

THE POWER OF THE WORD IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S APPALACHIAN NOVELS

by

Kathryn E. Shores

(Under the Direction of James Everett Kibler)

ABSTRACT

An analysis of Cormac McCarthy's prose style and the language of his characters in the representative Appalachian novels *The Orchard Keeper*, *Child of God*, and *The Road* demonstrate a tense double vision of hope and hopelessness. Consumer culture and bureaucracy are life-sapping in McCarthy's work; however, communicative spoken words are restorative. Although in McCarthy's most recent novel, he tells the story of a world in ruin, memory and story and beauty survive, despite the bleakness of the landscape. In McCarthy's work, the words themselves and the language of his characters suggest the possibility of a world other than the dark one he dramatizes.

INDEX WORDS: Cormac McCarthy, Appalachian novels, Community, Storytelling, Memory, Consumer culture, Bureaucracy, *The Road* as Appalachian novel

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KATHRYN E. SHORES

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by

Kathryn E. Shores

Major Professor: James Everett Kibler

Committee: Hugh Ruppersburg
Jonathan Evans

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2007

DEDICATION PAGE

To the parents:
Mom, for sitting with me
and Dad, for the endless talks.
You are wonderful.
I love y'all so, so much.

SDG

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 THE WORDED AND WORDLESS CULTURE OF <i>THE ORCHARD KEEPER</i>	8
3 WITHOUT THE WORD IN <i>CHILD OF GOD</i>	24
4 <i>THE ROAD</i> : REMAKING THE WORLD WITH THE WORD.....	39
5 CONCLUSION.....	53

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to Vereen Bell's seminal work of criticism *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Bell declares "the prevailing...mood of all of Cormac McCarthy's novels" to be "gothic and nihilistic" (1). Many critics have disagreed with this assessment, for Bell's was the first work in a storm of criticism batting back and forth the very question: McCarthy as nihilist? McCarthy as mystic? McCarthy as hopeful or hopeless novelist?¹ I argue that McCarthy's novels are not in fact prevailingly nihilistic. Nor are they prevailingly hopeful, for McCarthy does not work in the black and white. One may say he "prevailingly" works in the black, in the dark. Dennis Lehane guesses that "darkness" in McCarthy "usually comprises 99.9% of [his] world[s]" (2). If one examines his novels, his characters, and the words that pass (or do not pass) between them, however, one sees that McCarthy's language and powers of description embrace a dialectic of hope and hopelessness. Bell, in the introduction to his work, describes McCarthy's language as "suggestive" and "referential." These words belie a nihilistic reading.

Of McCarthy's prose style, Bell writes, "it binds us to the phenomenal world. It is as lapidary and particular as John Updike's, though less ideational and less self-conscious by a factor of, say, ten, and therefore, in its strange economy of effect, more suggestive" (2). Bell

¹ In his essay "The Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction," Edwin T. Arnold takes up the challenge of Bell's diagnosis that McCarthy's characters are "essentially unthinking, unreflective" (20) and also cites Denis Donoghue's assertion that "[t]he appalling quality of each [character's] deed is its emptiness, as if it were done before anyone thought of any meaning it might have" (qtd. 21). In his essay, Arnold suggests, as he says, "just the opposite" (21).

argues that the rich level of metaphor in McCarthy's language keeps "a dreamlike, almost symbolist, pressure of meaning, or meaningfulness, alive in the text without providing easy or even perceptible means of release. [It] is necessary, in other words, to give McCarthy's otherwise concrete world its aura of mysterious, opaque, and unyielding signification" (3). McCarthy's prose is suggestive without ever releasing what it has to suggest, and according to Bell that refusal proves that it has nothing to suggest. Bell says McCarthy's is a "paradigmless world" (8). McCarthy does not, I agree, promote or trust the systematic, the paradigmatic. But his language is not suggestive only to disappoint. It does not suggest only to say laughingly, look, there is nothing to suggest: there is only this hopeless, trash-covered world. There would be nothing oppressively and fecundly decayed and hopeless about the landscape of *Suttree* if McCarthy and the reader did not have some belief in the reality of real evil, and opposingly, the possibility of transcendent good. The narrator would have no reason to entreat the reader, at the conclusion of this novel, to "fly" the deathly hound that sniffs the ground on which Suttree has just been standing. There is, in McCarthy's novels, something to suggest, or as Suttree puts it, "a thing to tell..." (459). This rich suggestiveness battles Bell's diagnosis of nihilism. It does not, however, make McCarthy hopeful. The conclusion of his most recent novel, *The Road*, provides another word with which we may want to examine McCarthy. That word is mystery.

In this paper, I propose to examine the sources and signs of the evil or darkness that McCarthy so comprehensively discusses, the "*thing...inside*" (*Suttree* 4) whose shape we cannot guess, and the human thing that counters its powers of attenuation. The words "suggest" and "tell" hint at this paper's thesis. "Suggest" and "tell" are language words, speaking words. Words of story. David Paul Ragan in a note to his essay, "Values and Structure in *The Orchard Keeper*," makes clear that critics have recognized bureaucracy and consumer culture as an

enervating power in McCarthy's work since the publication of his first novel (n. 26). The power of consumer culture to obscure the world of myth and break the old ways into outmoded fragments in the novels, especially *The Orchard Keeper*, is thoroughly recognized.² Critics like Ragan and Walter Sullivan have named western consumer culture and bureaucracy as the executors of human darkness and fragmentation in McCarthy's work. At the same time that McCarthy describes the waste of consumer culture, his language evokes feelings of more than mere wastedness and decay. Consider this passage from *Suttree*:

Market Street on Monday morning, Knoxville Tennessee. In this year nineteen fifty one. Suttree with his parcel of fish going past the rows of derelict trucks piled with produce and flowers, an atmosphere rank with country commerce, a reek of farmgoods in the air tending off into a light surmise of putrefaction and decay. Pariahs adorned the walk and blind singers and organists and psalmists with mouth harps wandered up and down....A strong smell of feed in the hot noon like working mash. Mute and roosting pedlars watching from their wagonbeds and flower ladies in their bonnets like cowed gnomes, driftwood hands composed in their apron laps and their underlips swollen with snuff. (66)

² Ragan summarizes well the generally-accepted thoughts of McCarthy's critics on this point: "McCarthy depicts a world in which traditional embodiment of value—religion, community relationships, agrarian connections with the earth—have deteriorated as a result of the increasing pressure of urban culture, commercial interests and governmental institutions upon the lives of the novel's essentially rural characters. This deterioration is a central issue in all of McCarthy's novels with Appalachian mountain settings, but it seems particularly prominent in *The Orchard Keeper*" (17).

The somehow onomatopoeitic richness³ of words like “cowled,” “gnome,” “reek,” “mash,” “swollen,” “putrefaction” speak for the “mute and roosting pedlars” who have no language here of their own. They need a language, and the richness of McCarthy’s vocabulary brings alive both these images of decay and something else. As David Holloway expresses it, “[the] proliferation of words whose meanings are not immediately transparent, but which seem instead to fall onto the page as the residue of an older—or the anticipation of an ‘other’—order of things, [suggest] a world that remains potential, but as yet unrealized, within what is extant” (120). In McCarthy’s novels, language, the spoken word between characters, communicates the desire for and the ever-present possibility of community and narrative structure within his fragmenting or fragmented landscapes. The bleakness of the world in which his characters find themselves is not the last hopeless word, even though the possible world suggested by his language is one McCarthy will probably never describe. It will come, he perhaps suggests in *The Road*, after we have worn out every other possibility in the world we now are wasting. In this way, McCarthy proves himself a prophet.

I will examine three of McCarthy’s Appalachian novels—the first, the third, and the last—to show the arc of these thematic considerations. For, if there is an awareness of the powers of evil, and a rich suggestiveness to his language that is not present merely to disappoint, how may one approach this evil thing? In *Suttree*, McCarthy’s fourth Appalachian novel, the titular protagonist is ill with typhoid, feverish and dreaming. He sees or perhaps imagines a nun tugging at his elbow. Some voice begins to indict him:

³ In his review of McCarthy’s *The Road*, Michael Chabon considers the “onomatopoeitic splendor” of the word *Magnolia* and what it signifies in the ashen landscape of the novel. I borrow this idea from him.

Mr Suttree it is our understanding that at curfew rightly decreed by law and in that hour wherein night draws to its proper close and the new day commences and contrary to conduct befitting a person of your station you betook yourself to various low places within the shire of McAnally and there did squander several ensuing years in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers... (457)

The list goes on and on. When the accusatory litany of societal dregs is finished, Suttree in helpless and feverish excuse cries, "I was drunk." What follows this avowal provides a vision of what it is McCarthy warns against or damns in his work; what it is that has diminished consciousness of any sort of evil or good:

Seized in a vision of the archetypal patriarch himself unlocking with enormous keys the gates of Hades. A floodtide of screaming fiends and assassins and thieves and hirsute buggers pours forth into the universe, tipping it slightly on its galactic axes. The stars go rolling down the void like redhot marbles. These simmering sinners with their cloaks smoking carry the Logos itself from the tabernacle and bear it through the streets while the absolute prebarbaric mathematick of the western world howls them down and shrouds their ragged biblical forms in oblivion. (457-458)

The Word itself, paraded through the streets by smoking sinners, is smote into oblivion by the "mathematick of the western world" (458). The systematizing, abstracting calculating mathematic of cold science and late-western capitalism, the institutionalization of the inhuman, has worn down and riven the soul and the Word into pieces. Suttree spends the length of the novel trying to find life, as Vereen Bell expresses it, in the "pockets of experience" (8) instead of

in the business and law of his father's world. Suttree finds, at the novel's end, that he has a "thing to tell" and that is "all souls are one and all souls lonely" (459). He has found in the "life in small places" (*Suttree* 13) that the particular is universal. Fragments become whole. All souls are one. And he wants to tell it; his grip is insistent. Community, and the spoken words and memories that effect it, counter in McCarthy's novels the calculating "mathematick of the western world" that would rive the Logos, potent even in the hot hands of simmering sinners, into oblivion.

