Because the seams are hid from us you see. The joinery. The way in which the world is made. We have no way to know what could be taken away. What omitted. We have no way to tell what might stand and what might fall. And those seams that are hid from us are of course in the tale itself and the tale has no abode or place of being except in the telling only and there it lives and makes its home and therefore we can never be done with the telling. Of the telling there is no end.

(143)

Everything is necessary and nothing can be dispensed with. The world is not a fact, but a tale made up of choices. And, without being able to see the complete tale, we cannot say we possess an unbounded and limitless free will because, even though, in the moment of choosing, we are free to forge a path, that path has already been limited by the choices that have come before it, and we can only make our choice based on a future that has not yet unfolded. It follows that choices are themselves exclusions, as Alan White notes:

The moment is bound to the future in that every moment is one from which I must take a single path forward, and in that any moment can be a moment of decision, a point where I change the direction of my development. It might appear that, in one sense, many paths into the future are open, in that I deem myself free to choose. Yet the fact remains that any specific choice is also a limiting choice, every selection an exclusion: I have only one life to live, only one path to follow.

(100)

Through these choices, we determine, as much as we can, the direction that our 'tale' will take. In *All the Pretty Horses*, the Dueña says that we are nothing if the events that make up life are random and not ordered; but it would perhaps be more accurate to say that whether an order already exists, or is only imposed after the event, makes no difference to our choices or their consequences.

This is made even clearer in *The Crossing*, where Billy encounters a wandering man on horseback. Woken from sleep, Billy listens as the man talks to him about the possibility of other paths:

Whether a man's life was writ in a book someplace or whether it took its form day by day was one and the same for it had but one reality and that was the living of it. He said that while it was true that men shape their own lives it was also true that they could have no shape other for what then would that shape be?

(379-80)

Our lives are always only in the moment of being created, and in that moment there is but one reality. Whether the moment was reached via the planning of an omniscient force or simply through the randomness of our own choices, it constitutes the 'path' we find ourselves on, and there is no other. John Grady is explicitly told as much by a blind man (and one notes the allusion to the traditional representation of Fate as being either blind or blindfolded) in the third novel of the *Trilogy*, *Cities of the Plain*: "We are free to act only upon what is given. Choice is lost in the maze of generations and each act in that maze is itself an enslavement for it voids every alternative and binds one ever more tightly into the constraints that make a life" (196-97). These words seem almost to have been taken directly from Nietzsche, who, as discussed earlier, argued for a form of 'personal fate' that is created out of the labyrinth of our previous choices –what McCarthy's blind man refers to as the "maze of generations."

The limits and limitations of choice are thus a major preoccupation for both Nietzsche and McCarthy. In *The Border Trilogy*, the various characters are repeatedly confronted with choices on their journeys, both metaphorical and physical. When Billy, for instance, chooses to save a wolf on a whim, or when John Grady chooses to pursue Alejandra, we cannot but reflect on whether or not they understand the nature of their own free will. In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss these characters' awareness of their choices, and of the role they play in shaping their respective fates.

Narration and Truth

No, she said. No. It's not a matter of right. You must understand. It is a matter of who must say. In this matter I get to say. I am the one who gets to say.

(*All the Pretty Horses* 137)

The Border Trilogy centres on two protagonists and their repeated crossings between the United States of America and Mexico. Since my emphasis is on the choices that determine their plots, it is necessary briefly to summarise these three narratives. In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady tries to outrun the decline of the only world he has known. After his parents' divorce, his mother sells the ranch on which he was raised and, rather than accepting the changes to his world, he convinces his friend Lacey Rawlins to leave USA for Mexico, and, in this way, tries to hold onto the reality he has lost. Once in Mexico, he falls in love with a ranch owner's daughter; he pursues her, but is thwarted by his own decisions and the reluctance of her grandmother to consent to their marriage.

Billy Parham, in *The Crossing*, decides to cross the border into Mexico after he finds an injured wolf in a trap on his family's ranch and impulsively decides to return her to her home, which he believes to be in the mountains of Mexico. In the course of the novel, he makes three journeys to Mexico. During the third visit, Boyd, his brother, dies, and this leads Billy to question the consequences of his actions. In *Cities of the Plain*, the third novel in the Trilogy, John Grady and Billy are working together on a ranch in Mexico, where they live a life very similar to that which they left in the first two novels. As in *All the Pretty Horses*, the action in this novel is driven by John Grady's impulsive decision to pursue a woman; this time a young, ailing prostitute named Magdalena, who he meets in a brothel in Mexico.

In my discussion of fate and free will, I mentioned that it is through our choices that we create the 'tale' of our lives. Since any 'tale' is, by definition, a cumulative narrative, it follows that our lives are a narrative constantly being told. I use the term 'narrative' here in much the same way that John Rothfork does in his argument that we "do not *discover* the truth about the world; we *narrate* it in myth and science" ("Cormac McCarthy as Pragmatist"). Rothfork is alluding to the fact that our perceptions of the world do not exist independently of us. In other words, the world we see around us is mediated by our own perceptions of it. Rather than being factual, the knowledge we believe we have of the world is narrated into existence. If this argument is taken further, it should follow logically that there

can be no narration without language. Indeed Linda Woodson even goes so far as to say that “language *is* the human activity” (“Sound and Sense” 207). Significantly, Nietzsche writes the following of language:

The importance of language for the development of culture lies in the fact that in language man has placed a world of his own beside the other, a position which he deemed so fixed that he might therefrom lift the rest of the world off its hinges, and make himself master of it. Inasmuch as man has believed in the ideas and names of things as *aeternae veritates* for a great length of time, he has acquired that pride by which he has raised himself above the animal; he really thought that in language he possessed the knowledge of the world.

(*Human, All Too Human* 21-2)

In this argument, language relates us to the world, and therefore mediates our perceptions of it. There are two additional points in this passage that are relevant to my argument in the rest of the chapter. The first is that language creates a “separate world besides the other world” (a point on which I shall elaborate in my discussion of dreams and myth), while the second is the belief that we can possess “knowledge of the world.” If one is to possess knowledge of the world, there must be a complete world, independent of our interpretations of it. Whether or not there is such a world is ultimately irrelevant, though, as we cannot access it other than through our experiences and descriptions of it. In narrating events, we simultaneously narrate the world.

McCarthy’s concern with the mediated nature of reality is explored in The Border Trilogy primarily through the repeated journeys of John Grady and Billy. As I have already mentioned, John Grady and Lacey, on their way to Mexico, befriend a young boy named Blevins (*All the Pretty Horses*). In the course of their travels, Blevins’ horse is lost in a thunderstorm, and the trio subsequently find it in a Mexican village. Knowing that the horse belongs to Blevins, John Grady and Lacey, albeit somewhat reluctantly, help to steal it back. Later, the trio are caught by Mexican authorities: Blevins is executed out in the wilderness and the other two are imprisoned. It is during his imprisonment that John Grady is taught his harshest lesson about the nature of truth. While being questioned by the captain, he is told:

You have the opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to Saltillo and then you will no have this opportunity. It will be gone. Then the truth will be in the other hands. You see. We can make the truth here. Or we can lose it. But

when you leave here it will be too late. Too late for the truth. Then you will be in the hands of other parties. Who can say what the truth will be then? At that time? Then you will blame yourself. You will see.

(168)

John Grady is perplexed by the captain's words, and his response only highlights his naivety: "There aint but one truth [. . .]. The truth is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody's mouth" (168). This sentiment informs all of John Grady's actions and choices in the Trilogy; in his eyes there is but one world and everything is attainable within it. By contrast, the captain knows that it is those with the Will and power to do so who decide the truth. The Dueña too understands this, and it is ultimately John Grady's inability to see that truth is but one perspective among many that makes her decide to refuse him as an adequate suitor for Alejandra.

Choice and Consequence

For John Grady, outcomes follow logically from their actions, and each action has but one consequence. During his imprisonment in Mexico, however, this view is challenged. Worried about Lacey, and unable to free himself, he has no choice but to go to Pérez, a powerful inmate, for help. The discussion turns to the case of the stolen horses, and John Grady adamantly reiterates that he has done no wrong. To this Pérez replies as follows: "My goodness. You think there are no crimes without owners? It is not a matter of finding. It is only a matter of choosing. Like picking the proper suit in a store" (193). John Grady may know he is innocent, but that is not the only verdict that may be found. Just as each event can be narrated differently, so too can its outcome.

Shortly after this encounter, he is released from prison, thanks to the Dueña's intervention. After learning that Alejandra has been forced to choose against him, he decides to seek retribution for the death of Blevins. He kidnaps the captain and tells him that Blevins "was his brother and he'd taken a bloodoath not to return to his father without the captain's head and [. . .] that if he failed there were more brothers each waiting his turn" (261). Since he here narrates a new relationship for himself and Blevins, this is the clearest indication the

reader is given that John Grady has remembered some of the lessons he has been taught. Up to this point he has steadfastly believed that the world holds a certain truth that remains true always. Though there is much to admire in his character, he has hitherto been unable to comprehend the differing perceptions of the world he encounters, particularly those of the Dueña and Alejandra. To an extent, this changes in the course of his encounter with the captain, which suggests that he is beginning to see the world as a narrative. The fact that Blevins is not really his brother does not diminish the power of John Grady's narrative. In the moment of telling it, he sees that this narrative "is a form of construction, of order imposed, of meaning derived" (Arnold, "Cormac McCarthy's *The Stonemason*" 152). This realisation that the world is a story continually being told is a lesson learnt only briefly though, as in *Cities of the Plains* he fails to evince the same awareness in his choices, right until his death.

John Grady tries to create a narrative in which he proves to the Dueña that he is worthy of being a suitor of Alejandra. Ironically, the choices he makes in trying to do this count against him in the end. A similar irony can be seen in Billy Parham's attempt, in *The Crossing*, to create a narrative in which he can change the fate of a trapped wolf. It is his decision to return the wolf to Mexico that initially propels him on his journey and, during the course of both it and subsequent ones, he is taught the nature of truth in the world. Early in the novel, while speaking to an old man, he is told:

Between [humankind's] acts and ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them.

(46)

We see that which we "name and call out" because we believe in the power of language to create reality.

The reality created by such acts of narration is, however, by no means absolute. Rather, each such act creates its own reality, and it is this lesson, amongst others, that John Grady and Billy need to learn. After crossing into Mexico, Billy is separated from the wolf and later learns that she has been captured and is to be used for sport in a fair. When he asks a group of locals why she was taken there, they respond as follows:

They shrugged, they tramped beside the horse. An old woman said that the wolf had been brought from the sierras where it had eaten many school children. Another woman said that it had been captured in the company of a young boy who had run away naked into the woods. A third said that the hunters who had brought the wolf down on the sierras had been followed by other wolves who howled at night from the darkness beyond their fire and some of the hunters had said that these wolves were no right wolves.

(102)

The locals tell Billy several stories about the wolf, but which one is true? Since we, the readers of the novel, have had Billy's journey narrated for us, and have therefore followed him through his choices, we know that none of the stories the locals tell him is 'true.' McCarthy's point, though, is that Billy here encounters other truths, other tales that are true for the people narrating them.

As is the case with John Grady, Billy is introduced to the idea that truth is not monological but perspectival. At first, he is also guilty of failing to see that the world is made up of a multiplicity of narratives, as emerges from his ill-fated decision to save the wolf he was meant to kill. It is only when he finds the wolf at the fair, bloodied and injured, fighting off dogs in a pit, that he fully realises the consequences of his decision: "He stepped over the parapet and walked toward the wolf and levered a shell into the chamber of the rifle and halted ten feet from her and raised the rifle to his shoulder and took aim at the bloodied head and fired" (122). Paradoxically, Billy saves the wolf by killing her, an outcome to which his narrative has been leading from the start. His decision to save the wolf in the woods, albeit fuelled by noble intent, is the catalyst for the moment in which he kills her, and it is only at this point, in this precise moment, that Billy fully understands, and takes responsibility for, his choice. One of the biggest lessons that the protagonists of these two novels must learn is thus that there are countless consequences, often unknown, to any choice. By accepting all the potential consequences of their actions, they are, in effect, taking responsibility for them.

This is what Billy does when he kills the wolf, and what John Grady does when he seeks retribution for Blevins's death. As I have already indicated, though, John Grady is, for the most part, incapable of understanding the consequences of his actions. Nevertheless, James Lilley argues that this character does in fact learn something enduring in *All the Pretty Horses*:

The Dueña's gift to John Grady is, like the acquisition of language, a double-edged sword. On the one hand she forces him to realise that his life will always miss the mark, will never ground itself in a stable past. However, she also helps him to see the world more clearly and truly, enabling him to articulate his loss and desire in language.

(283)

Despite his stubbornness and inability to see beyond his own vision of reality, there are moments in which John Grady catches a glimpse of a world not his own: "He sat on the bed in the empty room and listened to the sounds of all that alien commerce in the world outside. He sat a long time and he thought about his life and how little of it he could ever have foreseen and he wondered for all his will and all his intent how much of it was his own doing" (*Cities of the Plain* 208-209). Despite moments such as these in which he perceives the world "clearly and truly," I do not agree that this character successfully evolves beyond his own desire to see the world as an elegy to the Old West. While Lilley suggests that he is able to articulate his loss in language, I would argue that he only demonstrates this ability momentarily when he creates a new narrative for himself and the deceased Blevins. By the third novel in the *Trilogy*, Cole seems to have lost this ability. For all intents and purposes, he makes the same decision twice, and, in both instances, expects different results. It is this that proves that the lessons he learnt in *All the Pretty Horses* have been quickly forgotten. After failing to see that it is the narrative of the Dueña that holds the key to his fate with Alejandra, he repeats this mistake in *Cities of the Plains* when he pursues Magdalena. Her fate is controlled by Eduardo, the owner of the brothel in which she works, and it is ultimately at the hands of the latter that John Grady dies. Billy is able to see the folly of John Grady's actions, but is unable to dissuade him from attempting to challenge Eduardo. For all their noble intentions, both Billy and John Grady are forced to learn that our narratives are always only in the moment of telling, and even the most innocuous choices need to be made in the knowledge that their consequences could be far-reaching and entirely unexpected.

