Regions of the Damned: Cormac McCarthy as Regional Writer

K. E. Wilkerson

When Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* won the National Book Award for fiction in 1992, Vereen Bell's 1988 assessment of his work as that of "our best unknown major writer" had given way to recognition of McCarthy as a writer well known. Denis Donoghue has recently assured us in *The New York Review of Books* that he is also a major one.

No critic of McCarthy's work has failed to notice that the usual garb of literary criticism cannot be made to fit it. It has invited comparison with Faulkner's but no critic has attempted to see it as primarily southern, and hence, regional. In response to Bell's critique Mark Royden Winchell in *The Southern Review* quotes with approval another critic's remark that "McCarthy writes as though Faulkner had never existed." Winchell goes on to distance McCarthy from traditional southern influences. The setting of one novel, he says, suggests Beckett as much as Faulkner and that McCarthy may owe as much to the tall tale tradition as to the Southern Renascence. Add to this the obvious theme of homelessness that pervades the novels and a narrative voice whose range transcends eras and regions, and it becomes a risky venture to claim McCarthy as a regional writer except in the trivial sense that his stories have local settings.

Yet my first response to his fiction was an inkling that I had known the folk and places described within it. I first read *Child of God*, his third novel, in which the usual prolix and archaic narrative voice sometimes breaks off and local voices comment on the deeds of the
central character. It struck me then that McCarthy's muse is the oral tradition of story
telling which tends to "elevate" the deeds of eccentric or representative individuals into
legend. This may be the tall tale tradition, but if so McCarthy raises it through his
astonishing language to something akin, however remotely, to epic, which is perhaps the
singularly great literature of region. His exact rendering of the nameless voices was the
hook that kept me reading on through all his work. I had listened, captivated, to the voices
of wintering farmers sharing similar tales around woodstoves in Ozark country stores in the
1940s, and imagined that McCarthy had like experiences growing up in the environs of
Knoxville. In addition he would have heard their urban counterparts, and perhaps
encountered some of their subjects, in pool halls and hole-in-the wall taverns while
slumming along that city's riverfront, a place where the down and out of whatever
background mingle. Suttree, his fourth novel, concerns the denizens of such a community.
In the 1970s with Knoxville become a city soon to host a World's Fair he moved to the
border country of west Texas, a region where, if anything, the tales are taller and the
weather and landscapes more fierce than those of southern Appalachia. His subsequent
novels are set in that territory.

Thus I will argue that McCarthy is a novelist of two regions and that each is significant in
itself within his fiction.² His protagonists are characteristically shorn of almost all that
humanizes them but with few exceptions their identities are regional artifacts. Most of
them are marked by their singleminded perseverance, a trait that, when described in
McCarthy's arresting language, has caused some critics to admire them even when their
deeds are most foul. The trait is indicative of something enduring in his troubled spirit, for
he uses it to leverage, with crafted rhetoric, even abhorrent characters into the legendary
and heroic. But they are ever circumscribed by particular times and places, and such
leverage is a characteristic technique—hyperbole is its major trope—of southern and
western yarnspinning. Homelessness is a pervasive theme in his fiction, but the contours of
region are made the more acute when seen through the eyes of those displaced within it.
There may be transcendent themes in the novels, but these are at best elusive prey for the
critic.³

In his first novel, The Orchard Keeper,⁴ a boy is brought early upon the verge of manhood
through confrontations with nature and interactions with characters whose roles are the
stuff of legend. The novel can be seen in part as a Bildungsroman with distinctive regional
colorings. Arthur Ownby's is the voice—sometimes wry—of the knowing mountain man
and spokesman for a way of life made impossible by intrusions of the progressive world.
Marion Sylder links the worlds of Ownby and the boy, John Wesley Rattner, to the outside
and urban environment of Knoxville by running whiskey from the mountains into the city.
The outlawed economy of bootlegging has been a rich vein for those who would extract the
ore of legend and refine it into southern fiction and class B movies about the south.

As late as the 1940s a country boy of the southern mountains would be attracted to
furrtrapping by its mystique as a form of hunting and its deceptive promise of economic gain.
Wesley thus journeys—the entire episode is italicized—into the stranger world of
Knoxville to collect a dollar as bounty for a dead hawk he has found and to spend it for
traps. He establishes his trapline and falls in with two boys of like bent. Tales are told of
trapping a bullfrog “by the ass,” of killing a skunk, and dynamiting birds.