Although *Suttree* seems to provide the meat of my diagnosis of McCarthy's linguistic interests thus far, I will consider only a representative three of the five Appalachian novels, *Suttree* not included. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the presence of a still-whole old world is most clear, and the enervating powers of the encroaching consumer culture are most obvious. Ragan treats this novel well in his essay, "Values and Structure in *The Orchard Keeper*," but a consideration of the novel is still imperative to show the community-creating power of communicative word, memory, and story that begins in *The Orchard Keeper* and stretches into *The Road*. The effect of the absence of community and communicative language on a character is most vivid in *Child of God*. Lester Ballard is one of McCarthy's most reviled protagonists, though John Lang does a skillful job of arguing for the reader's compassion toward the man. I propose that Lester is not as perverse as the "community" from which he has been banished, and an examination of Lester's dispossession from human language and the community from which he has been dispossessed reveals this. The very absence of signifying human language from *Child of God* and *Outer Dark* and the dark unearthly obscurity of those novels prove communicative language's power. It is *The Road*, however, that most obviously places the power of story, memory, and human speech next to the horror of a consumer culture turned

cannibalistic in a post-apocalyptic world. McCarthy tells in his latest novel of the world ruined, but even within the ruin, he likens the boy who leads his father “by the hand” (*The Road* 4) to a “tabernacle” (230) to which that stolen Logos in *Suttree* has been returned. The word and what it carries within it; what it effects and affects; what happens when it is absent, when the human is not allowed to speak and be heard; and its forms, oral and written merit a thorough examination to see whether or not it is the word itself that is McCarthy “*cat and counter-cat*” (*Suttree* 5)—the tense and suggestive dialectic of the meaningless and meaningful. The human voice still talking, still passing on memories that contain the “world in its becoming” (*The Road* 241), not telling how the story ends (*The Road* 64) marks McCarthy as not hopeful, not nihilistic, but prophetic in his diagnosis of our consumer culture and the position of the human within it.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WORDED AND WORDLESS CULTURE OF *THE ORCHARD KEEPER*

The road as image and metaphor twists through McCarthy's Appalachian novels and provides a sharp and curving line along which one may root examinations of different kinds of thematic progressions, for there are many. Many critics have noted McCarthy's ornate and arcane vocabulary, his proliferation of detail that is at once rich and abject, his labyrinthine sentence structures that in the words of Beatrice Trotignon "create at one and the same time a feeling of intensely transparent concreteness and extremely opaque unreality" (89). His vibrant, multi-syllabic words lie on the page conspicuous and esoteric. In McCarthy's description of the densest, vilest decay and trash, his language still holds something of the transcendent. Consider this passage in *Suttree*:

His feet went banging down some stairs. He closed his eyes. They went through cinders and dirt, his heels gathering small windrows of trash. A dim world receded above his upturned toes, shapes of skewed shacks erupted bluely in the niggard lamplight. The rusting carcass of an automobile passed slowly on his right. Dim scenes pooling in the summer night, wan inkwash of junks tilting against a paper sky, rorschach boatmen poling mutely over a mooncobbled sea.

(79)

The sentences descend into fragments and set off more starkly the imagistic, subtly rhyming presentation of luminous details in a scene of degradation. Shacks erupt bluely, an automobile is

anthropomorphized, scenes pool out of the night, and boatmen take on an air of the iconic as they pole through moonspattered water. If the novels are as desolate as some critics claim them to be, then why does McCarthy honor so vividly the sewer of the phantasmagoria in which his characters find themselves? In McCarthy's novels, it is the word itself that becomes testament to the possibility of another world. In his fragmented landscape, it is the fragment of language, spoken and heard, that points to the possibility that the world through which his characters walk is not the last hopeless word.

The detritus of the consumer culture is all the trash lining the riverbanks in *Suttree* or the side of the road in *The Orchard Keeper*. The consumer culture and its consumer-members are the grayed-out cannibalistic aftermath in *The Road*. How does language hedge against this kind of decay? In McCarthy's final novel, the world is completely desolate as though an illness in the earlier Appalachian novels, the abstraction of consumer-exchange economy and the unsignifying language of bureaucracy, has swept the landscape like a plague. In the post-apocalyptic world through which only a man and boy walk, even the names of things are fading. The narrator comments that "[e]verything [is] uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief" (10). Human breath and the spoken words it utters, tenuous and brief and trembling though they may be, remain and move between the man and boy in *The Road*, speaking of memory and of story. It is this speaking that stands and humanizes, providing reason for their continued walking and for the boy's concluding refusal to forget.

The Orchard Keeper acts as a prophetic word that realizes itself in *The Road*. The encroaching bureaucratic culture that in McCarthy's first novel is invading a still-existing world of myth, blood, and legend in *The Road* has overtaken and destroyed it. But the binary, the division in McCarthy's first novel, is clear: he damns the human who communes only with

himself, his language meant to coerce and calculate for power. The consumer culture sits placidly in the mouths of welfare agents and typing courthouse officials with their stacks of appropriate forms, making their words, their language, stilted and lifeless. This is one side of the binary. Oppositely, In the mountains around the city, there is a lasting though endangered ground of memory and myth, held stoically but neighborly by the atavistic Uncle Ather.

This money culture, a perverse husk of a system as McCarthy describes it, is personified in the first character we meet in the novel—Kenneth Rattner. He is a soulless and self-reflexive man. He is not a one among many but a one among one. His language and the diction used to describe him reveal not only this insularity but also McCarthy's binarial considerations. At the novel's beginning, a nameless man walks "like some squat ungainly bird," awkward and unfitting in himself, down a "blazing strip of concrete" (7). He examines his shoes, the first of many McCarthean references to the calceate or discalceate man. A wad of tape protrudes from the man's shoe-sole, and his ill-shod feet reflect his ill-shod self. A pickup truck flies past him, and he waves his thumb vaguely. When it does not stop, he says impotently, "Go on, damn ye" (8). Then "he [takes] out his cigarettes and count[s] them, put[s] them back. He turn[s] his head to the sun. Won't be no use after dark, he [says]. Windless silence, not even a rustle from the dusty newsprint and candypapers pressed furtively into the brown wall of weeds at the road edge" (8). This man is Kenneth Rattner, and his actions are subtly revealing: he counts his cigarettes, analyzes the use of his gestures. He is a calculating, utilitarian creature interested only in the monetary and the self-propelling. The newsprint that lies uselessly in the ditch, its words telling of events long-past and curious, is apt detail to couch the description of Rattner. Instead of living words and human breath, a connective tissue of human gesture, Rattner is interiorized and insular, speaking dead words to the empty air.

Instead of a community-creating language reminiscent of the dialogue between man and boy in *The Road*, Rattner speaks a language that is appropriative and calculating. Wandering into a grocery store and filling station, he traverses its aisles with a “slithery sound,” pocketing small items. His interchange with the store-keeper is humorous and telling:

Say now, he said, you don’t have any, uh—his eyes took a quick last inventory—any tire pumps, do ye?

They ain’t in the cake rack, the man said.

He looked down at a jumbled mound of bread and cakes, quietly lethal in their flyspecked cellophane.

Over here—the storekeep was pointing....

Oh yeah, he said. I got em now. He shuffled over and fumbled among them for a few minutes.

Them ain’t the kind I was lookin for, he told the storekeep, making for the door now.

What kind was that? the man asked. I didn’t know they was but one kind.

No, no, he said, musing, standing just short of the door, rubbing his lower lip. He was inventing a new tire pump. Well, he said, they got a new kind now you don’t have to pump up and down thisaway (pumping) but what’s got a kind of *lever* handle you go at like this (pumping, one hand).

That’s a fact, said the storekeep. (8-9)

Rattner speaks to get, to self-protect. He takes visual inventory and uses a hedging speech in order to acquire. Later, after he importunes a ride from a man outside the filling station, the narrator comments of Rattner:

Coming into Atlanta he saw at the top of a fence of signs one that said
 KNOXVILLE 197. The name of the town for which he was headed. Had he been
 asked his name he might have given any but Kenneth Rattner, which was his
 name. (10)

As the leader of the diabolic marauders in *Outer Dark* insists, to name something is to claim it. Culla's refusal to name his own son is a foundational plank in his own damnatory scaffolding. The names of places and things, the putting of words with their referents, is an important act in the human ability to communicate and share communal memory and story. Rattner's refusal to give his own name places him with Culla, the unnamed, and the de-served.