Eternal Recurrence and the Will

He saw that a man's life was little more than an instant and that as time was eternal therefore every man was always and eternally in the middle of his journey, whatever be his years or whatever distance he had come.

(*Cities of the Plain* 283-84)

The preceding sections of this chapter have dealt with McCarthy's depiction of the process of existential choice. Nietzsche too was taken with this topic, as is evident from his theory of Eternal Recurrence, in terms of which each and every moment in every life has already been, and will continue to be, repeated. All actions, he insists, eternally recur: "Must not all things that *can* happen *have* already happened, been done, run past?" ("Eternal Recurrence" 251). To simplify Nietzsche's theory, fate is the cumulative limiting effect of all our choices and actions. However, the idea that every action has *already happened* would seem to negate this limiting effect, because if everything has already happened there could be no unknown future and therefore no real choice to make. This would be the case, if we were aware of the eternal nature of our lives. According to Nietzsche's theory, though, we are destined to repeat eternally even the smallest of actions. Since we are not aware of this eternal repetition, we make each choice as though for the first time.

Thus we all have only the one path to follow. Magdalena, in *Cities of the Plain*, recognises this, and says to one of her helping ladies that "one could not know where it was that one had taken the path one was upon but only that one was upon it" (102). Similarly, while the name of his theory might suggest otherwise, Nietzsche is concerned only with the singular path we each must follow. That being the case, why does he then insist that every action repeats itself eternally? Simply put, he is concerned with each and every moment of choice, and by suggesting that these moments repeat themselves eternally, he is able to put forward the following theoretical question: given the choice, and knowing the consequences, would I choose to make the same decisions again? It is this question that lies at the heart of his theory of Eternal Recurrence, and which is also significant in much of McCarthy's work.

Indeed, in *The Crossing*, Quijada, part of the group that allows the boys to take back their horses, asks Billy the following question: "If people knew the story of their lives how many would then elect to live them?" (387). Nietzsche (in his own typically flamboyant style) stages this question by asking what one would do if a demon were to creep up and offer

one the opportunity to relive this life, every pain and joy remaining as it is. In response to such a question there can only be two responses: “Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine” (*The Gay Science* 273-74). If I were to rejoice at the prospect of reliving life, exactly as it has been, it would follow that I was happy with *all* of my choices until now, and would choose to change nothing. Conversely, if my response was one of sadness, it would follow that I regretted past decisions and would not be happy to repeat them. This simple dichotomy, answering either yes or no, is the basis for many of Nietzsche’s theories. Any individual answering the question he poses in the affirmative will have experienced a “tremendous moment,” in which she or he holds no regret, doubt, or sadness for any decision or consequence. Such a state of being is only possible if one is able to accept all the possible consequences of an action. In *The Crossing*, Gillian, a Mexican trader, tells Billy that “no man can know [the outcome of a choice]. No prophet foresee. The consequences of an act are often quite different from what one would guess. You must be sure that the intention in your heart is large enough to contain all wrong turnings, all disappointments” (202). Crucially, the one who is able to achieve this will be one who has harnessed the Will to Power.

As I discussed at length in my previous chapter, embracing the Will involves the privileging of an individual’s desires. If an individual were to respond affirmatively to the question posed by Nietzsche’s demon question regarding Eternal Recurrence, it would follow that his or her every choice had been made in accordance with his or her drives and Will to Power. Accordingly, this individual would find himself or herself on the path of Nietzsche’s ultimate creation, the *Übermensch*. Like the *Übermensch* too, Nietzsche’s concept of Eternal Recurrence is not meant to be taken literally. Answering in the affirmative to the latter is a goal to be reached that has so far been unattainable, but is nonetheless a goal. The goal in question could only be attained by the “most audacious, lively, and world-affirming human being, one who has learned not only to accept and bear that which has been and is, but who also wants to have it over again, *just as it was and is*, throughout all eternity [. . .]” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 50). What Nietzsche is suggesting is that, were one to pursue such a goal, the decisions one makes would not bring regret because one’s own Will would motivate them. If every choice fulfils the Will to Power of the chooser there can be no regret. As he says: “Joy, however, doth not want heirs, it doth not want children, – joy wanteth itself, it wanteth

eternity, it wanteth recurrence, it wanteth everything eternally-like-itself” (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 359). For him, joy is the result of the Will rejoicing in its desires, and if every decision brings joy we would never desire to change past events.

In *The Border Trilogy*, neither John Grady nor Billy can say they have experienced such a “tremendous moment,” and in the course of the narratives they frequently reflect on the consequences of their actions and wish that they could change them. As Troy says to Billy, “you go back home and everything you wished was different is still the same and everything you wished was the same is different” (*Cities of the Plain* 30). Herein lies the Will’s greatest weakness, it cannot will backwards. For all his championing of the *Übermensch* and the Will to Power, Nietzsche recognises that the past is an opponent that no amount of force or Will can challenge:

To redeem what is past, and to transform every “It was” into “Thus would I have it!” – that only do I call redemption!

Will – so is the emancipator and joy-bringer called: thus have I taught you, my friends! But now learn this likewise: the Will itself is still a prisoner.

Willing sets free: but what is that called which still casteth the emancipator in chains?

“It was:” thus is the Will’s teeth-gnashing and lonesome tribulation called. Impotent towards what hath been done – it is a malicious spectator of all that is past.

Not backward can the Will will; that it cannot break time and time’s desire – that is the Will’s most lonesome tribulation.

(*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 189)

That the Will cannot will backwards is what afflicts John Grady, in particular, in the course of the *Trilogy*. As is so often the case, it is the Dueña who puts into words that which he cannot see: “I’m prepared to believe that certain circumstances must have conspired against you. But what is done cannot be undone” (*All the Pretty Horses* 228).

Throughout the *Trilogy*, neither John Grady nor Billy is prepared for the consequences of their choices. Billy crosses the border for the third and final time, searching for his brother, who has by now married a young girl and made a life for himself in Mexico. When Billy does eventually find his brother, the latter is already dead. Ironically, this is the first time that Billy has managed to find that for which he has been looking. This irony is not lost on him, as emerges in the course of his conversation with a fellow American: “This is my third trip [to Mexico]. It’s the only time I was ever down here that I got what I come after.

But it sure as hell wasn't what I wanted" (416). Even when Billy finds what he is looking for, he is not prepared to find it. However, it is not just the character's own musings that convey as much to the reader: McCarthy uses various devices to reveal the struggle between choice, intention and consequence in these narratives. In the case of John Grady, for example, myth is used to foreground the difference between perception of the world and the world itself. Moreover, McCarthy also uses the recurring metaphor of dreams to provide insight into the subconscious wishes and desires of his characters. In the sections that follow, I analyse each of these devices.

Myth in The Border Trilogy

In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. 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.

(All the Pretty Horses 238)

For the purposes of this argument, it is necessary to elaborate on my use of the term myth. Simply put, I use this word to denote a firm belief that the world is a certain way and that it conforms to a set of normative codes. In this sense, religion would be classified as myth. It does not follow that religion, thus termed, is necessarily imaginary or fictitious – indeed, it is very real for its adherents. Put differently, we all have our own myths about the world, and these form the basis for our narration of it. Myth is fictitious in the sense that it is a belief that only exists in the believing person's consciousness. This, though, does not diminish the power of the belief, for it is through myth that we create for ourselves what is 'real.' A Christian will believe in religious doctrine, and live his or her life accordingly, whereas an atheist will narrate a world that does not have any religious meaning. Both the worlds thus constructed are real for the believers concerned, and yet each only exists for the individual. Crucially, then, our myths hold tremendous power for us, but are not the world itself. In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady recounts the following memory he has of his grandfather:

On the wall opposite above the sideboard was an oilpainting of horses. There were half a dozen of them breaking through a pole corral and their manes were long and blowing and their eyes wild. They'd been copied out of a book. They had the long Andalusian nose and the bones of their faces showed Barb blood. You could see the hindquarters of the foremost few, good hindquarters and heavy enough to make a cuttinghorse. As if maybe they had Steeldust in their blood. But nothing else matched and no such horse ever was that he had seen and he'd once asked his grandfather what kind of horses they were and his grandfather looked up from his plate at the painting as if he'd never seen it before and he said those are picturebook horses and went on eating.

(15-16)

The painting contains real elements of horses, and at first glance is an adequate representation. But, as a representation, it can never wholly be the thing itself. Representations of representations, such as the painting here described, are scattered liberally throughout the novels under discussion. In the very first sentence of the Trilogy, John Grady enters a room, and the draught causes a candle to flicker: "The candleflame and the image of the candleflame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door" (*All the Pretty Horses* 3). Like the image of the "candleflame," our myths about the world reflect completely its appearance, without ever being it itself.

Throughout the Trilogy, McCarthy uses myth as a vehicle to examine the choices his characters make. From the very beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady, as is evident in his words and actions, perceives reality from the perspective of the traditional cowboy myth of the Old West. Early in the novel, the reader is given a description of his forefathers: "His grandfather was the oldest of eight boys and the only one to live past the age of twenty-five. They were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires. They seemed to fear only dying in bed" (7). The Cole family has for generations been steeped in the traditions of the adventurer and explorer, and it is apparent that John Grady is made in this mould. Indeed, James D. Lilley says of his journey that it "becomes an elegy to the Old West, an attempt to move backwards in time to a place where the codes of the Old West are still valorized" (274). This becomes even more obvious in the novel when Alejandra's father describes him as a "gentle knight" (146). Indeed, he is everything that a traditional hero should be: moral and good, strong and courageous. Apart from this, he has a strong, almost pastoral, affinity with the land and the animals around him, particularly horses. And yet, unlike the traditional hero, John Grady, in this narrative, does not get the girl or the happy ending. While McCarthy very

deliberately chooses to use the cowboy myth, the events in the novel defy the expected outcomes.

John Grady himself consistently conforms to the cowboy myth in his actions: he is strong-willed and strives to attain his goals with all the tenacity and stubbornness of one who believes that anything can be achieved. Nevertheless, the world around him does not conform to this myth, and I would therefore argue that McCarthy's subversion of the ending that one expects of a Western is related to this jarring dichotomy. Just as Paul Auster uses the detective genre only to subvert its ideas and expectations in the first part of his New York Trilogy, that is *City of Glass*, so too does McCarthy employ the hero myth to highlight the limitations of both it and myth in general.

What appears to be enacted in McCarthy's novel, then, is what Nietzsche says about the limitations of myth. In a letter to his sister, as noted in *Human, All Too Human* (BBC), Nietzsche maintains that "every true faith is infallible. It performs what the believing person hopes to find in it. But it does not offer the least support for the establishing of an objective truth." Essentially, Nietzsche argues that it is easier to follow blindly a faith than it is to recognise the often harsh reality of quotidian life. For the most part, John Grady's faith in the way he sees the world is "infallible," and it is for this reason that he is often unable to comprehend the unexpected results of his actions. He bases his reality on the foundation that anything is achievable. In this view, we are all equal and unlimited in our choices, and we alone are responsible for the outcomes of our actions. It is on the basis of this faith that he makes the choices he does, and because of it that he is unable to understand why he fails in his attempts to win Alejandra's hand.

While John Grady's myth may yield unexpected results in the world of men, it finds solid ground in that of horses. His inadequacies when interacting with the human characters in the novel are frequently juxtaposed with his prodigious ability to understand horses. As is evident in the following passage, John Grady is something of a mythical figure when it comes to training and riding horses:

The boy who rode on slightly before him sat a horse not only as if he'd been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance in some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or her right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been.

It is this ability to understand horses that gains John Grady favour with Alejandra's father and earns him an elevated position on their ranch. There is an unspoken bond between the young American and the horses he trains:

Before the colt could struggle up John Grady had squatted on its neck and pulled its head up and to one side and was holding the horse by the muzzle with the long bony head pressed against his chest and the hot sweet breath of it flooding up from the dark wells of its nostrils over his face and neck like news from another world. They did not smell like horses. They smelled like what they were, wild animals. He held the horse's face against his chest and he could feel along his inner thighs the blood pumping through the arteries and he could smell the fear and he cupped his hand over the horse's eyes and stroked and he did not stop talking to the horse at all, speaking in a low steady voice and telling it all that he intended to do and cupping the animal's eyes and stroking the terror out.

(103-104)

In instances such as these John Grady places the value of his horse's life above his own; indeed much of the plot is driven by his desire to rescue the stolen horses. He believes that the worlds of horses and men are similar, and what "he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the leanings of his life were for the ardent hearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise" (6). In his interactions with horses, this character ceases to be, as he is for so much of the novel, a parody of the traditional cowboy hero. However, as much as he would like it to be so, the worlds of horses and men are not the same, and his mastery of horses only temporarily gives his faith an absolute foundation. In fact, this total kinship with horses merely highlights the extent to which his myth fails to provide for him an objective reality in the world outside of horses.