You could see pieces of em strung all out in the yard and hanging off
the trees. And feathers. God, I never seen the like of feathers. They
was still fallin next mornin. (p. 141).

The boys visit “Uncle Ather” Ownby whom they prompt to tell his panther stories. They
listen expectantly as the old man answers their query about “a painter [that] was hollerin
around here one time.” He remembers the talk and had heard the sounds. But he
disappoints them. He had known at once that it was a “hoot-owl.” Then he tells how he
had played along with men at the store who were so frightened that the “hackles” rose on
their necks. The men warn him not to walk back home with a “wampus cat” screeching.
He claims to have seen it but isn’t afraid because it’s only a cub, not “a whole lot bigger’n
Scout here.” His coon dog weighed “bettern’a hunderd pound.” He “figured to give em
somethin to think about while they walked home” (pp. 149–50).

Thus mountain humor, thus the mystique of deeply wooded hills, and the comic, careless
attitude toward doing violence to nature. One can imagine the men at the store reacting to
the old man’s story after he leaves. He would have enhanced his legend.

McCarthy elevates him, however ironically, to heroic stature. Despite his more than eighty
years he violently protests the destructive encroachment of the outside upon his place. He
is deeply disturbed by the presence of a government tank at which he gazes with “infinite
contempt.” It looms above the tortured ground “like a great silver ikon, fat and bald and
sinister.” He blasts his signature, a large crude X, into its side with his shotgun thus
precipitating conflict with the government. (pp. 93, 97). Believable enough. But McCarthy
moves his character and powers of endurance beyond the pale of realism.11

This starts when he is assaulted by weather and landscape which McCarthy invests with
mythic images.12 Uncle Ather is past his eightyeth year but caught out in the woods he is seen
hopping and dancing wildly among the maelstrom of riotous greenery
like some rain sprite, burned out of the near-darkness in antic
configuration against the quick bloom of the lightning. As he passed it
thus a barren chestnut silver under the sluice of rain erupted to the
heart and spewed out sawdust and scorched mice upon him. A slab fell
away with a long hiss like a burning mast tilting seaward. He is down.
A clash of shields rings and Valkyrie descend with cat's cries to bear
him away. (p. 172)

After Wesley and Sylder are described contending with the rain the old man awakens with
grass in his mouth, the rain still falling. He sits up and peers about like Odysseus awaking
on a stranger shore.

We must suppose that he gets up and returns home for in the next chapter we find him
there holding off six lawmen and wounding two of them with his shotgun while he calmly
rolls and smokes a cigarette. (pp. 185–87). After they retreat he stashes his belongings on a
sleigh that he harnesses to himself, and he leaves with his dog. It is raining again. The inept
lawmen return with teargas bombs only to wound one of their own as they storm the house
from three sides. "'Got away,'' one remarks to the sheriff. 'How could he get away.' The
man asked two or three times but the Sheriff just shook his head and after that [he] didn't
ask any more" (p. 188). Ownby crosses the high mountains astonishing strangers along the
way with reports of from where and how he has come. He moves on to live for weeks in an
idyllic glade with no more shelter, one must suppose, than a lean-to, bartering for supplies
at a distant store with foraged ginseng roots. There he is arrested by a lawman who has
awaited him for a week. When Ownby and his dog are seen in the distance by the
storekeeper they look “jaunty and yet sad, like maimed soldiers returning” (p. 202). Thus
did the mountain man endure assaults of nature and man unwounded and unbowed and
without catching a cold.

Sylder, the bootlegger, is perhaps less fantastic but is in main aspect the stereotypical,
southern, whiskey-runner. He handles his car with the skill of a hollywood stunt man. The
car is made figuratively animate: parked it appeared “sleekly muscled and restless-looking
as a tethered racehorse” (p. 16). A requisite chase fills a short chapter. Sylder eludes the
law by skidding the car about in front of a store, taking out one of its windows and a corner
of its porch, then “taking a fender of the other car . . . with deliberate skill.” He lights a
cigarette and leaves singing a mountain song. (pp. 75–76). After a spectacular wreck in
which his car goes off the road into trees along a creek bank he hobbles away with the help
of Wesley who had been running his traps along the stream. Later he coolly breaks into the
house of a lawman who has insulted Wesley to bash his face with his fist. When he climbs

---

The Hudson Valley Regional Review
in bed beside his wife she can "feel him laughing silently." She tells him that he has cold
feet. He whispers to himself: "I'll be damned if I do" (pp. 167–68).