A kind of linguistic vortex, Rattner's inverted language and self-obscuring voice position him as human antithesis to the communicative, connective voice. The bootlegger Marion Sylder comes out of a bar in Atlanta after an unsatisfying drive. He opens his car door and

[b]y the phosphorous glow, more like an emanation from the man's face than from the domelight, Sylder froze....The face stared at him with an expression bland and meaningless....The mouth stretched across the lower face in a slow cheesy rictus, a voice said: You goin t'wards Knoxville?—A strained octave above normal, the pitch of supplication. (33)

Sylder expresses his disbelief and revilement, and Rattner's voice,

[t]he mouth, still open, said: I seen your plates, Blount County—that's where I'm from, Maryville. I figured you might be goin thataway. I need a ride bad... 'm a sick man. The tone cloying, eyes dropped to Sylder's belt as if addressing his stomach. It was not presentiment that warned Sylder to get shed of his guest but a profound and unshakable knowledge of the presence of evil. (33)

Rattner is pieced into mouth, lower face, and voice. He is machine-like in his monotoned single-mindedness. Later in the car, Sylder drives as though in a trance, “the unending and inescapable voice sucking him into some kind of oblivion, some faltering of the senses preparatory to...what? He sat up a little. The man had not taken his eyes from him, and yet never looked directly at him” (35). Rattner is metonymically referred to by his mouth, for it is his voice and language that characterize him. His deadening chant of meaningless, cloying words pulls Sylder into a “kind of oblivion” (35). There is no strengthening of self and resolve that the words between the man and the boy in *The Road* effect. Rattner’s interaction with Sylder is a study in looking and not looking; it is a faux, simulated connection that is precursor to a murder attempt.⁴ Just as consumer culture abstracts and commodifies, putting value on the marketable and cheap, so Rattner values what will further him and kills to acquire that furthering.

Rattner is the foul figurehead for a larger kind of oblivion encroaching upon the community of Red Branch. The myth and memory of Uncle Ather, alive and mysterious, is positioned against the sterility of courthouses and government institutions, bureaucracies “rigid with” unproductive “constipation” (*The Orchard Keeper* 11). The spoken word that ultimately will effect unnamable ties between Kenneth Rattner’s dispossessed son John Wesley and the boy’s foster fathers, Ather Ownby and Marion Sylder, is desiccated and ineffectual in the world of government forms. It is to these government institutions that John Wesley Rattner travels out of the uppermountain land. He is the implied heir of Uncle Ather’s guardianship and the ironic son of an errant and language-less father. His connection to the land and the living is marked most clearly in an emblematic passage-rite in which he catches a bass in shallow water and

⁴ I disagree with Natalia Grant’s belief that Rattner and Sylder differ only by degrees, that “they both possess animalistic natures” (65). Sylder’s future protection of Rattner’s son John Wesley seems to suggest otherwise.

“clean[s] it and [holds] the tiny heart in the palm of his hand, still beating” (66). His physical connection to the vital and the blood make him foil for the lifeless marble floors of the courthouse he visits. Later, in a scene reminiscent of this one of the fish and the beating heart and foregrounding his trip to the city, he finds a sparrowhawk on a mountain road. He picks it up, “*feeling it warm and palpitant in the palm of his hand, not watching him, not moving, but only looking out over the valley calmly with its cold-glinting accipitral eyes, its hackles ruffling in the wind*” (77). McCarthy uses the beating heart and the outward looking eyes as motif in *The Orchard Keeper*: Uncle Ather looks out over the valley listening to the barking of dogs (46) and John Wesley also sits and looks over the valley, “watching the lights go out one by one...[The] [s]ound of voices close and urgent on the acoustic night air, doors falling to, laughter...” (66). It is the connection to people and their voices that points these men outward toward community. McCarthy shows us the enemy of this outward-ness in Kenneth Rattner’s abstracted insularity and in the self-contained world of institutions.

John Wesley takes the sparrowhawk into town, hitching a ride with Mr. Eller. He enters the courthouse, and the first image inside the institution is a woman “*fanning herself with a sheaf of forms*” (78). In *Suttree*, the protagonist’s father insists that life is to be found in government, in law, and in business. There is nothing to be found in the streets but a dumbshow of the poor and impotent. It is clear, here, that these forms are the dumbshow, a substitute for living and active work. McCarthy deliberately notes the time it takes for any of these women to attend to John Wesley: “*He stood for a few minutes looking around the hall and reading the signs over the doors and finally she asked him what it was that he needed*” (78). While he waits, he is forced to read signs over doors whose significations are strange. Their mere labeling as signs without identifying their messages enforces their purposelessness. He is directed down a

hallway to a long counter of women at desks. After “a while,” one of them comes to him with a politic, “Yes?” (78). This woman “eyes [his] package with suspicion, then alarm, as the seeping gases reached her nostrils...she said, not suspiciously or even inquiringly, but only by way of establishing her capacity as official: Is it a chickenhawk?” (79). Her language here is not meant to draw or engage the hearer; it is meant only to reify her own office and standing. It is a self-reflexive word; it has nothing to do with the outside world. When John Wesley establishes that yes, it is indeed a chickenhawk (which it is not, and it is interesting that his language here is also deceptive. McCarthy works to smudge the binaries into a kind of dialectic), she

turned sharply and disappeared on a click of heels behind a tier of green filing cabinets. In a few minutes she was back with a little pad of printed forms, stopping further down the counter and writing now with a pen from a gathering of inkstands there. He waited. When she had finished she tore the form from the pad and came back and handed it to him. Sign where the X's are. (79)

Her clicking heels and regimented, clipped language abstract her. She is not woman but government official, and that abstracting is a kind of death. Her refusal to touch or name the animal that John Wesley has brought to her enforces her inhumanness. She, as synecdochic representative of courthouse, keeps herself separate from the world of the beating heart that John Wesley holds in his hand. As he is leaving after signing the two lines with his pen, she calls after him, “I wonder if you would mind, she said, wrinkling her nose and poking a squeamish finger at the little bird, mind putting it back in the bag for me. He did” (79). The chickenhawk becomes an “it”; and in that refusal to name or touch, she and the courthouse join the ranks of Culla and Rattner.

John Wesley's relationships with Marion Sylder and Uncle Ather are not legitimized by a government form or birth certificate signature. Instead they are made alive by touch and by word. In a scene later in the novel, John Wesley, Marion Sylder, and a group of men go coonhunting with the now-grown puppy Sylder had given to John Wesley. Told at first from Sylder's perspective, the man and boy stand listening in the night, the boy "listening too hard" for the sound of the yelps through the woods. They hear the sound, and Sylder "stood and touched the boy's shoulder lightly. Let's go, he said" (119). The boy stands and asks, "Has she treed yet?" to which Sylder replies, "No. She's jest hit it now. Then he added: She's close though, hot" (119). This touch between man and boy and the unselfconscious lesson on listening to and interpreting the animal yelps brings the two into unsignifiably communion. The man is ushering the boy into knowledge, and he does it with a touch and a spoken word. The boy is being taught how to hear a sound and know its meaning. The words between the man and boy signify a meaningful, though unquantifiable, relationship. They move toward Lady's trail-call "under the dark trees, through a stand of young cedars gathered in a clearing, vespertine figures, rotund and druidical in their black solemnity" (120). There is a touch of the pagan sacred here, the druidical cedar adding ritualistic weight to this rite of passage between man and boy. They swing into the fray, dogs roiling about. Lady, John Wesley's dog, is soon thrown into the river by a murderous raccoon, and John Wesley goes in with her. He eventually pulls her out, and the men come to where he is crouched freezing and still holding the animal. The narrator comments, "Sylder looked at him, huddled in the willows....He didn't say anything, just disappeared into the woods, returning in a few minutes with a pile of brush and dead limbs" (124). He builds a large brush fire while the other men are still talking and commands John Wesley to get off his

clothes. Sylder takes off his coat, throws it at him, and says, “Put it on. And get your ass over here in front of the fire” (126).

This interaction between Sylder and John Wesley is not immediately significant, nor is his relationally-binding interchange with Uncle Ather. Section three of the novel begins with stories of John Wesley at play with Warn Pulliam and their friend Boog. The boys dynamite birds, go skunk hunting, and smoke themselves out of a cave (unknowingly and unceremoniously cremating the corpse of John Wesley’s father in the process). After they shoot the skunk, John Wesley and Warn go up to Uncle Ather’s house. The old man sees the two figures coming and brings them into his cabin. The three sit with their shoes off in front of his fire, skunk-smelling, while the old man tells them coon hunting stories and “painter” legends. As he tells them his tales, “[d]own the small panes of glass behind the old man’s chair the sun lowered, casting his head in silhouette and illuming his white hair with a prophetic translucence” (150). He gets up to light the lamp and says, “You boys care for some...here, jest a minute” (150). He does not immediately name what he wishes to offer but instead gets up and brings back

two glasses and a cup, a mason jar of some dark red liquid....Muskydine wine, he said. Bet you-all ain’t never had none.

It beaded black and sinister in the soft lampglow. He settled himself in his rocker and filled his cup, watching them taste it.

Mighty fine, Warn said.

Yessir, said the boy.

They sipped their wine with the solemnity of communicants, troglodytes gathered in some firelit cave. (150)

They sip their wine like ancient cave-dwellers in a primitive mason-jarred communion while the man moves in and out of spoken memories of panther legend and unspoken memories of his wife. Ownby tells these stories not only for himself but to usher the boys into the web of the old world. He is sagelike in his storytelling, and the taint of ritual between him and the boys, touched by the sacred in their sipping of wine, creates a relational web between the old man and John Wesley that for the young boy the formal, blood relationship of father never does. This scene is a time of speaking and hearing between humans whose import is not immediately realizable. The novel's final movement brings the significance of these two scenes between John Wesley, Uncle Ather, and Marion Sylder to bear.

But before the novel's final scenes, the old world seems to be suffering its death throes. Marion Sylder is captured for bootlegging and Uncle Ather is taken to a mental institution for shooting an X in the government tank on his land. John Wesley's foster fathers who had ushered him into his inheritance in the mountains, the masculine impartation of name and place and memory, are taken into a world of forms and bars. Earlier in the novel, the county sheriff Gifford tries to question John Wesley about Sylder's possible bootlegging, and Sylder, incensed that the man had taken advantage of the boy's fatherless-ness, goes at night to Gifford's house and punches him while he sleeps. Now, Gifford has arrested Sylder on bootlegging charges and has beaten him in repayment. John Wesley comes to visit and tries to take hold of the role that Sylder has given him, saying "I'm goin to get the son of a bitch" (211). Sylder makes him swear that he will stay away from Gifford, saying that the two men are even. He gets more and more angry, trying to sway the boy away from playing the role that within the mountain world John Wesley would rightly be allowed to play: "His voice was beginning to rise and he had about him a look almost furious. But you, he went on, you want to be some kind of a goddamned hero.