The last time he sees Alejandra, John Grady tries to "read her heart in her handclasp but he knew nothing" (249). He can interpret all the nuances and subtleties of a horse's movements, but cannot do the same with the woman he loves. John Grady cannot read Alejandra's heart, or understand her choice, because he fails to recognise a myth beyond his own. While he leaves his homeland and crosses the border into Mexico on a whim, in the spirit of one who has until now been able to make choices freely, Alejandra is unable to do

the same. What thwarts John Grady is his inability to recognise that in Mexico it is tradition, hierarchy and family honour that are the currency of value to be taken into account.

Ironically, this is something that even a small child recognises. On his way to meet Alejandra for the last time, he shares his lunch with three children. When he divulges the reason for his travels, one of the children, a girl, tells him that Alejandra's grandmother should "be consulted because she was very important in these matters and that he must take her presents and try to win her to his side for without her help little could be expected. She said that all the world knew this to be true" (243). While all the world may know this to be true, John Grady does not. He expects Alejandra to choose him over family because this is the choice he would have, and has, made. What he fails to see, then, is that it is the Dueña who holds the power to winning Alejandra. Indeed, the Dueña makes Alejandra's choice clear to John Grady when she says that should her granddaughter not "value what is true above what is useful it will make little difference whether she lives at all. And by true I do not mean what is righteous but merely what is so" (240).

The Dueña makes her choice based on not passion or love, as John Grady would, but pragmatism and the future security of her granddaughter. Sara Spurgeon recognises the importance of the Dueña's words when she observes that John Grady must abandon his "blind faith in a mystic construct hiding from the true nature of the world – and therefore also the knowledge of his proper place within it" ("Pledged in Blood" 86). It is his inability to do just this that ultimately counts against him. To distinguish what is true from what is useful requires being able to look past one's own myth. And, looking past one's own myth enables one to see the world as others do, that is, to see other myths, and so develop an awareness of the nature of the world as a narrative. This is something John Grady does not grasp. Being unable to look beyond his own myth, he cannot see that the choices made in its name lead him further away from Alejandra. By starting a secret affair with her without her family's knowledge, he leaves the Dueña with no choice but to refuse him as a future husband for Alejandra. The truth in Mexico, a country firmly steeped in patriarchy, is that a woman's reputation determines her status. This is the 'truth' that the Dueña refers to, and John Grady's part in the stealing of the horses, and his clandestine affair with Alejandra, preclude him from marrying her.

After returning to the United States of America, John Grady comes to grasp some of what the Dueña has said to him. In a discussion with a magistrate, in the course of which he tells the story of his journey, he reflects as follows: "I worked for that man [Alejandra's

father] and I respected him and he never had no complaints about the work I done or him and he was awful good to me. And that man come up on the high range where I was workin and I believe he intended to kill me. And I was the one that brought it about. Nobody but me” (291). He seems finally to have realised that his loss of Alejandra and departure from Mexico are a consequence of his inability to see the world through the eyes of others. In the words of Nietzsche, faith provides what we hope to see, but that faith in itself is not an objective truth, and has no power to make the reflection of a thing the thing itself. Nevertheless, as I have already argued, this is a lesson not long learnt by John Grady.

Dreams and Mending the Past

They have a long life, dreams. I have dreams now which I had as a young girl. They have an odd durability for something not quite real.

(All the Pretty Horses 134)

As I have noted, the greatest obstacle to the freedom of the Will is its inability to manipulate the past. For Nietzsche, to “will backwards” would be the ultimate redemption, and the Will’s inability to do this, to make of the past what it wants, renders it futile. In *All the Pretty Horses*, it is again the Dueña who makes this clear to John Grady: “we weep over the might have been, but there is no might have been. There never was” (239). The present is the one and only path available to us, no matter how much we may wish to change this. To wish to alter the past necessarily means that we want to change some decision in it, because ultimately all consequences presuppose a series of choices. In The Border Trilogy, both John Grady and Billy reach points in the narrative where they question the consequences of their choices and imagine how the world would be had they chosen differently. It is largely through the use of dreams that McCarthy explores this desire to change the world, which is quite apt as it is in dreams that the dreamer, if only subconsciously, can create the world as he or she wants it to be. Nietzsche himself noted that, in dreams, one is able to create what he calls a “second real world”:

In the ages of a rude and primitive civilisation man believed that in dreams he became acquainted with a *second actual world*; herein lies the origin of all metaphysics. Without dreams there could have been no reason for a division of the world. The distinction, too, between soul and body is connected with the most ancient comprehension of dreams, also the supposition of an imaginary soul-body, therefore the origin of all belief in spirits, and probably also the belief in gods. 'The dead continues to live, *for* he appears to the living in a dream': thus men reasoned of old for thousands and thousands of years.

(*Human, All Too Human* 17-18)

Nietzsche's notion of a "second actual world" is mirrored in The Border Trilogy, where John Grady and Billy create, through dreams, 'second worlds' of their own. However, while both are provided with several dream sequences in the novel, the function of their dreams differs. John Grady, becoming progressively disillusioned with the world he encounters, tries to use his dreams as an avenue of escape, whereas Billy at times uses his dreams to imagine a different past.

In my discussion of myth, I touched on the fact that the Trilogy emphasises John Grady's affinity with horses and his lack of insight into the hearts of the human characters he encounters. He himself is not unaware of this, and often seeks out the company of horses rather than that of humans. Increasingly, he becomes alienated from the world around him, as is reflected in the progression of his dreams, which begin to manifest less and less human content in them:

That night he dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wildflowers out of the ground and the flowers ran all blue and yellow far as the eye could see and in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses and they coursed the young mares and fillies over the plain where their rich bay and their rich chestnut colours shone in the sun and the young colts ran with their dams and trampled down the flowers in a haze of pollen that hung in the sun like powdered gold and they ran he and the horses out along the high mesas where the ground resounded under their running hooves and they flowed and changed and ran and their manes and tails blew off of them like spume and there was nothing else at all in that high world and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised.

(161-62)

In his dreams of horses, John Grady finds a stability that does not exist in his reality. As the narrative progresses, he continually finds his expectations being thwarted because the cowboy myth to which he subscribes does not provide, on its own, an adequate means of understanding his experiences. Accordingly, he tries to escape into a world that he understands completely. It is after losing Alejandra, and while kidnapping the captain to avenge Blevins, that this emerges:

In his sleep he could hear the horses stepping among the rocks and he could hear them drink from the shallow pools in the dark where the rocks lay smooth and rectilinear as the stones of ancient ruins and the water from their muzzles dripped and rang like water dripping in a well and in his sleep he dreamt of horses and the horses in his dream moved gravely among the tilted stones like horses come upon an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed and if anything had been written on the stones the weathers had taken it away again and the horses were wary and moved with great circumspection carrying in their blood as they did the recollection of this and other places where horses once had been and would be again. Finally what he saw in his dream was that the order in the horse's heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it.

(280)

John Grady's dreamworld is more "durable" than the reality he encounters, and so this 'second world,' devoid of human action, is a temporary escape from the unexpected consequences of his actions. Significantly, his dream sequences indicate that his cowboy myth is not "durable" enough to provide a framework for anything outside of his dreamworld.

This inability to translate his dreams into reality is made painfully clear to him on the night before he hears the Dueña's final decision regarding his future with Alejandra. He, who often uses dreams as a means to influence the world outside, attempts to do so again: "He thought what sort of dream might bring him luck" (225). Thereafter, he tries to conjure up a memory of Alejandra, a dream in which they are together. His hope is that such a dream will enable him to create a similar reality. Instead, though, his mind wanders to Blevins:

He thought of his face and his eyes when he pressed his last effects upon him. He'd dreamt of him one night in Saltillo and Blevins came to sit beside him and they talked of what it was like to be dead and Blevins said it was like nothing at all and he believed him. He thought perhaps if he dreamt of him enough he'd go away forever and be dead among his kind [. . .].

Cole believes that, in dreams, he can erase his guilt over Blevins' death, just as he believes that a dream can change the Dueña's mind about him. In the end, "he fell asleep and dreamt of nothing at all" (225), and learns his fate regarding Alejandra the next day. Tellingly, it is Alejandra who provides a contrasting dreamscape, which foregrounds the futility of his dreams. On their last night together, she recounts a dream she had of him the night before: "I saw you in a dream. I saw you dead in a dream" (252). Her dream is, of course, prophetic, as becomes evident in *Cities of the Plain*. Whereas Cole's dreams try to create a second world, hers merely see the actual world as it is. Though he tries to find comfort in his dreams, they, like his myth, hold no objective power to influence the world.

While John Grady is concerned with influencing the present in his dreams, Billy constantly looks behind him into the past. Throughout the *Trilogy*, Billy regrets the outcomes of many of his decisions, most notably the deaths of the wolf and his brother. In his dreams, he often seeks to assuage the guilt he feels by returning to the home he left and to a time before he chose to save the wolf. In this way, he seeks to reconcile past and present through his dreams:

In the night he dreamt of his sister dead seventy years and buried near Fort Sumner. He saw her so clearly. Nothing had changed, nothing faded. She was walking slowly along the dirt road past the house. She wore the white dress her grandmother had sewn for her from sheeting and in her grandmother's hands the dress had taken on a shirred bodice and borders of tatting threaded with blue ribbon. That's what she wore. That and the hat she'd gotten for Easter. When she passed the house he knew that she would never enter there again nor would he see her ever again and in his sleep he called out to her but she did not turn or answer him but only passed on down that empty road in infinite sadness and infinite loss.

(*Cities of the Plain* 266-67)

He knows that his sister is dead, and yet calls out to her, thereby trying to connect the present to the past. At this point in the narrative, Billy is an old man and, subsequent to this dream, reflects on the path his life has taken: "He woke and lay in the dark and the cold and he thought of her [his sister] and he thought of his brother dead in Mexico. In everything that he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong" (267). In *The Crossing*, he tries to recreate the home he has left behind, and dreams that he has never left it:

“In the house his parents slept and when he crawled into his bed Boyd turned to him and whispered that he’d had a dream and in the dream Billy had run away from home and when he woke from the dream and seen his bed empty he’d thought it was true” (295-96). The obvious irony is that the dream Boyd has, though only a dream within Billy’s dream, reflects what actually happened, whereas Billy’s is a projection of the world he wants. Just as Alejandra’s dream provides a contrast to John Grady’s dreams, so too does Boyd’s to Billy’s attempt to revisit and reimagine the past. The latter’s decision to return to Mexico and retrieve the horses that were stolen by the men who murdered his parents is itself an attempt to allay his own guilt over their death. It is while there that Billy is told that “the past cannot be mended” (*The Crossing* 202), a sentiment that echoes Nietzsche’s insistence that the Will cannot reach into the past. Indeed, rather than dispel his own guilt over his parent’s death, Billy’s decision to take Boyd and find the horses leads ultimately to the latter’s death in Mexico.

John Grady is unable to influence his present through dreams, and Billy is unable to return to the past. Towards the end of *Cities of the Plain*, the latter encounters another drifter and discusses the nature of dreams. The man tells him that “in dreams it is often the case that the greatest extravagances seem bereft of their power to astonish and the most improbable chimeras appear commonplace. Our waking life’s desire to shape the world to our convenience invites all manner of paradox and difficulty” (285). It is in dreams that John Grady and Billy are able to escape these paradoxes, albeit not permanently. Eduardo, the man who owns the fate of Magdalena, articulates the inability of dreams to become reality: “Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of” (135). He is here referring to John Grady’s belief that he can save Magdalena, but his words apply equally well to Billy.

Maps, Paths and McCarthy's Landscapes

Until now, the focus of this chapter has been representations of reality, that is, the protagonists' use of narration, myth, and dreams to create their reality. However, the settings of The Border Trilogy develop these and other themes, and are, in this regard, similar to those of *Blood Meridian*, in which the harshness of the landscape mirrors the brutality of the characters that traverse it. Landscape, in The Border Trilogy, performs a related function, as it increasingly comes to reflect the metaphorical journeys that characters make. Upon entering the Mexican town where they find Keno, one of their stolen horses, Billy and Boyd encounter an old man who draws a map in the sand for them. On asking a passerby if this map is accurate, Billy receives the following reply:

He said that what they beheld was but a decoration. He said that anyway it was not so much a question of a correct map but of any map at all. He said that in that country were fires and earthquakes and floods and that one needed to know the country itself and not simply the landmarks therein. Besides, he said, when had that old man last journeyed to those mountains? Or journeyed anywhere at all? His map was after all not really so much a map as a picture of a voyage.

(*The Crossing* 184-85)

The map, then, is the old man's representation of his own voyage, his tale, his narration. For this reason, Billy and Boyd cannot make use of it: quite simply, it cannot take them where it has taken the old man. Indeed, the passerby's next words make this abundantly clear: "In any case a bad map was worse than no map at all for it engendered in the traveller a false confidence and might easily cause him to set aside those instincts which would otherwise guide him if he would but place himself in their care. He said that to follow a false map was to invite disaster" (185). The sentiment expressed in the passerby's final sentence applies to both Billy and John Grady, as each follows a map that does not lead him where he wants to go. John Grady's map does not lead him to a life with Alejandra, and Billy's map is unable to mend the past.

In *Cities of the Plain*, the same old man who talks to Billy about dreams tries to draw his life upon a map:

The man studied the coming day. In the middle of my life, he said, I drew the path of it upon a map and I studied it a long time. I tried to see the pattern that it made upon the earth because I thought that if I could see the pattern and identify the form of it then I would know better how to continue. I would know what my path must be. I would see into the future of my life.