Thus, in the eyes of the boy, and in the reader's, both men are heroic. The substance and
rhetoric of legend in the southern mode is present here as in each subsequent novel.

Through Ownby McCarthy represents what another boy in his last novel declares, and
embodies in turn, as that which he loves in men: "All his reverence and all his fondness and
all the leanings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never
be otherwise."13

In *Outer Dark*14 period and region are less specifically identified than in McCarthy's other
novels. Here place and period are themselves legendary. The South of our collective
imagination is perhaps more fabled than real, especially with reference to its periods:
Antebellum, the War, Reconstruction, the New South. The novel's place names are fictive
but entirely consistent with a region southeast of Knoxville that stretches from southern
Appalachia to the Atlantic flyway and south to vast cypress swamps.15 The dangling bodies
of lynched men that decorate country roadsides conjure the period of hard times and
vigilante law which followed the departure of Federal troops at the end of Reconstruction;
the time of carpetbaggers and the original Klan. Rinthy and Culla Holme, the incestuous
siblings and point of view characters in *Outer Dark*, are not alone as their quests take them
along unfamiliar roads. An outlaw band cuts obliquely across their separate ways. Its
partners share the singular motive of survival. Culla remarks to a blind man that many
people are on the roads. "Yes, the blind man said. I pass em ever day. People goin up and
down in the world like dogs. As if they wasn't a home nowheres" (pp. 239–40).16 The
theme of the wandering outsider dependent upon homefolk is best stated by a tinker whose
motif is heard throughout the story.

I give a lifetime wanderin in a country where I was despised. . . . I give
forty years strapped in front of a cart like a mule till I couldn't stand
straight to be hanged [later he is]. I've not got soul one in this world
save a old halfcrazy sister that nobody never would have like they
never would me. I been rocked and shot at and whipped and kicked
and dogbit from one end of this state to the other and you cain't pay
that back. You ain't got nothin to pay it with.

In epic narratives—Donoghue detects the genre in McCarthy's style17—the heroes are
typically displaced far from their native lands. Culla and Rinthy are effectively in another
country as the novel begins. References are repeatedly made to Johnson County as the
place of their origin, a place known only through its reputation for otherness to those they
encounter. Their leaving was perhaps motivated by their fear of the shame that would attend the birth of their child. Their displacement has reduced their identities to kinship; thus are they dependent upon each other. But this too is effectively lost when they become separated. Culla tries to expose their infant. The tinker guesses what he has done, finds the child, and takes him as solace for his alienated condition. Thus does Culla lose her “chap.” The action of the novel is little more than Culla’s search for Rinthy and Rinthy’s for the kidnapped infant. Rinthy especially gains our sympathy through her ardent, singleminded questing.

McCarthy’s elevated style gives pause to Bell who states that “any paraphrase of [it] will seem inadequate. McCarthy’s skill as a presenter of scene . . . can cause mere discourse to seem both superfluous and inexact.” The danger here is that one is tempted to look for meaning that can be found only if one creates it. Hence Bell, following his paraphrase of a scene in which swamp peepers go quiet as Culla approaches then return to song when he has passed, writes that “Culla’s world is an eerie stasis, the people in it exhibiting only a joyless stoicism. It is a vacancy and a silence, and his wordless wandering is only an extension of it in another form.”18 He thus overlooks the exact empirical detail about the habits of frogs and provides a distorting emphasis. The novel is replete with spoken words. It features dialogue to an extent uncharacteristic of McCarthy’s work. Over and over its concern is identity. At each new encounter with locals made by the siblings along separate paths they are asked who they are, where they are from, and where they are going. These encounters, always elevated by the narrative voice, recall nothing so much as the Odyssey in which questions about identity are commonplace. Unlike Odysseus the siblings hardly know themselves who they are. This often gives rise to humor that shades from dark to black. And Culla’s inability to identify himself is often motive enough for him to be on his way. He flees for his life more than once and travels at night because it is safer; hence the darkness that sometimes surrounds him. This need not be read as metaphor as Bell reads it, for Culla is often afoot in broad daylight enmeshed in palpable light.