Well, I'll tell ye, they ain't no more heroes" (214). He sends the boy away, saying "You ought not to of come here. You'll get me charged with delinquency to a minor. Go on now" (214). That formal courthouse phrase, "delinquency to a minor," is mark of Sylder's cross-purposes. He "stare[s] out at the emptiness before him" until the boy finally leaves. After the door closes,

[h]e sat up, half rose from the cot, would call him back to say *That's not true what I said. It was a damned lie ever word. He's a rogue and a outlaw hisself and you're welcome to shoot him, burn him down in his bed, any damn thing, because he's a traitor to boot and maybe a man steals from greed or murders in anger but he sells his own neighbors out for money and it's few lie that deep in the pit, that far beyond the pale*" (214-215).

This is a world gone beyond the pale, a world in which betrayal of kin has been institutionalized and sanctioned. McCarthy damns it in his work, the abstracting money culture that transforms a person from kin to consumable. The pit is the pit of hell, the ninth level of Dante's inferno that holds the betrayers of kin, country, and lord; and the pit is the government tank in this post-edenic world. That Sylder is kept in his language from speaking these words to the boy indicates that Sylder will not be able to carry on the ways and customs of the old world.

Uncle Ather, too, has been taken away to an institution, and most clearly demonstrative of the two different types of language in the novel—one lifeless and one alive—is the "conversation" between him and a young welfare worker. We first meet Uncle Ather as he is sitting wedged comfortably in the limbs of a peach tree and chewing on a dried peach. Now he sits on an institutional cot, the antithesis of his organic introduction. A young social worker "recently retained by the Knox County Welfare Bureau" (218) comes to visit him and get some information. After a confused attempt to establish why it is that the social worker has come to

see Uncle Ather, the old man asks the young one to have a seat. The man sits and launches into his routine: “Now, he said comfortably, first of all, your age” (219), to which Ather responds, “Well, I don’t rightly know” (219). This response baffles the social worker. The following interchange takes place:

Well, could you estimate your age then? You are over sixty-five?

Considerable.

Well, about how old would you say?

It ain’t about, the old man said, it’s either. Either eighty-three or eighty four.

The agent wrote that down on his form, studied it for a moment with satisfaction. Fine, he said. Now, where is your present residence?

If’n I’m eighty-four I’ll live to be a hunerd and five providin I get to eighty-five.

Yes. Your...

When was you born?

The agent looked up from his forms. Nineteen-thirteen, he said, but we...

What date?

June. The thirteenth. Mr Ownby...

The old man tilted his eyes upward in reflection. Hmm, he said. That was a Friday. Kindly a bad start. Was your daddy over twenty-eight when you was born?

The young social worker is asking a series of sterile, banal, and functionally useless questions. When Uncle Ather asks the welfare agent his age in return, this query is an attempt to turn the

faceless interchange into a human conversation. He corrects the specificity of the young man's language: "It ain't about, the old man said, it's either" (220) and then displays a kind of knowledge mysterious in his wielding of it. He is able to tell the young man the weekday of his birth while the young man merely blinks myopically at his form. Uncle Ather has a kind of knowledge the young social worker can know nothing about as long as the lifeless carbon-papered words sit in his hand and block his sight and his hearing. The agent moves along, ignorant of what or who sits before him, and continues asking questions while the old man answers indulgently, moving his right hand on his knee "opened and closed with a kneading action, as though he were trying to soften something in his palm. Until at length it stopped and the old man sat upright, fist clenched and quivering...and cut the agent off with a question of his own: "Why don't you say what you come here to say? Why not jest up and ast me?" (221). Uncle Ather cuts through the bureaucratic rhetoric and asks for straight language. Uncle Ather is sure that the young man has come to find out why he shot an X of warning (or, possibly, neutralization) into the side of the government tank on his land. The young man's speaking around instead of to the point is too much for Ather's patience, and he expresses his anger with no qualifications. When the young social worker says, "I beg your pardon?" and tries to pacify the old man with a patronizing, "Mr Ownby..." Ather replies,

Mr Ownby's ass. I could tell you why—and you stit wouldn't know. That's all right. You can set and ast a bunch of idjit questions. But not knowin a thing ain't never made it not so. Well, I'm a old man and I've seen some hard times, so I don't reckon Brushy Mountain'll be the worst place I was ever in. (221)

Here Uncle Ather says definitively that there is a kind of language that no matter how true or alive cannot be understood by those who do not wish to understand it. It is the language of

relationship, of accountability, of place; a language that requires that one live within limits and within story and within myth; a language that has a beating heart, to which the lifeless bureaucracy personified by the welfare worker is thoroughly deaf.

McCarthy will never speak a word of answer, the clarifying word as to whether his novels are to be left in hopelessness or edged toward hope and meaning. The conclusion of *The Orchard Keeper* in dialogue with the conclusion of *The Road* provides some clue, however, as to what McCarthy may suggest the human must take with him in the sometimes toxic trek through the ruins of the consumer culture. At the end of *The Orchard Keeper* and after seven years' absence, John Wesley returns to his old home and looks through its tired emptiness. He goes and sits beneath a tree and watches "[o]ld dry leaves [that] rattled frail and withered as old voices, trailed stiffly down, rocking like thinworn shells downward through seawater, or spun, curling ancient parchments on which no message at all appeared" (243-244). The emphasis on the message-less parchments prefigures young Rattner's looking at his mother's tombstone. He thinks, looking at the etched words, "[i]t was like having your name in the paper" (245). He reaches and touches the stone, trying to "conjure up some image, evoke again some allegiance with a name, a place, hallucinated recollections in which faces merged inextricably, and yet true and fixed; touched it, a carved stone less real than the smell of woodsmoke or the taste of an old man's wine" (245). The memory of the unspoken ties to Marion Sylder and Ather Ownby signify more in this moment than the carved words of his mother's name in stone. The written word is too easily shut and closed, too easily emptied out; it is the spoken word, the breath

between people, the “get your ass over here in front of the fire” (126), and memory that hedges against the death of the ways of the orchard keeper.⁵

At the novel’s conclusion, John Wesley stands near the road and a blinking traffic light (245). The images of the car, the lightbox, and the woman to whom John Wesley’s waves of greeting go unreturned, are abstracted and mechanical. Their presence here is ironic and community-less, but it is not McCarthy’s last word. The workers at the novel’s beginning, baffled and cowed by the twisted iron and elm, have gone. It is evening, and John Wesley is leaving that same cemetery to go west to some unknown place. But as the sun sets, breaking “through the final shelf of clouds,” it “bathed for a moment the dripping trees with blood, tinted the stones a diaphanous wash of color, as if the very air had gone to wine” (246). The air takes on the color of the sacrament, and the “drawing of the day” becomes “heraldic, pennoned in flame, the fleeing minions scattering their shadows in the wake of the sun” (246). Even though John Wesley’s walking into the west may relegate him to the world of myth and legend, it is these myths and legends themselves, the memory that John Wesley holds of Ownby and Sylder, that are alive in the dusty landscape. Memory and the human breath that communicates it becomes the McCarthean fortification line against decay and despair.

⁵ I owe David Paul Ragan my interpretation of John Wesley’s memories at the novel’s conclusion. He writes, “The images he conjures are revelatory: feeling no special identification with the watery memories of his mother, he focuses with greater clarity on associations with his two older mentors...These are the men whose values he has embraced as an adult, whose view of the world determines the direction the young man must take at the close of the book” (19).

CHAPTER THREE

WITHOUT THE WORD IN *CHILD OF GOD*

Late in McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, Lester Ballard leaves an old wagonroad and goes down a path that "he himself kept" to look upon the land that used to be his home. He looks out over the valley and lights upon an empty wagon coming up below him. He hears the "distant clatter of it, the mule pausing in the ford and the clatter of the immobile wagon rolling on regardless as if the sound authored the substance" (169-170). Ballard at the beginning of the novel is being dispossessed from his land. He is essentially removed from solid ground that he can possess and name as his own. Many critics have argued that this dispossession is the cause of Lester's perversity, that his removal from his home is the beginning of an inward twisting that results in murder and twisted sexuality.⁶ Others go back to his father's suicide, a dispossession from human relationship, as the source of Lester's eventual necrophilia.⁷ But a third kind of dispossession becomes apparent as the novel progresses: a dispossession from human language altogether. Lester has no one to whom he can speak. His curses go unheard, his questions go unanswered, and oftentimes his communicative language is a derivative patchwork of words he has heard other men say. If sound authors substance, then human language is the author of the

⁶ Dianne Luce Cox and John Lang both make this diagnosis.

⁷ Vereen Bell first draws this connection: "The necrophilia has a prior source in Lester's unprotected exposure to raw time and his conditioned belief that what is living—his mother, his father, his home—is what is lost" (64).

substance of the human self. Lester's banishment from the spoken word is a fundamental part of his dispossession and perversity.⁸

The spoken and heard word becomes intangible connective tissue between human beings, necessary for the construction or authoring of individual selves. This problem of language is pervasive in the novel; it is not only Lester whose voice does not signify. Even the trees speak a litany that stops abruptly, and other voices speak only to echo back an unsignifying threatlessness. But it is Lester whose dispossession from spoken language is most violent and creates the most violence. He has no one to whom he can speak himself; and in this lack, he begins to create a community of the dead to lessen his isolation, to give him a sense of self in community. At the novel's conclusion, McCarthy juxtaposes Lester and the hospital to create an implicit comparison between the two communities. There is some question as to whether the community of the dead that Lester creates is less perverse than the civilization to which he returns. Lester's concluding declaration, "I'm supposed to be here," marks him as both member of that world and symbol of its own tacit perversity. The narrator's persistent address to the reader, the images of community that are not communal, and a flood that covers the town like a biblical judgment mark the town as much as Lester as a thing depraved. Lester, too uncivilized for the civilized world, is banished from it. But the language of the world from which Lester is banished is sterile and in its own way just as perverse. Lester is "supposed to be" there, for he is one of its many shades of depravity.