(270)

Clearly, the old man was trying to foresee the consequences of his actions, to predict his own unseen future. The impossibility of this endeavour emerges in his response to Billy's question on the appearance of the maps: "It was interesting. It looked like different things. There were different perspectives one could take. I was surprised" (270). Since the map of our lives is always being rewritten, it can never be viewed as a coherent whole. In *Blood Meridian*, the Judge makes the same point when he says that no one individual can see existence as a whole, the "mind itself being but a fact among others" (245). The consequences of our choices cannot simply be mapped and known in advance; they lead to other choices, which themselves create further consequences. As already noted, Billy travels to Mexico three times in the course of his life, and each time his map does not lead him to what he wants. On each successive occasion, the country that he visits is different to that which he had encountered on his previous visit. It is as though the landscape itself is constantly being rewritten.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, after an old man, whose hospitality they have accepted, has described the countryside through which they are about to pass, John Grady comments as follows to Lacey: "He made that country sound like the Big Rock Candy Mountains. Said there was lakes and runnin water and grass to the stirrups. I can't picture country like that down here from what I've seen so far, can you?" (55). Given that he has no reason to lie to the boys, it is clear that the old man has simply described the country that he remembers. What is certain, though, is that it is not the same country that John Grady and Billy encounter. Similarly, after Cole's death, Billy returns to America to find his home vastly changed: "In the oncoming years a terrible drought struck west Texas. He moved on. There was no work in that country anywhere. Pasture gates stood open and sand drifted in the roads and after a few years it was rare to see stock of any kind and he rode on. Days of the world. Years of the world. Till he was old" (*Cities of the Plain* 265-66). The myth that John Grady clung to throughout the *Trilogy* has died with him. With the onset of war and the closure of ranches, the way of life in which he has believed has ended. Just as the characters narrate the story of

their lives on their journeys, so too the landscape itself becomes part of that narration, providing a map that can only exist in that tale.

Conclusion

According to Linda Woodson, the “rhetorical structure of *All the Pretty Horses* presents an intertextuality in which the worlds of the principal teachers whom John Grady Cole encounters reveal Nietzschean concepts like those of *Blood Meridian*” (“A Kristevan Reading” 272). This chapter has attempted to prove the accuracy of this statement. In each of the three narratives in The Border Trilogy, McCarthy constantly emphasises the choices that the protagonist has to make, and he does so in ways that resonate with Nietzsche’s various discussions of free will and ‘personal fate.’ Scott Esposito describes this emphasis on choice as a defining characteristic of this writer’s fiction: “No one thing has been as consistent in McCarthy’s work over his forty-year career as his insistence that we are only offered certain moments to really influence our identity, though we may not know them when we see them and we may be illusioned as to what the choices represent” (“Cormac McCarthy’s Paradox of Choice”).

I have argued throughout this chapter that John Grady and Billy very often do not recognise the true consequences of their choices, and, particularly in the former’s case, do not understand why their decisions do not lead to the outcomes they desire. On some occasions, though, these characters, through their choices, are forced to confront the meaning of fate and free will, and to recognise that their own myths and narrations are responsible for the consequences of their actions. It is the Will’s inability to will backwards that finally frustrates the efforts of both John Grady and Billy. While it is true that, in The Border Trilogy, there is nothing like the violence and depravity routinely encountered in *Blood Meridian*, the lessons that its characters are forced to learn are no less harsh. Though the Dueña ponders the existence of a fate that guides us, this question becomes meaningless in the act of narrating our lives. Whether there is a metaphysical fate or a ‘personal fate,’ as Nietzsche argues, the act of narration continues in each moment of choice. The Trilogy examines such moments.

Chapter Three

Sacrifice and Compassion in *The Road*

Introduction

Nietzsche often speaks about human existence being a road to be travelled, rather than a destination that has already been reached. None of McCarthy's works reflects this more than *The Road*. The preceding chapters of this thesis have attempted to show how this writer's novels deliberately resist conventional readings by foregrounding the transitory nature of the normative codes with which readers read. In many ways, *The Road* reflects several of the concerns evident in the earlier novels: the breakdown in systems of meaning, the erosion of the distinction between good and evil, the nature and consequences of choice, the mediation of reality by myth, are all present in this novel. McCarthy has here created a post-apocalyptic world in which civilisation simply does not exist. Guiding the reader through this landscape are a father and son, who must recreate for themselves their own values and meaning in a world without direction. Through these two characters, McCarthy juxtaposes a morality of pragmatism with one of idealism and pity. While my previous chapters have shown that McCarthy's novels find wanting the idealism of John Grady Cole, in The Border Trilogy, and the pity of the kid, in *Blood Meridian*, I argue, in this chapter, that the ethical codes of the father and son, in *The Road*, are grounded in forms of selflessness, empathy and compassion that are not antipathetic to the Nietzschean ideal of strength. In developing this argument, I draw on Nietzsche's theory of master and slave moralities, which yokes together the Will to Power, the *Übermensch* and the notion of Eternal Recurrence. I also discuss this philosopher's complicated relationship with compassion.

Personal Fate in a World Without Polity

Man lives in a community, man enjoys the advantages of a community (and what advantages! we occasionally underestimate them nowadays), man lives protected, spared, in peace and trust, secure from certain injuries and enmities, to which the man outside the community, the 'peaceless' man, is exposed.

(*Genealogy of Morals* 59)

The previous chapter dealt at length with Nietzsche's concept of fate. For him, fate is firmly located in human experience rather than in a divine plan that predetermines our actions: we are conditioned by the circumstances we are born into, and influenced by our experiences and the choices we make ("Fate and History" 14). As I have explained, each choice necessarily limits future choices. Given that this understanding of fate is grounded in the fact that the individual is born into a society and culture with particular values and normative codes, one cannot but wonder what would happen to 'personal fate' if the individual were to be located in a world stripped of the "advantages of a community."

Each of the novels discussed in the preceding chapters points towards a breakdown in civilisation and order. For instance, in *Blood Meridian*, this collapse is staged by the way in which the Judge and his gang of marauders traverse the lawless desert in the novel, collecting the scalps of people they come across. In *No Country for Old Men*, it is Chigurh's need to test his own Will that destabilises normative codes. This theme is by no means limited to these two novels alone: Lester Ballard, in *Child of God*, assuages his feelings of alienation from society by killing women and creating his ideal companions out of their dead bodies. And, in *Suttree*, the protagonist tries to escape his past altogether by locating himself in an outcast community inhabited by criminals and impoverished people.

Notwithstanding their preoccupation with lawless societies, none of the earlier novels places its characters outside of community. In *The Road*, the father and son wander through a post-apocalyptic world, constantly looking for sustenance and refuge. The cause of this apocalypse is never explicitly revealed, but what is certain is that the world in the novel has become a lawless one, without polity. It is populated by "men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and [in which] the cities themselves [are] held by cores of blackened looters who tunnel[] among the ruins and crawl[] from the rubble white of tooth and eye

carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell” (152).

As the father wanders through this bleak landscape, he often compares the desolate scenery with his memories of a world full of abundance and life. But even his memories begin to fade with time, and he fears that the world will vanish like a fire dying out:

He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colours. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.

(75)

There are numerous passages in which the man compares the present with his past. Early in the novel, for example, the pair comes across an abandoned gas station and the man picks up the phone, long out of order, and dials the number for his father's house, which, of course, harks back to a past that is no more. So removed is this past from the world they find themselves in that his memories are unable to provide any solace. At one point, he stops in the road, to go through his possessions:

He sat by the roadside and took out [his wallet] and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. He pitched the sweatblackened piece of leather into the woods and sat holding the photograph. Then he laid it down in the road also and then he stood and they went on.

(43-4)

In this world, there is no use for the former world's necessities: credit cards and a driver's license are not even worth the plastic they are printed on. Not surprisingly, the man hesitates before discarding the picture of his wife. However, he cannot fail to recognise that memories and reminders of the past are as insignificant as paper money and plastic cards. Despite this, he continually relies on his memories for refuge from the chaos they encounter, a point to which I return in detail later in this chapter.

I opened this section of my discussion by briefly recapitulating Nietzsche's ideas about a 'personal fate,' because I wish to argue that, to an extent, the boy, in *The Road*, escapes the restrictions of this concept. While the father maintains ties to a civilisation long since gone, albeit only through memory, his son has no such point of reference. The nightmarish world they walk through is the only one he has ever known. Accordingly, the boy is often perplexed by the symbolic gestures of his father: when the man picks up the phone in the gas station, it is an act tied to a past that the son neither knows nor understands (6). Perhaps the most simple and telling example of the boy's complete disconnectedness from the past is to be found in the scene in which his father comes across a single can of coke left in a vending machine (19-20). He gives it to the boy to drink, almost reverentially. Although an insignificant object, the can of coke indicates how far removed this world is from the pre-apocalyptic one that the father (or, for that matter, the reader) has known, a world in which the coke can is an almost universal bearer of meaning. Despite this disjuncture, there are times when the boy tries to establish links to the past his father remembers: he memorises the names of roads and rivers found on a dishevelled old map, and yet the names themselves tell him nothing of "the world that was for him not even a memory" (46). Since the boy cannot create a past out of names alone, he remains cut off from the world that exists so vividly in his father's memories and dreams.

It could be argued, validly so, that the father represents a form of authority for the son. However, while it is true that the former is responsible for most of the decisions the pair make, his influence on his son does not extend much further than this, as is evident in the different reactions of the two to their experiences on the road, as well as in the decisions that the boy makes after the death of his father. Each of these character's reactions to their reality is dealt with in detail in the following sections of this chapter. My argument is that the boy, irrespective of his father's presence, exists outside of a community, with no laws to follow except his own. Neither divine agency nor a human institution governs his actions. For Nietzsche, it will be remembered, 'freedom of will' cannot extend beyond the circle of ideas made up of an individual's choices and social conditioning ("Freedom of Will" 16). While the boy is indeed limited by previous choices, his social conditioning is confined to the influence exerted on him by his father. By implication, the distinction that the boy draws between good and evil is largely located in his own sense of value, as opposed to a socially accepted code of ethics. It is this that makes him stand apart from any of the characters that precede him in McCarthy's oeuvre. I should add that, although *The Road* encourages a

discussion of a world not predicated on traditional ethics, I am *not* in any way suggesting that either McCarthy or Nietzsche is advocating a return to the kind of barbarism commonly found in the novel. Nietzsche, in proposing a move away from the values of civilisation, points towards an imagined future in which we *surpass* humanity, not destroy it. I would argue that the same is true of McCarthy, as is evident in the hopeful ending of *The Road*.

Master and Slave Morality

While pursuing the many subtler and cruder moral codes that have prevailed or still prevail on earth thus far, I found that certain traits regularly recurred in combination, linked to one another – until finally two basic types were revealed and a fundamental difference leapt out at me. There are *master moralities* and *slave moralities*.

(*Beyond Good and Evil* 153)

As this epigraph indicates, Nietzsche distinguishes between a master and a slave morality, each of which has unique characteristics and virtues. He begins his discussion by equating master morality with strength and slave morality with weakness. Furthermore, he is very clear about which morality he thinks holds the most sway in the present world: “The ‘masters’ have been done away with; the morality of the vulgar man has triumphed” (*Genealogy of Morals* 16). The “vulgar man,” in this sense, is one who would advocate the ‘good of the many’ and the subjugation of the individual. These are essentially the values that Nietzsche accuses Christianity of being founded upon, and the reason why he is often vehement in his attacks on Western religion. By contrast, a master morality is the path to the *Übermensch*: it promotes pride, individualism, conquest and excellence. In his genealogy, a master morality is the system of values adopted by an aristocratic class of people who acted on their inclinations toward power, dominance, egoism, and pleasure. Nietzsche asserts that human history has always exhibited these two contrasting forms of morality.

Although both forms define actions according to whether they are good or bad, they differ greatly in their definition of these terms. What distinguishes the aristocratic adherents of the master morality from other classes is their creation of values. As Nietzsche puts it, they create what is good out of their own actions:

the judgement ‘good’ did *not* originate among those to whom goodness was shown. Much rather has it been the good themselves, that is, the aristocratic, the powerful, the high-stationed, the high-minded, who have felt that they themselves were good, and that their actions were good, that is to say of the first order, in contradistinction to all the low, the low-minded, the vulgar, and the plebeian. It was out of this pathos of distance that they first arrogated the right to create values for their own profit, and to coin the names of such values: what had they to do with utility?

(*Genealogy of Morals* 3-4)

This group, at the peak of the social hierarchy, therefore used the concept good to identify its own characteristics and bad for everything that fell short of this standard. The elite thus formulate moral values in accordance with their tastes and desires, rather than in conformity with some moral ideal. In other words, they bestow moral worth upon their own aristocratic traits. Crucially, then, good acts do not necessarily have to be unselfish or self-sacrificing; they merely need to accord with one’s own system of values.

While a master morality creates its values by first defining good, and then defining bad in opposition to this, the opposite is true for a slave morality. In contrast to every aristocratic morality, which begins with an affirmation of its own demands, “the slave morality says ‘no’ from the very outset to what is ‘outside itself,’ ‘different from itself,’ and ‘not itself’: and this ‘no’ is its creative deed” (*Genealogy of Morals* 17). For Nietzsche, this is a ‘morality of resentment’: in other words, a slave morality starts by identifying what is bad, and then defines everything opposed to this as good. For Nietzsche, Christianity, with its emphasis on the repression of certain actions in favour of others, exemplifies the weaknesses of a slave morality. In other words, in such a system, good is not created spontaneously out of one’s own actions, as it is in a master morality. Instead, the individual is negated, and from this stems Nietzsche’s contempt for a slave morality.