The humor is blackest when Culla converses with the leader of the brigands. Through a long encounter he chews a piece of meat, possibly human, that they have given him.

Where was it you was headed? the man said.

He worked the clot of meat into one cheek. I was just crossin the river, he said. I wasn’t headed no place special.

No place special.

No.
Ah, the man said.

Holme chewed. I don't believe I ever et no meat of this kind, he said.

I ain't sure I ever did either, the man said.

He stopped. You ain't et none of this? he said.

The man didn't answer for a minute. Then he said: They's different kinds.

Oh Holme said.

The one with the rifle across his squatting thighs giggled. Ain't they, he said. Shitepoke, pole . . .

The bearded one didn't say anything. He just looked at him and he hushed. (pp. 172–73).

This is, of course, a perversion of hospitality. But kindly if legally induced hospitality is shown Culla by a magistrate whose humor is less grim. Rinthy is never denied it when she asks for it. After several visits in the homes of strangers she encounters an old woman who takes her in and interrogates her about the father of her lost chap.

Your brother?

Yes mam.

And where's he at?

I don't know.

You've not lawed him?

No mam.

You ort to've

Well. He's family.

This echoes, of course, incest jokes about the South, particularly the hill country, relished by insider and outsider alike.

Through regional detail McCarthy summons a place in time and fleshes out legends about it. We view it not through the eyes of folk who attempt to ravel up the tatters of their communities, but through those of characters who wander across a human landscape
distorted by a devastating but never mentioned war. And he does it without condescension.19 His style may beget a sense of strangeness in the reader but his depiction of region is never quaint or picturesque.20 And Rinthy, ardent of heart, attains something like unto a state of grace. She is last seen as she enters the glade where her child had been sacrificed to no god and stands “cradled in a grail of jade and windy light.” She moves “in a frail agony of grace” toward the godless altar and is not seen to leave.21

Child of God begins in spring as neighbors convene on the farm of Lester Ballard to participate in its forced auction.22 Ballard threatens the auctioneer and is coldcocked with an axe. One of several locals whose voices punctuate the first half of the novel but go significantly silent in the second says that Ballard “never could hold his head right after that” (p. 9). The talker speculates that his neck may have been injured. It is more likely that he couldn’t hold his head up because he has lost his place, one of two primary sources of identity in certain areas of the South.23 The other, kinship, was lost to him when his father killed himself after his wife had run away. This we learn from another interjected narration. In late winter Lester encounters Greer, the man who had bought his farm.24 In the brief episode McCarthy makes it poignantly clear that in his own eyes his identity is entirely gone.

He lowered his head and tucked the rifle under his arm and stepped to one side to pass but the other would not have it so.

Howdy, he said.

Howdy, said Ballard.

You’re Ballard ain’t ye?

Ballard did not raise his head. He was watching the man’s shoes there in the wet leaves of the overgrown logging road. He said: No, I ain’t him, and went on. (pp. 113–14).

Later he returns to his homeplace, a dolorous cross-dresser, and attempts to kill Greer. He has taken the clothes from the bodies of women he has killed and pathetically loved. He has scalped one of them to fashion the wig he wears. Murder motivated by necrophilia is sensational. But I would agree with Bell that Ballard is to be seen as desperately trying, in his madness, to create a family. The great virtue of a dead woman/wife is that she won’t run away.25 He keeps all the bodies with him in the caves he inhabits together with stuffed animals won as prizes for marksmanship at a country fair. His longing for community is thus extravagantly rendered.
Extraordinary events are as much the province of oral talebearers as that of tabloid journalists. That Ballard would long be the subject of men's gossip need not indicate, as Bell thinks, that he "has become a part of the mythology of his region" and functions as a sort of "spirit of the place." The narrators seem constrained by facts until his marksman's skill encourages exaggeration. "I seen him shoot a spider out of a web in the top of a big red oak... and we was far from the tree as from here to the road yonder" (p. 57). The voice moves on to other tales of marksmanship and bravado thus indicating that Ballard stories have found their place in local, oral archives.