⁸ Vereen Bell and other critics note Lester's discontinuity with community and the longing for it and for home. Bell writes, "Lester's own story is another one of McCarthy's meditations on homelessness, living in the unhomelike..." (58). No critic, however, has examined Lester's language-use as indicator of his dislocation or made connections between Lester and McCarthy's theories of language in general.

At the novel's beginning, Lester is being removed from his land by the county. The first spoken language the reader hears is a litany of market speech. An auctioneer has brought a kind of capitalistic carnival to Lester's land; musicians play and above the melee the auctioneer speaks into a microphone:

All right now let's get everybody up here and get registered for ye free silver dollars. Right up here. That's the way. How you little lady? Well all right. Yessir. All right now. Jessie? Have you got it...? All right now....Yessir? What's that? Yessir, that's right.....we will bid on the tracts and then we'll have a chance to bid on the whole....Now they's good timber up here too. Real good timber. (4-5)

The auctioneer in his rhetoric asks a series of questions whose answers are implied and unheard. It is as if he absorbs language into himself. The questions he poses are moot, meaningless, a dumbshow. He misnames the forest, referring to the trees as "timber." Their only value is in their marketability. This auctioneer is the face of the county, and when Lester stands in front of him, not only does a whisper go up in the crowd to signify an action we have not yet seen (Lester's stepping in front of the auctioneer), but simultaneous with the confrontation, "in the pines...voices chanted a lost litany. Then they stopped." (6). A kind of wind-prayer sounds in the trees and then goes quiet. Words falling to silence is the background for Lester's first speaking in the novel, one of his only significant verbal interchanges with another human being. And, it comes to naught:

What do you want, Lester?

I done told ye. I want you to get your goddamn ass off my property. And take these fools with ye.

Watch your mouth, Lester. They's ladies present.

I don't give a fuck who's present.

It ain't your property.

The hell it ain't....I want you sons of bitches off of my goddamned property. You hear? (7)

The man does not hear. No one does, for Lester's words are impotent. One of the first imperative statements directed at Lester is a command for him to "watch" his "mouth"—to shut it. There is a clear refusal to hear his words or respond to them. When he tries to accuse with his rifle, to name and diagnose his dispossessor, the auctioneer counters him: "What you aim to do, Lester, shoot me? I didn't take your place off ye. County done that. I was just hired as auctioneer" (7). Lester's dispossessor has no face, and before that facelessness, that bureaucratic robbery without a name, Lester cannot act. When he tries, his head is knocked crooked with an axe helve.

Displaced, he moves to squat in a two-room cabin. He cleans out the hornet-inhabited, dust-covered space and moves in his few things. The final item he takes into the cabin is his mattress: "Late in the afternoon a small thin mattress of stained ticking forded the brake toward the cabin. It was hinged over the head and shoulders of Lester Ballard whose muffled curses at the bullbriers and blackberries reached no ear" (14). It is not Lester who is first given agency for the mattress's moving but the mattress itself. Not only does the mattress seem to be moving on its own, further reinforcing our sense of Lester's impotence, but his cursing in the effort goes unheard. Later in the evening, he bites into a blackened potato, burns himself, and curses at the roasted vegetable. Instead of the appropriate receptacle for a spoken word, another human ear, Lester's words meet what is either dead or empty.

Within Lester's moving into the cabin, there are several references to newsprint, bringing into *Child of God* the ever-interesting dialogue between the written and spoken word that McCarthy subtly carries through his Appalachian novels. When Ballard comes in to clean the cabin, he sweeps the floor with a piece of cardboard, brushing up "old newspapers" along with "the dried dung of foxes and possums" (14). He also uses wadded newspapers to build a fire, and McCarthy spends much time describing their slow burning: "the flames sputtered and ate their way along the rims and edges [and] [t]he papers blackened and curled and shivered" (14). After Lester eats the blackened potato he has just finished cursing, he lights a cigarette and "spread[s] the newspapers he had gathered and mutter[s] over them, his lips forming the words. Old news of folks long dead, events forgotten, ads for patent medicine and livestock for sale" (15). The power of the spoken word is its power to enact communion between two human beings. The speaking and hearing of the word, language in its essence, is antidote to isolation. Reading, superficially an auto-experience, is community-creating: the reader is joined to the author and the character with whom the reader identifies. But this is not the kind of community that guards against darkness and isolation for McCarthy. McCarthy's placing the newsprint on the ground with fox dung, his describing its slow curling in the fire, and Lester's slow, painstaking shaping of the words whose stories are long dead, all favor the spoken word and the living human breath. Lester's living breath that goes unheard and unfelt is the most emasculating and dehumanizing kind of dispossession.

Because Lester is isolated from his community, verbal interactions between him and other human beings are few. When they do occur, their place, effects, and rhetorical structure are important to examine. Ballard lives near a junkyard run by a man with nine daughters who live in a squalid fecundity. There are prowling men and illegitimate babies everywhere. Ballard

comes on one of his visits to this place wearing a look of “narroweyed and studied indifference” (28). The word “studied” passes by almost without notice. This indifference is a persona or self he is consciously creating to pass more easily by in human interactions. Ballard has a self, and he is capable of posing. He has his eyes on one of the daughters, “blonde” and “flatshanked” (28). This particular day, the girl is hanging wash while another man looks on. The three enter into a conversation fiscal, haunting, and revealing:

What you lookin at?

Why, he’s lookin at them there nice titties for one thing, said the man on the drum.

You want to see em.

Sure, said Ballard.

Gimme a quarter.

I ain’t got one.

She laughed.

He stood there grinning

How much you got?

I got a dime.

Well go borrry two and a half cents and you can see one of em.

Just let me owe ye, said Ballard.

Say you want to blow me? the girl said.

I said owe, said Ballard, flushing. (29)

In this interaction, not only is a part of the human being on sale for a quarter, but Ballard in his attempts to interact with this girl also is misunderstood. The girl asks him a question, “What you

lookin at?” that the man on the drum answers for Ballard, initially keeping Ballard from answering for himself. The human body, something alive and physical, is being abstracted and commodified, but Ballard is not equipped to contextualize this. Instead, he stands sort of baffled and pleased and aroused, and well he should, for how often is he allowed to speak to a human who responds to him? But when he pleads the monetary favor, “Let me owe you,” the girl mocks him, twisting his words. He flushes—a very human reaction—for he is embarrassed. His self, behind his studied indifference, has been superficially misrepresented, even if what the girl twists his word into is a thing or act for which he wishes. In one of the few instances that his words are heard and responded to by another human being, the interaction is based on the willing commodification of the girl’s body by the girl herself, and the words he intends are deliberately misconstrued and used for mockery. Ballard’s voice, normally unheard, is here used against him. He finds it impossible to effect himself in the communal world (which is hardly communal here in its perversity), so he is later spurred to create his own.

Put in jail for a crime for which he could not defend himself, Ballard spends nine days and nights eating boiled greens and baloney sandwiches. It is clear in the jail that Ballard is not linguistically autonomous. He does not have words for his own thoughts. He is celled across from a black man, and “after a day or two Ballard fell into talking with him” (53). He first asks the man’s name, then his crime to which the man replies, “I cut a motherfucker’s head off with a pocketknife. Ballard wait[s] to be asked his own crime but he wasn’t asked. After a while he said:

I was supposed to of raped this old girl. She wasn’t nothin but a whore to start with.

White pussy is nothin but trouble.

Ballard agreed that it was. He guessed he'd thought so but he'd never heard it put that way. (53)

Ballard waits for the question to which he can respond, to offer his story, but it does not come. When he offers it anyway, the man gives him a phrase to name a thought that Ballard had never put into words. He is not, however, given voice in his agreement. There is no, "I agree," but instead a moment occurs here that occurs in *Child of God* like a linguistic tick: "Ballard agreed that it was" (53). Several times in the novel, in his spare human interactions, the narrator does not give voice to Ballard's agreement or affirmations. Instead, McCarthy offers a "Ballard agreed that it was" or as in response to the man's statement and question in the previous scene, "I'd like to chance it...Wouldn't you Lester?" the narrator offers, "Lester said that he would" (30). To say yes or agree to a thing with another human being is a moment of community, a moment of affirmation. Ballard is linguistically removed from it. His verbal first-person "yes" is relegated to a third-person nod. The black man sits there singing, and Ballard offers again, "All the trouble I ever was in...was caused by whiskey or women or both. He'd often heard men say as much" (53). Ballard does not have a language of his own here, but he has his suspicions and unspoken thoughts. There is a pull in him toward communication. But to a black man singing "Flyin home / Fly like a motherfucker" Ballard ballasts his communication with a phrase he has heard other men say. His language is derivative, self-pointed, or made unavailable to him. He ultimately can speak only to the dead who cannot respond to him.