Although it would be reductive to say that Nietzsche, of the two moralities, completely favours a master morality, it is nevertheless true that he does always advocate strength over weakness, particularly with regard to upholding one’s own values, and it thus follows that the *Übermensch* would only be able to flourish under the conditions of a master morality. Significantly, in this regard, the characters in *The Road* exist in a world that is no longer governed by a collective morality. Indeed, the conditions for such a morality simply do not exist: in Nietzschean terms, the “vulgar man” is no longer triumphant. It is for this

reason that so much emphasis is placed on the creation of one's own values in the novel. In the following sections of this chapter, I will examine the characters of the father and son and compare the ways in which they create value in the chaotic world in which they find themselves.

Carrying the Fire

Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up. Okay.

(*The Road* 116)

In a certain sense, the difference between master and slave moralities is rhetorical. While both forms are grounded in actions that are good and bad, the way in which these terms are defined sets them fundamentally apart. Nietzsche describes an aristocratic individual as one who “conceives the root idea ‘good’ spontaneously and straight away, that is to say, out of himself, and from that material then creates for himself a concept of ‘bad’!” (*Genealogy of Morals* 21). By contrast, practitioners of slave morality act in opposition to the aristocratic individual, that is, by negatively defining everything other than themselves as good. For Nietzsche, the very act of naming oneself good is thus an act of affirmation, an assertion of mastery over language. The master's “right of giving names goes so far that it is permissible to look upon language itself as the expression of the power of the masters: they say ‘this is that, and that,’ they seal finally every object and every event with a sound, and thereby at the same time take possession of it” (4). Masters are not separate from their actions, and their use of language is therefore an expression of their own power: they name themselves the righteous, the powerful, the noble.

It is language, then, that allows the master to define himself as such, to create out of his own actions all that is good. In *The Road*, where there is no social order, and where to survive often means committing atrocious acts, language is the only way to differentiate what is good from bad. This is made clear in a scene in which the father and son happen upon an abandoned house while looking for food and supplies: “At the farther edge of the town they came upon a solitary house in a field and they crossed and entered and walked through the rooms. They came upon themselves in a mirror and he almost raised the pistol. It's us Papa,

the boy whispered. It's us" (111). The fact that the man is momentarily unable to recognise himself and his son in the mirror suggests that there is no innate difference between them and the 'bad guys.' At another point in the novel, the father and son are forced to hide from a travelling gang of cannibals. When they are found by one of them, the father is forced to kill the man in order to ensure their survival (56). In yet another instance, towards the end of the novel, they track down a thief who has stolen their possessions. The boy asks if they are going to kill him, the man replies that he does not know (215). In order to protect themselves, the possibility exists that they may have to commit the very same acts that the 'bad guys' would. It is at moments like these that the pair is forced to confront what it means to be good in a world where there is little conventional goodness to be found.

This uncertainty over what is good and bad weighs heavily on the boy as the novel progresses. Though he understands that the father had no choice but to kill the gang member who found them, he is also driven by the need always to know that they are the 'good guys.' At one point, they happen upon an underground storage bunker fully stocked with supplies. Before eating anything, the boy needs to know that they are not stealing it, that they are not the 'bad guys':

Is it ok for us to take it?
 Yes. It is. They would want us to. Just like we would want them to.
 They were the good guys?
 Yes. They were.
 Like us.
 Like us. Yes.
 So it's okay.
 Yes. It's okay.

(118)

Out of this need to be the 'good guys' is born one of the novel's dominant themes: the motif of 'carrying the fire.' Much of the action in the novel is premised on the need always to have the tools with which to make a fire in order to ward off darkness. Erik J. Wielenberg notes, in his illuminating essay on morality in the novel, that "throughout much of the story, the two are literally carrying fire, or at least the means to produce it" ("God, Morality" 3). In the relationship between the father and son, it should be added, fire gains a symbolic resonance way beyond the literal need to keep warm. To the boy, it becomes a symbol for being the 'good guys,' as is made clear in his following conversation with his father:

We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?
Yes. We are.
And nothing bad is going to happen to us.
That's right.
Because we're carrying the fire.
Yes. Because we're carrying the fire.

(70)

In various permutations, this exchange is repeated several times during the novel, most often after they have had to choose their own survival at the expense of others. It is at such moments that the boy needs to reaffirm that they are still 'carrying the fire.'

What is the fire, and what does it mean to carry it? There have been various critical responses to this motif. Given that the imagery of light warding off darkness is so pervasive in the novel, it is not surprising that it has been argued that 'the fire' is a symbol for a common humanity, an inextinguishable spark of goodness that survives the darkness (see, for example, Daniel Luttrull, 26). More practically, in a world as chaotic as the one in the novel, it would seem to be a linguistic trick used by the pair to create a sense of purpose in a world where there is none (see Wielenberg 3). On a practical level, the term enables the pair to reaffirm their own sense of goodness, as is evident from the many conversations in which they discuss 'the fire' and its relation to the 'good guys.' As Luttrull notes, while it does not represent a moral revolution, 'the fire' is an articulation of some standard of decency that stands out in the bleak world of the novel:

The man does not bring a fire of social or moral progress; he brings only his son, who embodies simple charity. And, although this charity is nothing new, it is shockingly foreign. Throughout the novel, those things thought to be conventional values — a regard for grace and beauty, a father's love for his son, the choice to live without preying upon others — meet as much resistance and require as much perseverance as the unconventional values for which a Prometheus type normally suffers.

(24-5)

Luttrull's assertion that the pair's ethic is "shockingly foreign" elucidates *The Road's* treatment of normative ethics: simple acts of charity, the basis of most traditional ethical codes, are alien in the novel.

In my view, though, the motif of fire foregrounds the way in which language is used to define power in the reality represented in the text. After all, it is not through their actions, but their language that the father and son position themselves as the ‘good guys.’ While ‘carrying the fire’ may be seen purely as a “crude myth adopted by the [man and boy] to keep themselves going” (Wielenberg 3), it is also the only thing separating them from the cannibals and murderers they encounter. In this regard, we need only look, again, at the aforementioned incident in which the thief steals the pair’s supplies towards the end of the novel. After they have tracked him down, the father threatens him with his revolver and instructs him to strip off his clothes:

Don’t do this, man.
 You didn’t mind doing it to us.
 I’m begging you.
 Papa, the boy said.
 Come on. Listen to the kid.
 You tried to kill us.
 I’m starving, man. You’d have done the same.
 You took everything.
 Come on, man. I’ll die.
 I’m going to leave you the way you left us.

(217)

As this passage indicates, the man readily admits that, in acting as he does, his actions are not that different from those of the thief. Indeed, it would not require a great stretch of imagination to see the man acting in the same way were the roles reversed.

What separates the man and boy from the thief, and from everyone else in the novel, however, is that it is they who are ‘carrying the fire.’ As I have suggested, the fire connotes a set of guidelines, shorn of metaphysical or religious significance, for how the pair should act. Wielenberg summarises what the rules of this code seem to be:

1. Don’t eat people.
2. Don’t steal.
3. Don’t lie.
4. Keep your promises.
5. Help others.
6. Never give up.

(4)

By using language to place themselves in relation to others, the man and boy create for themselves a position of power: it is they who 'carry the fire' and who are, by extension, the 'good guys.' In the world that McCarthy has created, there is no absolute value for good, no guidance markers that a conventional morality would lay out, and the characters must therefore themselves take possession, through language, of what is good.

Nietzsche's Life-Affirming Compassion

Indeed the more accurate a picture of another's suffering a sentiment provides, the more fully does it deserve the name of compassion.

(Frazer 68-69)

Thus far, my argument has been that 'the fire' forms the basis for the man and boy's code of ethics, which is founded primarily on selflessness and compassion. Throughout this thesis, I have shown that Nietzsche is critical of many normative codes, particularly those founded on the 'common good' or on shared suffering. With this in mind, it would now seem somewhat anomalous to suggest that compassion and selflessness of the kind shown by the father and son are Nietzschean strengths. Indeed, to argue that compassion, which in a traditional moral system like Christianity is the highest form of virtue, may affirm Nietzsche's ideals, would seem to corrupt, even pervert, them.

Nietzsche maintains that compassion, or *Mitleid* ("suffering with"), deprives the higher individual of his or her own strength, and so threatens his or her vitality. While he denounces any trait that would weaken vitality, he is especially antipathetic towards *Mitleid*, labelling it "the virtue of prostitutes" (*The Gay Science* 88). In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, this is the final vestige of weakness that Zarathustra must discard in his journey of becoming. Not surprisingly, then, Michael L. Frazer observes that compassion, and its revaluation, "is one of the central themes, if not *the* central theme, in Nietzsche's immoralist ethics" (50).

The question that Frazer goes on to pose, "how might one argue that he endorses [compassion] in any form" (64), is highly pertinent to my discussion. That there might exist such a form of compassion is hinted at by Nietzsche himself in his early definition of the Dionysian, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which he describes as culminating in the unity and

sharing of all emotions, including suffering. One must assume, then, that the kind of suffering found in compassion or empathy forms part of this unity. Elsewhere, he goes so far as to posit the possibility of a “*more virile* brother of pity,” though it is a concept for which Christians, in particular, “have no name” (*Dawn of Day* 82). Despite his inability to name this ‘new’ emotion, it is nonetheless a form of compassion. What this line of thought suggests, then, is that there *does* exist a form of compassion that Nietzsche would classify as strength. Indeed, this possibility is confirmed by his postulation of a man “who can spearhead a cause, execute a decision, remain loyal to an idea [. . .] in short a man who is by nature a *master*: when such a man feels pity – well! *this* pity has value” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 174). Notwithstanding Nietzsche’s efforts to distance it from its weaker counterpart, the fact remains that this unnamed virtue, this ‘valuable compassion,’ would still involve recognising, and *experiencing*, another’s suffering. Hence, Henry Staten argues that what he seems to name with other names “is therefore true *Mitleid*, the deep and genuine version of that which *Mitleid* usually names” (154-55).

Nietzsche, it would thus seem, is aware that it is possible for compassion and empathy to strengthen vitality, even though this possibility may seem to rest uneasily with his damning claim that *Mitleid* is more dangerous than any vice. The apparent contradiction, here, dissolves when we remember that he also argues that no emotion or drive can simply be eliminated. The crucial corollary here is that, for him, the very same symptoms can point to weakness or to strength. It is no different with *Mitleid*, which is why Ruth Abbey notes that Nietzsche “does not rule out a drive like pity; everything depends upon who is experiencing it, why and how, with whom and to what ends” (qtd. in Frazer 60). Implicit in Abbey’s argument is the idea that, for Nietzsche, an emotion only becomes a vice or a virtue in its use. Indeed, as I indicated in my first chapter, this philosopher argues against any system predicated on absolute values for good or bad. This being the case, the question that arises is why it should be that he distinguishes *Mitleid* from other vices. The answer is quite simply that he sees it as an enormous threat to the individual’s vitality: the more a strong-willed individual embraces life, the more suffering he or she feels and, potentially, the more compassion. What is at issue here, I would argue, is not turning compassion into strength, but rather “the overcoming of passion” (*Ecce Homo* 18).

What would such mastery entail? Zarathustra’s response to surviving his own test of compassion is to cry: “‘*Fellow-suffering! Fellow-suffering with the higher men!*’ [. . .] ‘Well! *That* – hath had its time! My suffering and my fellow-suffering – what matter about them! Do

I then strive after *happiness*? I am striving after my *work*!” (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 364). Taken at face value, this passage would seem to suggest that Zarathustra has cleansed himself of his compassion. Like Frazer, I would argue that this is actually not the case. Zarathustra does not rid himself of pity, but *overcomes it*. After all, if he were to rid himself of it, he would not have mastered it. In this regard, Frazer points out that mastery over a “virtue or sentiment [. . .] necessarily implies retaining it in one’s psyche, not abandoning it” (73). Nietzsche describes humankind as an “*animal that has not yet been established*” who needs to choose its own goals, and therefore its own values, and he places no restrictions on what these values might be (*Beyond Good and Evil* 56). The strong-willed individual, who is able to create meaning for himself or herself, will have earned the right to call any passion a virtue, even a propensity for “fellow-suffering,” and, “the virtue so chosen will inevitably shine forth as sign of his [or her] strength, and be put to service in the advancement of life” (Frazer 74). This argument becomes important in the following sections of my chapter in which I explore the selflessness and compassion of the principal characters in *The Road*.

Selflessness and the Will to Power

As I have noted, there is often a contradiction between the pragmatism of the man and the idealism of the boy. Though they are both united in their conviction that they are ‘carrying the fire,’ their responses to the situations they encounter often differ greatly. The theme of choice, as I have noted throughout this thesis, pervades McCarthy’s writings. In *The Road*, such moments of decision are foregrounded by the desolate nature of the reality depicted. The man makes choices based solely on their consequences for himself and his son, whereas the latter responds compassionately to those they come across, often disregarding the consequences of his actions for himself. While the reader may sympathise with the boy’s wishes to help the destitute characters they find along the road, there is no doubt that their survival depends largely on the harsh decisions his father has to make. And these decisions are harsh indeed: each choice not to share food or supplies is effectively a death sentence to the other party. According to Nietzsche, choices should be made first and foremost with the consequences to oneself, rather than others in mind. Where every choice is a matter of life or death, the man’s pragmatism comes to embody an extreme instance of this philosophy.