Ballard's determination and powers of endurance, like Ownby's are moved well beyond empirical constraint in the general narrative. When he fears that he will be discovered in his cave with his sordid family he moves them all to remoter caverns across a flood swollen creek. He plows into it with a great burden of gear and goes under.

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 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 wrong 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. How then is he borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him?

Why indeed? He crosses the stream not once but repeatedly until all his decaying wives are ensconced in their new abode. Absent the gods who rescued heroes in Homeric epics, Ballard must be kept afloat by rhetoric.

Despite the ghastliness of his deeds and the depth of his madness readers have been moved to admire him. Bell perhaps scores a point observing that "child of God" in some areas of the rural South refers to children who are "not right in the head." He concludes that "if Lester is in a state of grace—if such grace were in fact possible—this seems to be... what true grace would be like." A less tentative and contorted conclusion is that he is an oxymoronic hero since madness itself—something encompassed in ancient epic—can be an empowering ingredient of the heroic. Thus is Achilles sustained by his wrath. But there is also the suggestion that he is in league with nature, has become so much at one with it that the waters "decide" not to take him. The time is late winter but he seems beyond the reach of cold, and like Ownby exposure and exhaustion cause no illness. Madness, or something akin to it, is a pervasive theme in Suttree which follows Child of God in the order of publication.
Suttree diverges most from McCarthy’s usual course. It represents a community as experienced by its residents, but one set apart—alienated—from those of layered respectability around it. In it reside “thieves, derelicts, miscreants, [the list continues with nineteen additional types] . . . and other assorted and felonious debauchees” (p. 457). Suttree, a dropout from respectability, has come to reside among them. He is educated, reflective, and more than a little lost, but it is there that he finds himself, if not his permanent abode.

Suttree is a sort of Bildungsroman manque. Winchell learned that it was the first novel McCarthy started. I would agree with him that it “makes a good deal more sense if we see it as an earlier rather than a later product of [his] muse.” Many of its secondary characters are mainly stereotypical, and there are frequent lapses into sentimentality. It is prolix and rhetorical even when measured against McCarthy’s standards. In it the imposition of what William Wilson refers to as “a double vision” distorts the writing. To paraphrase Wilson, Suttree sometimes struggles to overcome his alienation in the forms of alienation. One is often tempted to see Suttree as the singular autobiographical character in McCarthy’s work. The novel ends when the community is ravaged by progress—the Interstate system ‘dozes through’—and Suttree moves on, perhaps made wiser by his tenure there. It is surely significant that the novels published later would be set in another, geographically distant, territory.

There are heroic moments for Suttree, but he achieves no heroic status in the empirical world. His character is too lived in; he has psychological depth and background that are anathema to epic. His wanderings occur mainly in his mind, but these too are attached to region. An old Geechee woman he visits tells him “you can walk . . . but you caint see” (p. 423). When she leads him by the hand he is said to look “like some medieval hero led by a small black gnome” (p. 425). Apparently spooked when the old woman casts her knowing eye upon him, he takes to the mountains equipped with “some rice and dried fruit and a fishline.” It is late October and snow is already falling at the higher elevations. He sleeps “mummied up” in a blanket. He catches no fish and his foraging yields only “a few wild chestnuts.” He moves beyond hunger and eats nothing. “Old distaff Celt’s blood in some back chamber of his brain moved him to discourse with the birches, with the oaks.” Apparitions appear. “He saw with a madman’s clarity the perishability of his flesh.” He emerges from the woods in December in North Carolina, still testy enough to complain of the food he is served in a restaurant and with strength to board a bus for Knoxville. (pp. 283–95).

Suttree roves farther into otherness by ingesting a potion prepared by the Geechee woman. He sees significant moments from his childhood as well as “what would come to be,” as he
lay in his bed "like a dead king on an altar" (pp. 424–30). Later, in delirium brought on by typhus he wanders again, this time to the gates of Hades from which the "archetypal patriarch himself" looses a "floodtide of screaming fiends." He sees "the stars go rolling down the void" and cloaked "simmering sinners" carrying "the Logos itself" through streets "while the absolute prebarbaric mathematick of the western world . . . shrouds their ragged forms in oblivion" (pp. 458–59).