After the first eighty-four episodic pages of the novel, a poetic study of the disenfranchised and language-less man who tries to effect himself to no avail, Lester finally comes into the beginning of the only community possible for him in the world of this novel. It is a cold winter morning, and Lester comes down Frog Mountain road with a brace of squirrels on his belt. He

comes upon an idling car, and there is no sign to him of anyone in it. He goes to examine it: “He came out of the bushes and walked on down past the automobile. He was just a squirrelhunter going on down the road if it was anybody’s business” (86). It is as though he affirms his own self to himself and to all invisible onlookers, supporting the fact that at this point, as ignorant as he is, Lester still has a self to affirm—he is Lester, and here, though he is spying, to all others, he still looks just like a squirrel hunter going about his business. In the car, he sees two dead bodies, poisoned by carbon-monoxide in the idling car. They are strewn naked upon each other, in the middle of the sex act. Lester pushes the man off of the young woman and sees her exposed breast. After fondling her hesitantly, he takes down his trouser and has his way, “a crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse” (88). As he does this, “[h]e pour[s] into that waxen ear everything he’d ever thought of saying to a woman” (88). This scene is both perverse and tragic, for it is as though Lester has a body of language stored up, obscene though it may be, signifying his natural desires as a man that could never be met naturally because no one would hear his words or have his body. He is community-less and forced by that linguistic and physical dispossession to commune here with a corpse.⁹ It is insane, yes, but that insanity may be the result of a body and mind that after many futile attempts to turn outward to the living are forced now to turn to the dead. And, the manifestation of his desire for community comes in his pouring out his language of desire, his stored up words, into the ears of a dead woman. We are meant to pay attention to this as the narrator turns his words to us: “Who,” the narrator asks us, “could say she did not hear him?” (88). Perhaps she does, for none of us have. We are in this moment indicted for Lester’s depravity.

⁹ I agree with John Lang who writes of this scene, “The girl becomes the first citizen of Lester’s necropolis, his community of the dead, and the measure of his desperate longing for intimacy. Edwin T. Arnold also calls Lester’s murders and necrophilia a search for “companionship”; he is “creating his own community” (55).

Who are “we”—who is it that the narrator addresses when he points at Lester and connects him to the mysterious “you”? At the novel’s beginning, the auctioneer and his carnival are milling over Lester’s land, and the narrator introduces Lester in a description thoroughly unsympathetic. The narrator comments, “To watch these things issuing from the otherwise mute pastoral morning is a man at the barn door. He is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4).¹⁰ The morning apart from the capitalistic melee is “mute”—silent, languageless. Lester looks on, a separate and impotent voyeur. It would be easy to type him as other, as pariah, and as the novel progresses, as twisted monster. But he is, strangely, “[a] child of God, much like yourself perhaps” (4). As Lester is dispossessed, so is the reader to whom the narrator speaks. From what has the reader been dispossessed, as ignorantly as Lester has been? One should examine the world from which Lester has been removed.¹¹

The auction is the first metonymic piece of this enigmatic world. The next is a church that Ballard enters “with his hat in his hand and...[sits] alone on the rear bench” (31). The congregation of this church has the habit of turning around like a “cast of puppets” at the opening of the door behind them.¹² When Ballard enters, a “windy ruffle of whispers went up

¹⁰ Cox acknowledges this idea in her entry on McCarthy for *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*. She writes, “The horror of this novel is that its author insists that Ballard is one of us—an example of what can go wrong with a Child of God” (230).

¹¹ Bell goes so far as to label Lester as connected to the community from which he came, but he still calls him “a bizarre aberration” (54). Lang, however, comes closest to my own diagnosis. He writes, “he is...as the novel’s title attests, a child of God, a fallen creature in a patently fallen world who earns a measure of compassion” (88).

¹² Lang analyzes this scene and of the congregation, he writes, “What is apparent...is that the congregation...fails to make Lester welcome. In his isolation even among these representatives of the ethic of love for one’s neighbor, Lester becomes an object of sympathy” (90).

among them” (31). The language here is not a community language; it is insubstantial, flimsy. Ballard, at least in gesture, is aware of the attitude of reverence a church requires. His hat is in his hand, but when he enters, the preacher stops speaking. Language falls away. The preacher, “to justify the silence...pour[s] himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the pulpit” (31). He drinks, wipes his mouth, continues to preach:

Brethren, he went on, a biblical babbling to Ballard who read the notices on the board at the back of the church. This week’s offering. Last week’s offering. Six dollars and seventy-four cents. The numbers in attendance....Ballard had a cold and snuffled loudly through the service but nobody expected he would stop if God himself looked back askance so no one looked.

The church only looks askance at a sick outcast. The preacher’s language is babble, confused. And the church’s language is confused, for it is the money culture that makes the pews and pulpit hold, not the word of God that speaks to the poor and the dispossessed. It is the offering and the numbers in attendance upon which the church places its emphasis. The last image of community in this church is the withheld gaze, the antithesis of the human touch between Sylder and John Wesley or between the man and his son in *The Road*.

As the novel progresses, Lester descends more and more deeply into isolation and grotesquerie. He has long taken to talking to himself (105), and after the burning of his cabin, he moves below ground into a red-clayed network of caves. During a three-day rainstorm, Ballard watches as “in the night the side of the mountain winked with lamps and torches. Winter revelers among the trees or some like hunters calling each to each there in the dark. In the dark, Ballard passed beneath them, scuttling with his ragged chattel down stone tunnels within the mountains” (154). A hellish ghoul, Ballard seems completely other, wholly separate, from the

night revelers calling each to each. But the description of the callers falls into a sentence fragment, and McCarthy reiterates the phrase “in the dark” for both the callers and for Ballard. The sentence fragment and the common darkness belie the separation between the scuttling mountain creature and the community of the winking lights. This deluge of rain brings a flood, a veritable biblical archetype of judgment upon the town. As Lester struggles to move his bodies and his things across the river, “Anyone watching him could have seen he would not turn back if the creek swallowed him under” (155). No one is watching, and Lester alone is taken under by the river. The narrator again turns voice to the reader:

He could not swim, but how would you drown him? His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to be at work here. See him. You could say that he’s sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their blood in its history and will have it. But they want this man’s life. He has heard them in the night seeking him with lanterns and cries of execration.

(156)

The literary past tense changes to the objective present tense mid-way through the passage, and the reader is invited in that shift to look at Lester Ballard as the central character of a parable. The narrator notes that there seems to be some “halt” in the way of things, some catch, some wrongness. In his essay, “McCarthy’s Moral Parables,” Edwin T. Arnold writes, “[Lester] is created by those around him, a necessary figure of the community, a scapegoat that embodies their weird alienation and stoked violence but also their terrible sadness, their potential nothingness” (57). Lester is communal bearer of blame, a figure that must have his being to circumvent a town-wide, or humanity-wide, conviction.

The community in the novel speaks with a kind of gossiping piousness to itself. Interspersed through the novel are episodic interludes of unnamed narrators telling old stories about Lester. It is clear that the Lester-centered narrative is past, and various communal voices are verbally relating and interpreting the now mythological details of Lester's crimes and Lester's person. He has become an object of voyeuristic fascination. In one short interlude, a group of men go back to tell stories about Lester's grandfather who fought in the Union army. After they relate to one another that he was no good soldier and never did anything but "scout the bushes," one man comments, "I'll say one thing about Lester though. You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn't outstrip em all" to which another man replies, "That's the god's truth" (81). "Talking about Lester..." two others say, "You all talk about him. I got supper waitin on me at the house" (81). The god's truth—Lester has become the mythological vessel into which the community chatter projects itself. It settles around him like a flock of birds or, more accurately, a crowd of the pitchfork-waving irate hurling cursing cries of execration. They spurn him so they will not be spurned.

It is to this community that Lester returns. Captured after shooting and being shot by the man who now inhabits his old farm, Lester loses an arm and is imprisoned in the hospital. A group of men take him and demand that he show them the bodies he has hidden away. Lester, slight and malformed, slips through a small hole and loses them in the system of caves to which he has taken them. Three days of searching for cracks and light lead him to a beam of sun through which he digs upward and surfaces through the ground. His first vision is an idyllic pastoral, a cud-chewing cow, a barn, a house. He looks for signs of life but sees none. What life can there be here? Crawling from the earth, he is covered in red clay like blood. He had wished, underground, for "some brute midwife to spald him from his rocky keep" (189). She has done

so. Reborn, (but into what?) Ballard looks to the night sky for signs, but “the heavens wore a different look that Ballard did not trust” (190). This monster is still a reader of signs, a discerning interpreter. He turns down the mountain and hobbles along “weak but able, the night being as fine as you could wish” (190). The reader is still onlooker, watching the parabolic unfolding. Walking, “as he neared the town the roosters were calling....Everywhere across the sleeping land they called and answered each to each. As in olden times so now. As in other countries here” (191). The call and response from which Lester is again separate, as he is separate from signifying language altogether, is made a story not just of one time but of all times and all countries. He is the isolated man among all isolated men. He returns to the hospital unbidden, walks up to a nurse’s desk and says with eyes “caved and smoking,” “I’m supposed to be here...” (192). Lester is meant to be part of the world that dispossessed him, symbol of human depravity. For the world of the hospital is as perverse, maybe more so, than Lester himself. It is representative of the “mathematick of the western world” (*Suttree* 458).