However, his pragmatism invests his relationship with his son with a faith that is uncannily similar to Christian doctrine, which, it will be remembered, diminishes the importance of the individual and is therefore, for Nietzsche, associated with weakness. It follows that my argument that this character's created faith is an affirmation of his Will to Power requires some support.

The novel opens with the man waking in the darkness of night "to touch the child sleeping beside him" (3). While this initially seems to be the natural act of a father being protective of his child, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that what the boy means to him goes well beyond just a parental bond. As much is hinted at early in the text, when the man holds his son and we are told that "the boy was all that stood between him and death" (25). At several points in the novel, the man contemplates death: "There were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead" (194). In a world such as this, death is ever-present, and one of the greatest tensions in the novel emanates from the man's knowledge that, despite his desire to protect his son, he may have to kill him in order spare him the grisly fate of the charred and eaten remains they come across. The possibility of this eventuality is something that he continually tries to prepare for, asking himself: "Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?" (24). The man even goes so far as to instruct his son on how to commit suicide should he be killed first.

Just what is meant by the man's reflection that the boy stands between him and death is revealed by his last memory of his wife, who took her own life because she was unable to find a reason to carry on living in the bleak world in which they find themselves. In the passage in question, the man recalls the way in which she had responded when he begged her not to commit suicide:

I can't help you. They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I don't dream at all. You say you can't? Then don't do it. That's all. Because I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time. You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so don't ask for sorrow now. There is none. Maybe you'll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you won't survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart.

(48-9)

Her final words echo those of Nietzsche, who observes that “man will wish *Nothingness* rather than not wish *at all*” (*Genealogy of Morals* 178). What the woman seems to be saying is that in a world with no social order, no direction, and seemingly no greater purpose, one must create faith out of something by breathing it “into being,” in the same way that God’s breath, in the Christian Bible, imbues earth itself with life and purpose.

Although we do not know what the man’s response to this argument is, it is certain from his actions and words in the remainder of the novel that he makes of the boy a “passable ghost” to breathe life into. Indeed, his actions are often ritualistic in nature. He himself is not unaware of this: at one point, we read that he “sat holding [the boy] while he tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. When you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (63). Throughout the novel, the simple interactions between these two characters are couched in ritualistic imagery. So, for instance, the man even describes the boy as a “golden chalice, good to house a god” (64), and elsewhere, in the light of a fire, calls him “God’s own fire Drake” (26).

For much of the text, the language used by the father portrays the boy as a divine entity. We read that he has been “appointed” by God to protect the boy (65), though he does not give an indication as to where or how such a god would exist in the world they encounter. Despite not knowing who has appointed him to this role, the father dedicates himself to the task, to the point of seeing himself, at times, as nothing more than a sacrificial figure. Indeed, throughout the narrative, the man sacrifices his own wellbeing for that of the boy, who even has to make sure that his father does not feed him all their rations.

It follows that the mother’s words prove prophetic. Through the boy, the father has created a faith that allows him to, in some sense, escape the horrors they have to face. In so doing, he seems to embody all that Nietzsche condemns in religious martyrdom, in particular the negation of the individual in favour of others. How then does he differ from the martyrs Nietzsche criticises? In answering this question, it should be remembered that, as discussed before, this philosopher allows for the possibility that a value may become a strength through fostering one’s vitality. As Frazer notes, the very nature of Nietzsche’s immoralist ethic means that he “ultimately cannot tell those of us strong enough to choose our own values to choose one particular moral code. All he can do is describe the sort of choices characteristic

of such noble individuals – choices that shine forth as signs of their natural strength” (58-9). For Nietzsche, an individual achieves strength through saying “that pleases me, I will make it my own and protect and defend it against everyone” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 174). In *The Road*, this is precisely what the father does in sacrificing himself for his son. The form of sacrifice here at stake is vastly different to the kind of religious selflessness Nietzsche criticises for the hypocrisy of ‘doing good unto others’ in the hope of gaining some heavenly reward. As such, the man’s secular ethic, based on what Nathan Carson calls a “sacrificial charity” (2), aligns itself with that of a master morality, rather than its weaker alternative. Through sacrificing himself, the father, paradoxically, invests himself with the strength to live in a world devoid of design and purpose. By means of devotion to his son, that is, he affirms his Will to Power.

The Anti-Prophet

If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we’d have something to talk about. But we’re not. So we don’t.

(*The Road* 145)

The reader of *The Road* is rarely given the opportunity to see the world through eyes other than those of the father and son. However, there are two occasions on which McCarthy provides alternative perspectives. The one, as I have already mentioned, is that of the dead wife and mother, though her point of view is mediated by the memory of her husband. The second is that of Ely, an old man who the man and boy encounter on the road, and to whom they give some of their food (*The Road* 136-47). During this chance meeting, the man and Ely discuss how the latter has managed to survive, the existence of God, and the possibility of there being other ‘good guys’ on the road. Since it is full of nameless characters, Ely occupies a unique position in this narrative. Although the reader is told that Ely is probably not the traveller’s real name, the fact that he has one at all, real or not, suggests that this exchange is an important one. Exactly what that significance is, however, is not initially clear. This section of my chapter will examine the dialogue between Ely and the man in order to unpack its implications for the themes of the novel.

Given McCarthy's treatment of religion in much of his work, coupled with what Ely himself says, it seems clear that the old man's name is an allusion to the prophet Elijah. It is not unusual for McCarthy to invest characters with religious significance. When he does so, though, as for example, in *Blood Meridian*, in the Judge's denunciation of an innocent priest as a paedophile, and in the kid's habit, towards the end of this novel, of carrying a Bible with him on his aimless travels, it is usually to foreground the futility of religious symbols in his fictional worlds. *The Road*, too, is replete with religious imagery, both in the apocalyptic world the characters traverse and in the relationship between the man and boy. Significantly, however, this meeting with Ely is the only instance in the novel in which McCarthy explicitly foregrounds particular sections of the Bible. After meeting Ely, the man is reluctant to give him any food at all, but his son convinces him to let the old man camp with them for the night. One of the first things that the man asks him is how he has survived. Ely's response is that he just keeps going, that he knew that "this [catastrophe] or something like it" was going to happen, and that he had "always believed in it" (142). He suggests here that he was able, in some way, *to foretell* this outcome, a detail that lends credence to the argument that Ely's name alludes to that of Elijah. In Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament, it is foretold that Elijah (who had warned Ahab, then king of Israel, that the worship of false gods would lead to a disastrous famine and drought) will return, and in so doing, precede Judgement Day and the return of the Messiah (*New International Bible*, Malachi 4:5).

So, while the reader is given initial indications that Ely might be a prophet of sorts, he or she does not yet know what it is that he prophesises. An answer of sorts is implicit in the fact that he is initially taken aback by the presence of the boy:

I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men can't live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone.

(145)

These words contradict those of the mother who says that her husband would be best served by cobbling together a faith of sorts. If Ely is any sort of prophet, then, he is certainly not one in the conventional sense. Indeed, his argument seems quite nihilistic: we are alone and everything will only be resolved when "everybody's gone," because the world is indifferent

to humankind's existence. These sentiments lead to the following conclusion, "when we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too" (145-46), which discounts the possibility of any meaning beyond our short existence. Finally, in response to one of the man's questions, Ely states that "there is no God and we are his prophets" (143).

According to Wielenberg, Ely is perhaps a prophet who "predicted the catastrophe" in the world of the novel, and who "preceded the child, who is the word of God." (2). This comment raises interesting questions about this character's role in the text: whereas the man, as will be recalled, associates the boy with the word of God, Ely seems to have no religious faith. And yet there is an inescapable paradox in his words: he denies the existence of God even as he declares himself a prophet. This is a paradox which a reader familiar with Nietzsche would immediately recognise: after all, it is this philosopher's own prophet, Zarathustra, who proclaims that "God is dead. God remains dead" (*The Gay Science* 181). So resounding is the similarity between McCarthy's and Nietzsche's prophets at this point that Ely could be read as a fictional reincarnation of Nietzsche's *anti*-prophet. Like Zarathustra, he insists that God is no more, and that death is the only thing waiting for us. His words certainly seem to ring true for the world the characters find themselves in; if there is a God in the gruesome world of *The Road*, one can only assume that he has turned his back on humanity completely.

If read in this Nietzschean context, Ely's words would seem to oppose the idea of 'carrying the fire.' Did McCarthy therefore create him in order to highlight the folly of the man and, in particular, of his son for believing in such a notion? I would argue that the opposite is, in fact, true. Although Ely's words certainly appear to be nihilistic, nihilism has little significance in the absence of a normative code of ethics. One should be mindful that Nietzsche, being sceptical of most systems of meaning, was himself proud to be labelled a nihilist as this placed him in opposition to such systems. Seen in this context, nihilism becomes a positive force rather than a negative one. I would argue that, in a sense, Ely's apparent nihilism is also an affirmation of sorts, though an affirmation of what?

Like Zarathustra, Ely signifies the possibility of a world where meaning can be found even in the absence of traditional frameworks, such as religion. Nevertheless, his function is very different to that of Zarathustra. He is not a visionary bringing news of the future, nor does he offer any profound words of wisdom to the man and boy. Through his answers to the former's questions, however, the reader is given a glimpse of a world that has not been hinted

at until now. In responding to the man's questions, Ely confirms that he has wandered through the wasteland, surviving off the goodwill of the travellers he has encountered (143-44). In this regard, he is again similar to Elijah, who himself wanders in the wilderness, surviving off the goodwill of God (*New International Bible*, 1 Kings 17:5-7). When the father responds sceptically to Ely's words, the old man simply retorts that "there's other people on the road. You're not the only ones" (144). At several points in the novel, the man and boy have discussed the existence of other 'good guys' on the road; however, nothing in their experiences thus far has confirmed this possibility. As such, Ely's words give the first confirmation that there are indeed other 'good guys.' This is a crucial, if understated, moment in the novel. As Wielenberg notes, "this old man has survived not through divine assistance but rather through random chance; he and all the other survivors of the catastrophe are prophets of atheism, bearing witness to the absence of God from the universe" (2). It is human agency and not divine intervention that has enabled Ely to survive on the road.

Importantly, this encounter with Ely endorses the idealism and compassion of the boy. Until now, the father's pragmatism, based on a universal distrust of anyone but themselves, has seemed the only way to survive. Wielenberg spells out the existential and ethical difference here at stake:

[The man] is suspicious and distrustful of others. He is reluctant to share what little food they have. The child, by contrast, typically tries to reach out to other people and help them. Thus, the encounter with the lightning victim illustrates a dynamic that is repeated throughout the novel. The child often seems to function as the man's conscience in this regard. When the man helps others, it is at the urging of the child. The man believes in the ideal of helping others but has a hard time living up to it, given the circumstances.

(5-6)

In terms of the man's logic, because they themselves are good, everyone else must be bad. This, at least, is what emerges from his following conversation with the boy:

We need to get out of the road.
Why, Papa?
Someone's coming.
Is it bad guys?
Yes. I'm afraid so.
They could be good guys. Couldn't they?

As this dialogue indicates, the son is willing to believe that there might be others like themselves. When the father tells him that they are not likely to see any ‘good guys’ on the road, the boy replies, as does Ely, that they are on the road. Ely is living proof that it is possible to survive off the goodwill of others.

Does Ely then prophesy the possibility of an ethic without God? If so, this would only further enhance the link between him and Zarathustra. Certainly, his is a view located outside religion, and he very clearly echoes Zarathustra when he says that God is dead, and that we are his prophets. Despite imagining a world that is godless, though, both these figures hint at the possibility of a human ethic. As I have shown, Ely is the first concrete indication in the novel that there are other ‘good guys’ in the world, and therefore that the boy’s idealism and willingness to help others may not be *misplaced*. Indeed, it is the boy’s ability to trust others that allows him to find the ‘good guys’ at the end of the novel. Soon after his father dies, he realises that someone is coming along the road towards him. While his initial reaction, as his father has taught him, is to turn off the road and hide, he does not: “He started to turn and go back into the woods but he didn’t. He just stood in the road and waited, the pistol in his hand” (237). Had the father still been alive, they most certainly would not have made the decision to come out into the road. So, if it is Zarathustra who heralds the coming of the *Übermensch*, then it is Ely who validates the boy’s own trust and compassion by confirming the existence of other ‘good guys.’

The encounter with Ely also carries significance when seen in the context of McCarthy’s own vision of ethics in his oeuvre. It is telling that, in his most nightmarish creation thus far, the boy not only survives but also succeeds in finding the good guys. This is in stark contrast to the fate of the kid and John Grady Cole, in *Blood Meridian* and The Border Trilogy respectively. Although the two protagonists of McCarthy’s earlier novels bear a similarity to the boy in terms of their ethics and creation of values, they fail to adapt their ethics to the worlds they encounter. The boy marks a development on McCarthy’s earlier protagonists by triumphing where they were not able to, and in so doing embodies that most important of *Übermenschlich* traits: overcoming the limitations of those that come before us. Even though it would be too grand to claim that Ely heralds the arrival of some form of redemption, as does Elijah, his presence in the novel certainly gives the boy’s ethic a power and endurance that was not present before this encounter.

Dreams and Memories

And the dreams so rich in colour. How else would death call you? Waking in the cold dawn it all turned to ash instantly. Like certain ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day.

(The Road 18)

As I have argued, it is significant that McCarthy's post-apocalyptic setting should be devoid of conventional systems of meaning. It is a world where the 'good of the many' has been eradicated and replaced with the individual will to survive. Consequently, the man and boy constantly struggle to survive and find resources and shelter. Although they are united in their struggle, as I have shown, they encounter different worlds. The physical world they negotiate is, of course, the same. What is vastly different, however, is the abstract meaning and value that they infer from their individual experience of it. The father is increasingly caught between two worlds, one that exists in reality and another that exists only in his mind. Rather than being separate, these increasingly begin to overlap and compete for his consciousness. By contrast, the boy has no such conflict, as the world they inhabit is the one he was born into and he knows no other. This tension is explored in the novel primarily through the agency of the man's dreams and memory. In this section of my chapter I will analyse each of these in turn.

As he and his son travel through the charred countryside, the man is constantly confronted with reminders of the past. Blackened woods, dead lakes, and derelict houses are resurrected by his memory. In a sense, he is living two lives, and consequently occupies a unique position that at times seems to straddle two worlds. A case in point is their visit to the dilapidated remains of the house in which he grew up:

All much as he'd remembered it. The rooms empty. In the small room of the diningroom there was a bare iron cot, a metal foldingtable. The same castiron coalgrate in the small fireplace. The pine paneling was gone from the walls leaving just the furring strips. He stood there. He felt with his thumb in the painted wood of the mantle the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago. This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy. He turned and looked out at the waste of the yard. A tangle of dead lilac. The shape of a hedge. On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework.

In the novel, there are numerous such examples of the man remembering events he experienced with people who are no longer alive, and in a world that no longer exists. He conjures up images of fishing with his uncle, or sleeping on the beach under the stars with his wife. There are also moments in the novel when these fragile memories begin to overlap with the present, almost becoming a means of escaping it. While plodding along the road, the man drifts off into a daydream of his dead wife:

From daydreams on the road there was no waking. He plodded on. He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and sconces and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress, Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned.

(16)

Owing to the vividness of the prose, the memory gains such a tactile nature that the road almost appears to be the daydream that the man needs to awake from, rather than the harsh reality from which his dreams of the past allow a temporary respite. Through these fragile memories, along with “old stories of courage and justice” (35), the father tries to create for his son the world that only he has lost. Understandably, the latter is unable to comprehend this ‘other’ world. When the man stands in his childhood home, memories flooding over him, the boy, we read, “watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see” (22). For the boy, these memories are as mythical as fairies and goblins. He also realises that they, together with the stories his father tells him, have no place in the present world. Towards the end of the novel, after the man asks him if he wants to hear a story, the boy declines, saying that “in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (225). He has begun to see the difference between the stories his father tells and the truth of the world in which they live. Because they contrast so starkly with his reality, these tales are of no comfort to him.

In my previous chapter, I examined the function of dreams in The Border Trilogy, arguing that John Grady Cole and Billy Parham use them as a way of altering their reality: the former dreams of the present as he wants it, whereas the latter re-imagines a different past

for himself through his dreams. The theme of dreams is again prominent in *The Road*. Early in the novel, the man dreams that he is visited by his dead wife, “her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white” (15). Upon waking, he warns himself against such dreams, reflecting that “the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death” (15). A little later in the novel, he again reflects that such dreams are the call of death, as they are “turned to ash instantly” (18), leaving the dreamer with only a lingering feeling of some other world, “like certain ancient frescoes entombed for centuries suddenly exposed to the day” (18). Indeed, the father teaches the son the same lesson, telling him that when his “dreams are of some world that never was or some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you can’t give up. I won’t let you” (160). Despite this understanding of their seductive nature, his dreams and memories become increasingly vivid and colourful, so much so that the real world seems a pale imitation of his dreamworld. His dreams are of “things no longer in the world” and so rich are they that he is “loathe to wake” from them (111).³

The man’s dreams do not simply re-enact past events, though. Like Billy in *The Crossing*, he also alters events in his dreams. For example, he dreams that his wife has not left: “In his dream she was sick and he cared for her. The dream bore the look of sacrifice but he thought differently. He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell” (27). He may recognise that there is only one waking world, but that does not stop him from escaping into an imaginary one that has its own power to create meaning. In a sense, his dreams are very much about death, as it is only through dying that he can escape the waking world. As I note earlier in this chapter, the man constantly “envies” the dead. Once again, it is the boy who provides a contrast to his father in this regard. While he seldom talks about his dreams, on those occasions that he does, we can clearly see the difference between the two characters. At one point, the boy recounts his “really scary” dream about a toy penguin he had when growing up in their old house (31). Like the man, the boy has dreamt of the past, but, unlike him, his dream is not one of escape. This becomes further apparent when he says that he has no “good dreams anyway. They’re always about something bad happening” (227). The

³ Compare the following lines from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in which Caliban says that he would rather dream than wake to reality: “[. . .] in dreaming the clouds methought would open and show riches ready to drop upon me, that when I waked I cried to dream again” (3.2.135-38).

waking world and the dreamworld of the boy do not contradict each other in the same way that the father's do.

What this section of my chapter has attempted to highlight is the contrasting ways in which the father and son react to the harshness of their reality. The former, through memories and dreams, creates "siren worlds" (15) that are so rich in colour and life that he is loathe to return to the real one, and only does so because of his son. For his part, the boy, as young as he is, instinctively recognises that he cannot access this "vanished world." When the man asks him to tell him a story, he says that he does not have any like his father's, which are always happy. By contrast, his are "more like real life" (226). After the man has a dream, of which he can only recall "the feeling," he comes to realise the nature of the difference between him and the boy:

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he himself was an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought that perhaps the child had known this better than he.

(129-30)

The stories that the man constructs are elegies to a world to which he cannot return. To his son, though, they are no more than tales. While the man longs for a world that will never exist again, the boy knows only the 'real' one.

Untangling the Responses to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*

But we have seen that one has to imagine all too much about the *Übermensch*, that blank cheque which Zarathustra issues without any directions about cashing it.

(Tanner 65)

In this chapter, and the two that precede it, I have offered a Nietzschean reading of McCarthy, which emphasises the notion of the *Übermensch*, and what the achievement of such an enlightened state would entail. However, I have not yet provided a clear sense of how

the *Übermensch* may be attained, or the kind of ethic it would be premised upon. The reason for this is, quite simply, that no such blueprint exists. This, of course, complicates my assertion, at the beginning of this chapter, that the boy (and to a certain extent his father), in *The Road*, comes closer to embodying the *Übermensch* than do any of McCarthy's other characters. As such, I need to justify my contention in this regard. Although Michael Tanner's description of the *Übermensch* as a blank cheque that we cannot cash (65) is, by and large, accurate, Nietzsche does gesture towards the nature of this state in his distinction between master and slave morality, his idea of Eternal Recurrence, and the Will to Power. In this section of my chapter, I expand on the notion of the *Übermensch*, and support my claim that traits central to this notion are embodied by the protagonists of *The Road*.

At this juncture, it would be useful to outline some of the conflicting critical responses to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. I have already alluded to the fact that his writing contains certain paradoxes and inconsistencies that make it difficult to define his philosophy, and which have led to what Daniel Blue describes as unavoidable "tensions in contemporary Nietzsche studies." Interestingly enough, such tensions are usually to be found in discussions of the implications of the *Übermensch* for the philosopher's over-arching ideology. Some critics even question the value of the notion itself. Michael Gillespie, for instance, points out that this Nietzschean ideal is only discussed in any depth in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and concludes that it is "not as central to his work as we often assume" (49).

While it is true that Nietzsche, after *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, rarely refers to the *Übermensch*, it does not follow from its comparative absence from his later work that he has simply discarded this idea. I would argue, as Paul Loeb does, that the opposite is true, and that as much is implicit in Zarathustra's following words: "The Superman, I have at heart; *that* is the first and only thing to me – and *not* man: not the neighbour, not the poorest, not the sorriest, not the best" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 326). Importantly, there are places in his later writings where Nietzsche very clearly indicates that Zarathustra's words are still of paramount importance in his philosophy. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, for example, he begins to talk about a "man of the future," who will redeem man from "the old ideal" (92). Although the rhetoric here is very reminiscent of the ways in which Zarathustra extols the values of the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche names this ideal individual the "Antichrist and Antinihilist" in this particular context (92). Tellingly, though, Nietzsche, in the very next passage, admonishes himself as follows: "But what am I talking of? Enough! Enough? At this juncture I have only one proper course, silence: otherwise I trespass on a domain open alone to one who is

younger than I, one stronger, more ‘future’ than I – open alone to *Zarathustra*, *Zarathustra the godless*” (93). For him, then, the “man of the future” is entirely the domain of Zarathustra, which possibly is why the *Übermensch* is so rarely directly discussed in his later work. Only Zarathustra, a construct, a fictional character, a projection who is presented as a “man of the future,” is capable of speaking of Nietzsche’s ultimate ideal. I would therefore agree with Loeb’s argument that “we should not suppose that Nietzsche abandoned these ideas, or that he lost faith in them, or that his thought evolved beyond them” (74).

Wherever one chooses to place the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche’s philosophy, the fact remains that it is an elusive concept. Part of the difficulty lies in the rhetoric with which he describes this ideal individual: he (and Nietzsche uses the masculine pronoun) will be a liberator and unlike anything humanity has previously known. But how he will liberate, or what form he will take, is unclear; all we can say with relative certainty is that he will be *other* to anything that has come before him. It is this indefinable aspect of Nietzsche’s theory that leads critics like Maudemarie Clark to conclude that the *Übermensch* is little more than a negation of human life, a revenge against the weaknesses that Nietzsche perceived in humanity (qtd. in Pearson, 17). I would argue against this, though. While it is true that Nietzsche’s ideal envisages the future individual as something totally different from what presently exists, one must remember that this individual will still be *born* from present-day humankind. The *Übermensch* is an acknowledgement, on Nietzsche’s part, of the *potential* for the human individual to surpass himself or herself.

What would surpassing ourselves entail? On the face of it, Nietzsche seems to be advocating an ethic premised on the notion of ‘doing whatever you want,’ and in which anything goes. This leads on to the unavoidable and disturbing question of the practical application of the notion of *Übermensch*. One need only think of the immense presence of both the Judge and Anton Chigurh, in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* respectively, to see what may ensue from the embodiment of the Will to Power. The issue here at stake is summed up by Tanner’s following question:

Can someone who has, by standards one can imagine few rejecting, certainly not Nietzsche, a wholly deplorable character still pass his tests for having style? If Nietzsche’s criteria were purely formal, that is, all the bits fit together and it does not matter what they are individually, then the appalling answer would seem to be yes.

(44)

So, although the Judge and Chigurh represent the very extreme outcome of the Will to Power, if Nietzsche's theory is "purely formal" then even the violent and terrifying acts of the Judge must be deemed good.

The questions that arise, then, are the following: are Nietzsche's theories purely formal? Can they be actualised irrespective of how cruel or extreme the methods of doing so are? I would argue that the answer to both questions is no. Nietzsche himself realised that his theories could result in extreme aggression, as can be seen in his following observation:

I should not, of course, deny – unless I were a fool – that many actions which are called immoral should be avoided and resisted; and in the same way that many which are called moral should be performed and encouraged; but I hold that in both cases these actions should be performed from motives other than those which prevailed up to the present time.

(Dawn of Day 100)

From this it is clear that his writings renegotiate rather than preclude ethics. He is indeed a nihilist, in the sense that he opposes existing value systems. Nonetheless, as I hinted at in my discussion of master and slave moralities, he is *not* advocating the total destruction of value systems, only particular instances of them. It is for this reason that I argued, earlier in this study, that the violence of McCarthy's Judge and Chigurh makes of these characters parodies of Nietzsche's philosophy, rather than signalling its inevitable outcome. The latter's theories are not purely formal, and, crucially, his *Übermensch* is located within an ethical framework based on extreme individualism and therefore a refusal to sacrifice autonomy (Tanner 39). In the following sections of this chapter, the concept of an individual ethic will be explored with specific reference to McCarthy's writing.

Discovering the Individual Ethic in *The Road*

So, while Tanner is correct in asserting that Nietzsche leaves us with an unanswered desire to know how the *Übermensch* is “the meaning of the earth, what steps might be taken to bring about his arrival, and what he will be like when he appears” (48), there are two elements of Nietzsche’s theory that can be deciphered. The first, as I have just mentioned, is an ethic which places the emphasis on the individual. Such an ethic is unlike any traditional ethical system that has hitherto existed, and is one in which the ‘good of the many’ does not take precedence. The second element is in many ways an extension of the first: the individual, by creating his or her own hierarchy and determining “aught [that] is good or bad” (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 242), will come to have a worldview that is at all times a total affirmation of life, in both its good and bad experiences.

In *The Road*, the boy embraces both these elements. To support this argument, I need briefly to recall my discussion of the two characters who bear the strongest resemblance to this one: the kid in *Blood Meridian*, and John Grady Cole in *The Border Trilogy*. It will be remembered that I argued that the kid is guilty of not affirming his Will to Power at crucial moments, and of possessing what Nietzsche would call a ‘morality of pity.’ This is particularly apparent when he decides not to kill the Judge, knowing full well that this decision could lead to his own death. It is therefore somewhat ironic that, in this chapter, I have tended to the conclusion that the ‘morality of pity’ of the boy, in *The Road*, is an exercise of his will, rather than a weakness. I have also stressed that Nietzsche is heavily critical of Christianity because of its preoccupation with pity and compassion. How then can I argue that the boy is affirming his Will to Power? The resolution to this apparent contradiction is implicit in my earlier argument that Nietzsche does not rule out pity, empathy or compassion as strengths. In fact, the opposite is true, as the crux of his ideal ethic is that a passion’s value as a virtue or vice is solely determined by its ability to affirm life (or to deny it). This is perhaps best explained in his own words: “Whether benefiting or hurting others involves sacrifices for us does not affect the ultimate value of our actions. Even if we offer our lives, as martyrs do for their church, this is a sacrifice that is offered for *our* desire for power or for the purpose of preserving our feeling of power” (*The Gay Science* 87). The crucial point is therefore that individuals act with the desire to preserve their feeling of power, regardless of whether their actions benefit or harm others.