Ballard with his corpses tries to make a functional community of the dead to which he talks, has relationship. He arranges the bodies “saintlike” on their cave shelves. He dresses them, makes them animate. When they are discovered, they are “arranged...in attitudes of repose” (195). Conversely, Lester’s body is “shipped” like a package “to the state medical school in Memphis,”

...laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped of his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. At the end of three months when the class

was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service. (194)

In McCarthy's works, the societal treatment of the dead is often revelatory of that society's values. In *Suttree*, the protagonist who cannot bear to watch his son buried by machines picks up a shovel and buries him with spade upon spade of dirt, pitched by his own hands. There must be something human in the treatment of the human—ritual and ceremony must keep. This sentiment echoes in *The Road*; the man as he tousles the wet hair of his sleeping boy before a fire comments that the ritual of touch and washing was “[a]ll of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (63). Lester’s ceremonies are twisted, yes, but they are a twisted version of a right desire for community, vital language, humanness. But, he is not in a world where these things are possible. The world from which he is banished is cold and calculating, a soul-enervating institution that looks to the dissected pieces of the human for scientific knowledge. Lester’s body finishes in pieces scraped into a plastic bag. His corpses repose, saintlike, in a tomb. In the absence of human breath, the connective tissue of the spoken and received word, and in a civilization based on the monetary and the dissected, everyone is communing with the dead. Ballard is the myth that explains the “some halt in the way of things” (156). He himself is the word, the child or son or Word of God spoken to deaf ears in a deaf world.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ROAD: REMAKING THE WORLD WITH THE WORD

In McCarthy's fourth novel *Suttree*, the protagonist goes to a marketplace to sell his wares. He walks through gray doors into a building, a

lazaret of comestibles and flora and maimed humanity. Every other face goitered, twisted, tubered with some excrescence....Dour and diminutive people framed by paper cones of blossoms, hawkers of esoteric wares, curious electuaries ordered up in jars....Great cleavers and bonesaws hung overhead and truncate beeves in stark abbatoir by cambreled hams blueflocked with mold. (67)

This market, the gutter version of business and government and law to which Suttree's father would have him go to find the life he seeks, is decadent and decaying. The people who move through it are deformed, one thinks almost by the place itself. Words like "abbatoir," "cambreled," "blueflocked," and "lazaret" stick out like some incantation of a world dying. In *The Road*, that world has died, language has collapsed, and now "the cities themselves [are] held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled 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). Something has happened, a "long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (45). One imagines a kind of nuclear apocalypse. The world is burned. Corpses scatter the landscape. Ash falls like a constant snow, and through this wasteland walk the novel's two protagonists. In McCarthy's first four Appalachian novels, the reader is treated

to images like this one from *Suttree*: “pokeweeds gorged with sooty drainage whose clustered fruit gleamed small baubles of a poisonous ebon blue” (91) with all its round vowels and spitting, bubbling consonants. *The Road*, McCarthy’s return to Appalachia, is unlike any of McCarthy’s first four novels—its vocabulary is spare; its sentences are short. Even *Child of God* is more descriptive, its imagery dark and rich in places. The violence in *The Road* is muted, always anticipated, hitting in gripping flashes and then retreating as the protagonists run from it. A father and son, who are perhaps two of the last people on earth, walk for months toward the gray coast, freezing, starving, on the lookout for ones who would prey upon their very flesh. They walk only because they must. Suicide follows them like a shadow. The reader does not know their names. They are called only “the man” and “the boy.”

The consumer culture has reached its nadir, for in the late days of *The Road*, there is no more culture. There are still consumers, however—the worst possible kind. In the latter days of *The Road*, those that have survived the world-burning disaster are the “bad guys,” as the man describes them to his boy. They eat the only fresh meat available—human flesh. The man and the boy for much of the novel are the “good guys,” surviving on the food they can find and trying to keep warm. The narrator comments in fragments, “The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it” (24). All the creeds and beliefs and plastic rituals of consumer culture are burned away with the trees and grass. McCarthy consciously makes note of the old signs that no longer signify, the ludicrous “billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered” (7). The apocalypse has made the common billboard message ridiculous. A member of the bloodcult, a group of cannibals, on whom the man must waste one of his bullets, “lean, wiry, rachitic...[is] [d]ressed in a pair of filthy blue coveralls and a black billcap

with the logo of some vanished enterprise embroidered across the front of it” (54). These signs and symbols seem to be an ashen, vanished myth, the “runic slogans, creeds misspelled” (76) of an old story that though it no longer carries meaning, marks a ruined landscape. It is as if to say that under this consumptive incantation, the world was lost.

Can there be a new incantation, this novel seems to ask, when the world of marketplace capitalism and consumer advertising is gone, a new story with new voices? The man does not seem to think so, for he sees the world

shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought....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)

He sees, “the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe” (110). Words are disappearing and the universe is cold. But there are two visions in *The Road*, not one. Even within the darkness of the man’s vision, he still speaks to his son, tells stories to his boy. The dialogue between man and boy, their stories, language’s ability to shape and pass on memory, and the boy himself as living word sit tensely, hopefully, against the fallout of the apocalypse. As Michael Chabon writes in his article on *The Road*, “To annihilate the world in prose, one must simultaneously write it into being” (4). Language serves to remake the world even as McCarthy tells of its undoing.

“When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he’d reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him....His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath” (3). *The Road* begins in dark and cold and touch and breath. It is a novel with a tense dialectic, a tense double vision of hopelessness and hope. It is as though the author himself, while he tells of a world in ruin, also tells of its remaking. Even in the dark and cold of the woods, there is the “precious” breath of a child. This is McCarthy’s mystery, his paradox. Critics call *The Road* McCarthy’s grimmest novel—“pure poetic brimstone” says Janet Maslin from the *Times*. But in the novel’s opening page, the man wakes from a dream in which his “child led him by the hand” and “like pilgrims in a fable” they walk through the dripping walls of a dank cave. Pilgrims have a goal toward which they walk, and one thinks that in this fable-tale it is not just toward the perhaps-warmer coast that the man and boy travail. This may be a world complete in its hopelessness as the days become “more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3). The child, however, leads his father dream-like by the hand, and the reader is invited not to settle into the man’s bleak, often-futile perspective but to look to the relationship between the man and his son as perhaps more indicative of McCarthy’s vision.

In *The Orchard Keeper* and in *Suttree* particularly the vocabulary and dialogue are rich and ornate. But even *Child of God* and *Outer Dark* have dialogue in sentence form. The conversation between the man and boy in *The Road* is short, terse, as though they save valuable words in their pockets, guarding against their short supply. The rapid trading of dialogue feels liturgical, like affirming calls and responses. A continual affirmation of yes, we are still alive. Yes. Okay. In their first conversational interchange, the boy turns to the man, “[h]is face in the

small light streaked with black from the rain like some old world thespian,” an actor of stories.

“Can I ask you something?” he says.

Yes. Of course.

Are we going to die?

Sometime. Not now.

And we’re still going south.

Yes.

So we’ll be warm.

Yes.

Okay.

Okay what?

Nothing. Just okay.

Go to sleep.

Okay.

I’m going to blow out the lamp. Is that okay?

Yes. That’s okay.

And then later in the darkness: Can I ask you something?

Yes. Of course you can.

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay. (9)

I quote the passage at length to show the word to which the man and boy constantly return:

okay. It is a word of promise, a word that makes them pilgrims. As Michael Chabon writes, it is a “word which both characters endlessly repeat to each other, touching it compulsively like a sore place or a missing tooth” (3). Invariably, almost every conversational interchange ends with the word. It is as though their words to each other have become a kind of prayer, to which they always say, whether they understand the implications of the word, amen.

There are in the novel the desiccated words that no longer signify: the old newsprint; “A log barn in a field with an advertisement in faded ten-foot letters across the roofslope. See Rock City” (18); “[B]illboards advertising motels” (7). The man remembers standing in “the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row” (157-158). He remembers that “[h]e’d not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come....That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation” (158). The written words of knowledge and bombast of the old world, like the billboards with ridiculous advertisements for motels that no longer stand, are the incantation of old, meaningless creeds. “Creedless shells of men [now] totter down the causeways like migrants in a feverland” (24). But still there is the pull toward story and meaning. Toward putting things into words, or in the words of Suttree, having a “thing to tell” (*Suttree* 459).

One does not know whether there will be a world to come on which one may hazard words of knowledge, love, or hope. But even in the man’s hopelessness, his belief that “there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell” (27), he makes a creed, a story for his boy. Within the ashen, fragmented landscape, and within this novel that is told in fragments without chapter divisions or titles, the man still tries to foster the boy’s desire for

narrative wholeness. The two are “the good guys,” and they are “carrying the fire” (70, 109, 183, 234).

The man’s calling himself and his son the “good guys” makes the novel seem a childhood story of good versus evil, and well it may prove to be. The boy touches on the idea like a mantra, and it feels at times absurd:

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)

The man cannot promise this okayness, but he does. He tells the boy “[o]ld stories of courage and justice as he remembered them” (35). He tells these stories but he is troubled by their telling. Interspersed in *The Road* amid such horrors as “[t]he mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk, their faces of boiled sheeting” (20) are images of great beauty. Standing at a river, watching “where it swung loping into a pool and curled and eddied,” he remembers that he “stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the teacolored water except as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave” (35). Even within the darkness one feels that these memories are as the flashes of light in that cave. One morning the man awakes to a “forest fire...making its way along the tinderbox ridges above them, flaring and shimmering against the overcast like the northern lights. Cold as it was he stood there a long time. The color of it

moved something in him long forgotten” (27). In response to this vision, the narrator or the man himself importunes, “Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember” (27). Memory and the words that pass it, the recitation, the litany, the command to remember becomes in the midst of the grayness and the man’s overwhelming sense of futility the sliver of hope. It is hope, however, that only the boy seems able to grasp unselfconsciously. In his willingness to lead his father by the hand in hope, the boy “glow[s] in the waste like a tabernacle” (230).

When once more they have almost no food left, they turn into open country. The air feels different. They come upon the ocean from a turn in the road and stand looking out at “the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of” (181). The horizon is a “gray squall of ash” (181). The man looks at the boy. “I’m sorry it’s not blue, he said. That’s okay, said the boy” (181). They sit on the beach and embark upon yet another one of their calls and responses of speculative affirmation:

Do you think there could be ships out there?