For the boy, in *The Road*, the most important thing is always to know that he and his father are ‘carrying the fire.’ In this ideal, lies his feeling of power, and all of his actions are undertaken with it in mind. By contrast, the kid’s compassion is a weakness because, in the first sections of *Blood Meridian*, he is part of Glanton’s gang and is present at, as well as a participant in, horrendous acts of violence. The kid is inconsistent in his actions, and it will be recalled that the Judge accuses him of this when he tells him that he has a “flawed place” in the fabric of his heart (299). Furthermore, the kid’s actions are almost always a response to those of the Judge. It is this trait that aligns him with Nietzsche’s slave morality: he defines the Judge as bad, and creates his values of good in opposition to this. No such accusation can be levelled at the boy in *The Road*, who is entirely consistent with the ideal he has created for himself, namely that he is one of the ‘good guys’ and ‘carrying the fire.’ When the boy catches a glimpse of another child in a supposedly deserted town, he is distraught at the thought that this child might have no one to look after him, and wants to give him half of his own food. Later, in the encounter with Ely, it is the boy who convinces his father to give the old man food and shelter, and, later still, it is again he who shows compassion to the man who steals their belongings and supplies.

The previous sections of this chapter have emphasised the ways in which the boy creates a system of values to give meaning to his experiences. In this respect, he strongly resembles John Grady Cole, who also creates his own ideals modelled on a cowboy mythos of chivalry, bravery and adventure. As I argued in the previous chapter, however, John Grady is guilty of not adapting to the reality that confronts him on his journey. He is constantly disappointed by the consequences of his actions, and fails to realise that his own choices have led to these. Whether retrieving his family’s stolen horses, avenging Blevins’ death, or trying to win Alejandra’s hand, the outcomes of his deeds are rarely what he would like them to be, and he is thus never happy with his reality. While John Grady and the boy in the later novel may be similar in terms of their creation of a hierarchy of values, they therefore differ greatly when it comes to their treatment of reality and the consequences of their choices. In fact, there is a distinct similarity between John Grady and the man in *The Road*. As I have intimated, both use dreams and memories to escape a reality that fails to satisfy them.

Given the horror into which he is born, the boy could probably be forgiven for trying to escape his reality. Yet there is no point in the novel at which he is not firmly grounded in it. Perhaps nothing proves this more than the short passage dealing with his mother’s departure and suicide: “In the morning the boy said nothing at all and when they were packed

and ready to set out upon the road he turned and looked back at their campsite and he said: She's gone isn't she? And he said: Yes she is" (*The Road* 49-50). This acceptance of the realities of life is a constant throughout the novel. On several occasions, the pair come across human remains, and though the father wants to shield his son from such horrors, he eventually realises that he cannot, for "what was there to hide?" (199). Indeed, at times it is the boy who first encounters the horrors, as, for instance, when they come across a campsite, and he, rather than his father, notices the "charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (167). So aware is the boy of his reality that he is, at times, suspicious of anything that would create a false sense of the world. In what is their greatest piece of good fortune in the novel, the aforementioned discovery of the bunker filled with supplies, it will be remembered that the boy is initially reluctant to accept their good fortune. The plentiful stocks in the bunker are so far removed from what he associates with reality that he is reluctant to accept this new state of affairs. He is not easily tempted to see the world as anything but what it is.

As discussed in my first chapter, Nietzsche wrote that the *Übermensch* would embrace both the Dionysian and the Apollonian: for an individual to grasp fully his or her Will to Power, that is, he or she has to take into account both chaos and order in equal measure. Such a balance is founded on a complete acceptance of life, an affirmation of everything, whether good or bad, joyous or painful. Alan White describes this notion of complete acceptance succinctly when he notes that we "cannot affirm human life without also affirming death. What we must affirm is the existence of the world as it is rather than as we might wish it" (36). It does not follow that Nietzsche's 'affirmation of life' prescribes a mere stoical acceptance of the suffering involved in human experience. Instead, it denotes the derivation of joy from every aspect of life, an attitude exemplified by, for example, Leopold Bloom, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, who possesses an undiminished cheerfulness, despite facing an existence that is frequently disappointing. Although the boy, in McCarthy's novel, does not exhibit this same cheerfulness, he does, at the very least, affirm his reality (itself no small achievement), something that his father and fictional predecessor John Grady Cole fail to do.

The boy thus embodies an affirmation of his reality: he accepts the suicide of his mother, as well as the daily horrors he and his father face. And later, although mourning the death of his father, he finds the will to go on and find the 'good guys.' Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that this character's decision to stay on the road after his father's death is a

pivotal moment in the novel. Its significance lies in the fact that it is the first time in the novel that the boy is in total control of his own actions. Until this point, it has been the man who has made most of the decisions, which have almost always involved staying off the road and not being seen. Through his choice to stay on the road, even though he is aware of an approaching presence, the boy therefore affirms his agency.

The reader can respond in at least two ways to the boy's choice. On the one hand, she or he may assume that the boy is simply being naïve, as he has been for most of the novel, and does not really know what to do. On the other hand, the boy's choice may be read as an heroic affirmation of his compassionate ethic. For much of the novel, this ethic has seemed totally incongruous in a world that is antipathetic to any form of compassion or empathy. And yet, it is these values that compel him to stand his ground and wait. In other words, his choice is founded on a full affirmation of his belief that there could be other 'good guys,' and its heroic nature is confirmed when the approaching presence turns out to be one of them.

The mere fact that McCarthy has chosen to end his novel with the boy's success in finding other 'good guys' is telling. Had he not done so, this character's final decision to wait on the road would have suggested the futility of his idealism and compassion (which is exactly the way in which the ethic of the kid and John Grady is treated in *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy*). As it stands, though, the ending of *The Road* suggests not only that the boy's compassionate ethic can survive, but also that it can *thrive* in the desolate reality in which he finds himself.

I should note that Carson disagrees with my view that the boy's ethic, while being based on traditional moral values, is an affirmation of his Will to Power. By contrast, he contends that the "boy acts not out of self-interest, a position of abundant or virtuous self-sufficient will-to-power, but out of virtues that are far more Christian in character: compassion, charity, and a gift-giving that seem devoid of self-interest or power" (9). Carson's argument is premised on the assumption that it necessarily follows from his condemnation of Christianity that Nietzsche must find all Christian values weak. What I have shown in this chapter is that this is not the case, that compassion, charity and gift-giving certainly can be an affirmation of one's Will to Power. In my argument, the boy's ethic is both morally good (in a normative sense) and *noble* (in a Nietzschean sense). Accordingly, this character transcends those that have come before him in McCarthy's oeuvre. While not to be simplistically equated with the *Übermensch* (after all, we still have no way of knowing

what the shape or form of this being may be), the son's complete affirmation of his own compassionate ethic puts him firmly on the road that Nietzsche has created.

Conclusion

The Road is not only McCarthy's most recent novel (at the time of writing this thesis), but also, in many ways, brings together many of the prominent themes evident in his earlier work, particularly the issue of the kind of ethic that may be found in the absence of conventional systems of meaning. As Staten argues, our "moral beliefs did not fall from heaven and neither are they credentials we can flash like a badge to establish our moral probity" (78). If ethics are not God-given then where are they located? This question, which is central to Nietzsche, is also the focus of *The Road*. The emphasis in this chapter, as in the previous ones, has been on this commonality between Nietzsche's philosophy and McCarthy's fiction. I have attempted to develop my discussion of this nexus in the earlier chapters by examining the need of McCarthy's characters to find order in a world that is largely chaotic. With its post-apocalyptic, barely recognisable world, *The Road* foregrounds this theme.

In this novel, the opposing moral perspectives of the father and son form the basis for a meditation on ethics. While the man's view is premised on actions that benefit himself and his son, the latter possesses a compassionate idealism that, initially at least, seems misplaced in the world of the novel. This chapter has argued that self-sacrifice and compassion, so often seen as weaknesses by Nietzsche, are redefined as strengths in the ethic of the father and son. In this regard, the protagonists' meeting with Ely is a pivotal moment in the text, as it suggests that such an ethic may survive and, in particular, validates the boy's 'morality of pity.' Unlike the kid in *Blood Meridian*, the boy's morality is an affirmation of, rather than hindrance to, his Will to Power. In the context of Nietzsche's theories, which provide no blueprint for the creation of the *Übermensch*, although they do suggest where it may begin, this affirmation is crucial. The boy's self-created values, through their affirmation of experiences both good and bad, enable him to embrace *Übermenschlich* traits in a way that none of McCarthy's other characters can. Being founded on both normative moral values and Nietzschean individualism, this character's ethic is unique in McCarthy's oeuvre. What is

more, the novel's ending suggests that it has a durability that is absent from this writer's earlier fiction, in which characters with a traditional moral worldview are afforded very little success. So, while he shares many similarities with some of McCarthy's earlier protagonists, in particular the kid and John Grady Cole, in *Blood Meridian* and The Border Trilogy respectively, the boy is the only one of them who is able to affirm his Will to Power while responding with compassion to others in a world that is seemingly antipathetic to such an ethic.

Conclusion

This study has examined several of Cormac McCarthy's novels with two related aims in mind: to refute the widespread claim that they lack ethical content, and to trace in them developments in this writer's treatment of ethics. Since his 'immoralist' ethic resonates with the individual's struggle to find meaning in McCarthy's novels, Nietzsche's philosophy has informed my argument throughout. Interestingly, those responses to this philosopher that address the problematic nature of his proposed ethic, mirror critical responses to McCarthy, which often claim that his work excludes any defensible moral code. For this reason, my analysis of McCarthy has also suggested ways of reading some of Nietzsche's more controversial theories, particularly his complicated (and often contradictory) views on compassion and empathy.

I have shown that the argument that McCarthy's novels are indifferent to ethical concerns, while correct in its recognition that they do not privilege normative value systems, does not allow for the possibility of an ethic that bypasses such paradigms entirely. Indeed, it is clear enough from the lack of affirmation enjoyed by those of his characters who express a conventional moral framework that McCarthy does not privilege such systems of value. In fact, where moral (and typically religious) symbolism does appear in his work, it is usually invoked precisely to foreground the futility of normative moral codes. Some of the examples I have cited in support of this contention include the kid, in *Blood Meridian*, who carries a Bible with him that he cannot read; the Sheriff, in *No Country for Old Men*, who does not believe God can do anything to alter the violence he encounters; and Billy Parham, in *The Crossing*, who comes across an old man looking after a derelict church with no congregation. Each of these protagonists possesses an ethic that is informed by one or more of the following conventional values: compassion, mercy, idealism, selflessness, or sacrifice. In all these cases, though, the ethic in question, for the most part, finds little or no purchase in the violent world in which the character moves.

As a result, McCarthy seems to be suggesting that human beings cannot exist without violence. Indeed, the author himself, in an interview in 1992 with Richard Woodward, seems to admit as much:

There's no such thing as life without bloodshed, I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous.

(“Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction”)

These words, which bear a marked resemblance to Nietzsche’s own ‘immoralist’ writings, appear to inform the narrow emphasis on “bloodshed” in much of the critical response to this author. And, indeed, if taken individually, his novels do seem to emphasise the “elemental primitivism” that Quinn finds in them (111).

Nevertheless, I have maintained throughout this study that McCarthy’s work does not simply assert the ineluctable nature of human suffering and violence. His warning against the “danger” of thinking that humankind may be improved is an indictment of the misguided hope in a utopian existence, rather than of *all* attempts to better the human condition. In other words, McCarthy intimates, as does Nietzsche, that the attempt to find meaning in human existence must always be cognisant of its potential for both goodness and violence.

In arguing this case, I have approached McCarthy’s fictional project from the vantage of *The Road*, which marks a shift from his earlier work, in which violence often seems to overshadow the potential for humanity. The author himself notes this shift in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, in which he says that “there’s not a lot of good guys in *Blood Meridian*, whereas the good guys is what *The Road* is about. That’s the subject at hand.” (“Hollywood’s Favourite Cowboy”). Herein lies the importance of this novel for McCarthy’s oeuvre: despite its bleak setting, it is the first of his novels to foreground human decency. So, while this text sustains many of the themes found in the earlier novels, its shift in emphasis cannot but alter the way in which we now read them. Where their narratives are marked by failure, the more hopeful ending of *The Road* confirms that McCarthy does not deny the possibility of attaining significance and moral value. Indeed, against the backdrop of this novel, we can see that failure does not necessarily preclude the possibility of success.

Arguing along similar lines, Vereen Bell even claims that McCarthy’s project is to “believe in a numinous value at the heart of existence while remaining wholly without reassurance about this project from the realities of political life” (“Between the Wish and the Thing” 41). I would add that *The Road* necessitates an amendment to Bell’s argument: its optimistic resolution suggests an increased confidence in the possibility of affirming human

existence. It now becomes possible to say that McCarthy's overall ethic is one in which moral value is not only privileged, but given a resilience that was hitherto not readily discernible in his earlier work.

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