I dont think so.

They wouldn’t be able to see very far.

No. They wouldn’t.

What’s on the other side?

Nothing.

There must be something.

Maybe there’s a father and his little boy and they’re sitting on the beach.

That would be okay.

Yes. That would be okay.

And they could be carrying the fire too?

They could be. Yes.

But we dont know.

We dont know.

So we have to be vigilant.

We have to be vigilant. Yes. (182-183)

Even though there seems to be nothing to the man, to the boy, there must be something. To imagine that something, they make up a story. For McCarthy, this vigilance, the human voice still talking,¹³ the human person still aware of the possibility of others is the only recourse in the face of “[the] message and [the] warning [that] this tableau of the slain and devoured did prove to be” (77).

Through the novel, the man has insisted on their surviving in isolation. As a child, he had “pored over maps...keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world” (153-54). There is now no “themselves among others,” but the boy desires for there to be. In one of the only times in the novel that the reader gets access to the boy’s perspective, the two are passing through a ghost town. The boy is sitting on some steps

when he [sees] something move at the rear of the house across the road. A face was looking at him. A boy, about his age, wrapped in an outsized wool coat....He stood up. He ran across the road and up the drive. No one was there. He...ran to the bottom of the yard through the dead weeds to a still black creek. Come back, he called. I wont hurt you. He was standing there crying when his father came sprinting across the road and seized him by the arm. (71)

¹³ cf. Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1950)

As they leave, the boy sobs and sobs, “ I want to see him, Papa....What about the little boy?...What about the little boy?” The man insists that they move on. During one of the last interchanges in the novel, the boy at first turns away his father’s querying:

What is it? the man said.

Nothing.

No. Tell me.

There could be people alive someplace else.

Whereplace else?

I dont know. Anywhere.

You mean besides the earth?

Yes.

I dont think so. They couldnt live anyplace else.

Not even if they could get there?

No.

The boy looked away.

What? the man said.

He shook his head. I dont know what we’re doing, he said. (205-206)

If there are no others to be found, the man and boy’s journeying is pointless. What is the point in carrying the fire, the boy seems to say, if there is no one to see its light, feel its heat? Man in isolation, twisted, perverted—the Lester Ballards, Culla in *Outer Dark*—is joined here even paradoxically by the man of *The Road*. The fact that through the novel it becomes clear that he is dying and that his hopelessness and, so we find out, their isolation dies with him force the

reader to examine once again McCarthy's vision of community, the viability of memory, and the power of the spoken word.

The man weakens; their progress slows. He leans his head upon the bar of the grocery cart, coughs, spits "a bloody drool" (229). He rests more, and the boy watches. Finally they camp and he can go no further. The boy sits helplessly on deathwatch. They have a single tin of peaches. The man feverishly watches the boy "come through the grass and kneel with the cup of water he'd fetched. There was light all about him....when he moved the light moved with him" (233). The man and boy have lived in isolation, but with the man's dying, he entreats the boy to go on. He says, "You need to find the good guys but you cant take any chances. No chances. Do you hear?"

I want to be with you.

You cant

Please

You cant. You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (234)

The following day the boy asks his father his last question:

Do you remember that little boy, Papa?

Yes. I remember him.

Do you think he's all right that little boy?

Oh yes. I think he's all right.

Do you think he's lost?

No. I don't think he's lost.

I'm scared that he was lost.

I think he's all right.

But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?

Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again. (236)

This story sounds like a childhood fairy tale, a father's light, empty words of comfort, signifying nothing. But within the words, the two touch on McCarthean themes of memory and fostering (foster caretaker and child) that begin in *The Orchard Keeper*. Like the pilgrims in a fable that they have been, *The Road* ends as a fable does. The tableau of the dead served as message and warning. The ending of the novel is message as well.

For no "good guy" comes until the father passes. Three days after his father's death, the boy goes up to the road. "Someone was coming. He started to turn and go back into the woods but he didn't....The man that hove into view and stood there looking at him was dressed in a gray and yellow ski parka" (237). To hove is to appear, to float or be suspended. The man appears apparition-like. The following interchange occurs:

Where's the man you were with?

He died.

Was that your father?

Yes. He was my papa.

I'm sorry.

I dont know what to do.

I think you should come with me.

Are you one of the good guys?

The man pulled back the hood from his face. His hair was long and matted. He looked at the sky. As if there were anything there to be seen. He looked at the boy. Yeah, he said. I'm one of the good guys. (237)

The boy and this second man both make gestures that in this latter-day world seem futile. The boy looks for the other little boy, wants to feed the thieves and the tottering near-dead. The man looks to the sky for wisdom, though there is nothing there to be found. These gestures of hope, fusing to belief, to the bearing of story in a world with "no other tale to tell" (27) mark this boy, this man, as the new community in the new world.

And what marks them but embrace and suggestions of the breath of God? The boy promises his father that he will speak to him every day and he will not forget. He is then gathered into a band of men, women, and children, bringing into the circle of this group all of his father's fear and hope of fire. When she sees the boy, the first woman in the novel besides the boy's shade of a mother opens her arms and says, "Oh...I am so glad to see you" (241). It is a moment of recognition. The woman speaks to him of God, encourages their speaking. The boy tries to talk to God, but to him "the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (241). The spoken word and human breath becomes a divine web of ties between all of man, and one feels that the relationships in *Suttree* and *The Orchard Keeper*, and the lack thereof in *Child of God* and *Outer Dark* indicate the presence or absence of the breath of God that passes from man to man.

Dialogue, naming, speaking relationship into being—the word is all the breath-carried fire. Although *The Road* ends in memory of “a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (241), the brook trout’s torsional and vermiculate scaled patterns of the world in its becoming are both “maps and mazes” (241). Both guides and mis-guides. The thing cannot be put back, but the boy, “a golden chalice, good to house a god” (64) carries his father’s memory of beauty. He remembers, and the memory provides a narrative even while the fragmented landscape combats the wholeness and hope of such a form. The tension between hope and hopelessness, between the viability and desiccation of the word, “hums with mystery” (241). McCarthy’s language is suggestive, referential. Arcane as the “deepest glen” (241). And though he himself will not provide the word of answer, only a prophetic warning, the act of storytelling a ruined world suggests the possibility of its rebirth. As Chabon expresses it, “the only true account of the world after a disaster as nearly complete and as searing as the one McCarthy proposes...would be a book of blank pages, white as ash. [E]ven an act of stylistic denial as extreme as McCarthy’s here...remains, in spite of itself, an affirmation” (4). The boy’s remembering within embrace, even after the narrator’s avowal that the thing evoked by the brook trout cannot be restored, is perplexingly hopeful. After the “mathematick of the western world” (*Suttree* 457) is finally burned away, the mere act of McCarthy’s writing this novel seems to suggest the possibility of a nervous and careful waiting for the Logos to return.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In the morning of one of the innumerable dark days, after the rain has stopped, the man leaves the tarp tent where he and his boy have been sleeping and walks out along a ridge. There is a haze of fire stretching for miles. He smells the smoke. He wets his finger and holds it to the wind. When he rises and turns to go back, the “tarp was lit from within where the boy had wakened. Sited there in the darkness the frail blue shape of it looked like the pitch of some last venture at the edge of the world. Something all but unaccountable. And so it was” (*The Road* 41). The man still looks to the wind to tell him something. The breeze against his whetted finger may still be a sign; or, the gesture may be a futile one, an antiquated gesture from the lost world. The cold on one side of his finger and the glowing light from the blue tent on the edge of the world are all but unaccountable here. And so they are. Or, more accurately, “but” so they are. In spite of all the ashen decay, McCarthy seems to say, the signs, the suggestions of language, the golden hair of the god-like young boy, memories of places that hum with mystery, still have their being even after the world has been wiped out. “And so it was” (41). And so they are. McCarthy as prophet joins the ranks of the literary diagnostics, those artists who in the words of Walker Percy are like “the canary lowered into the mine shaft to test the air, [who] has caught a whiff of something lethal” (*Lost in the Cosmos* 120). Percy calls the artist the “suffering servant of the age, who, through his own transcendence and his naming of the predicaments of the self, becomes rescuer and savior not merely to his fellow artists but to his

fellow sufferers. Like the scientists, he transcends in his use of signs. Unlike the scientists, he speaks not merely to a small community of fellow artists but to the world of men who understand him” (119).

Through McCarthy’s Appalachian novels, the whiff of something lethal is a pungent one. But the deadly fumes are not the “*seeping gases*” wafting from the unlucky sparrowhawk in John Wesley’s crinkled paper bag. Instead, they are the ionized air of the courthouse and the government tank that looks over the orchard “like a great silver ikon, fat and bald and sinister” (*The Orchard Keeper* 93). Lethal is the marketplace that draws countrymen for miles with “*the earth clinging to their shoes*” who “*sit [in it] all day like mutes*” (*Suttree* 3). I do not know whether McCarthy has transcended the spirit of his age, but in his use of signs, he does speak to “the world of men who understand him”—to whom the consumptive city and the consumer culture are “*like a camp before battle...beset by a thing unknown*” (*Suttree* 4). In *The Road*, it seems that the battle is over and the city destroyed. What to do but walk forward. Speak. Tell stories “about beauty or about goodness” (*The Road* 109). The man says as he looks to his boy, “God’s own firedrake”: “Not all dying words are true and this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground” (26) McCarthy speaks a prophetic word both of damnation and healing. He begins *The Road* in touch and breath and ends it in embrace, memory, and mystery. All the horrors in between make what is human all the more sacred and the spoken word all the more hopeful.

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