Of all McCarthy's protagonists he is the most utterly adrift. After his sojourn in the mountains and following the storm-caused death of a girl he loves, he takes "to wandering aimlessly in the city" (p. 366). He who once attended the university has left a wife and child, done time in a workhouse, ceased to communicate with his natal family, and entered the ranks of the underclass. He sustains himself mainly by trotline fishing in the polluted river he dwells on in a scant houseboat. But we never learn why he has chosen to lead such a life in McAnally Flats in league with its derelicts. He has no quest unless it is to discover one.

But if he wanders in his mind he has friends enough who ardently strive against forces of the world. Suttree is often seen fighting beside them, but he falls short of their valor and watches the two chief warriors among them with open-faced admiration. Callahan, who appears to live for drink and fights, rescues Suttree and an undersized country boy from a wrathful and dangerous longtimer in the workhouse. He smiles as he slams the villain but is subdued by guards who take him to the dreaded hole. He reappears fighting in dubious battles mid-way and late in the novel. In a barfight Suttree, on the floor, sees "Callahan go by, one eye blue shiny, smiling, his teeth in a gout of blood. His busy freckled fists ferrying folks to sleep" (p. 186). His death is foreshadowed when a blind man, prompted by Suttree, feels his name graven on a tombstone, its legend down, that serves as their table in a tavern. (pp. 369–71). Following a catalogue of his further deeds Callahan meets his end "smiling and going among the tables" of a tavern. He is taken down, ironically, by a small bullet that lodges in his brain, one of the "small enigmas of time and space and death" (pp. 375–76)

Ab Jones, a gigantic black, is the other warrior. At the age of twelve when he weighed "a hunnerd and eighty pound" he'd gone on the river. At fourteen he was shot by a white man he had whipped. Someone killed the man before Jones recovered, but he is jailed and beaten with clubs, his "first acquaintance with the wrath of the path" (p. 204). Following one of his periodic stints in jail where he is again beaten, Suttree takes him to the Geechee woman before whom he stands like "a great tottering zombie." She has sewn up his larger wounds with carpet thread, and stanched lesser holes with "cataplasms of cobweb" (pp. 279–80). Like Callahan he goes down fighting. Before his last stand he is sick and helpless, but moments later, when confronted by police, he stands "erect with a strength and grace
contrived out of absolute nothingness” (p. 440). Thus again McCarthy “contrives” with absolute rhetoric.

Their warrior deeds pale in comparison with the antic ones of Harrogate, the country boy rescued by Callahan. He is a Dickensian character who will use any scheme he can contrive to get on in the city. In the most mind-boggling scene of miraculous survival that McCarthy has written “the city mouse” dynamites a wall in a sewer beneath the city that he thinks is the side of a bank vault. The blast blows him twenty feet up the tunnel into a wall, sucks him back, then forth and back repeatedly as the reverberations subside. After all is still he is “engulfed feet first in a . . . wall of sewage, a lava neap of liquid shit and soapcurd and toilet paper from a breached main.” Suttree finds him four days later thirsting for ice water and able to walk away. (pp. 269–77).

Each of Suttree’s friends is ardent of heart and determined to stay his life’s course. And each has the lineaments of urban legend. Harrogate, who, in his country days, has sexual congress with a watermelon, may have been an antic precursor of Ballard. He gives evidence against himself as one who, at the age of ten, had torched the house of an old woman. When asked if he would have done so knowing that she was inside, he says that he would. Ballard burns a house and an idiot child with it. Both endure impossible moments of adversity. Jones and Callahan, the warriors, are pale foreshadowings, as are the renegades in Outer Dark, of men to come.

Those who have followed the career of McCarthy must have been surprised by Suttree with its reflective, intelligent, central character and sentimental self-indulgence. They would have been surprised again by Blood Meridian31 which might have been written in expiation for publication of the former. It is a sort of anti-novel in its rejection of all attitudes that have traditionally informed the novelistic enterprise. It seems to say that human kind are an affront to the world. Because the central character, the kid, had shown a faint moral scruple at leaving a wounded companion behind to die and chooses not to kill the judge who seeks to kill him, he is derided by the judge who plagues his mind like a crazed and perverted conscience. At their final confrontation in a filthy outhouse the judge murders the kid who long since has become a man. We are spared the details.

The dust jacket informs us that the novel is grounded in history. Bell remarks that “we" may feel “that we are being told, for the first time, the raw, unromantic truth about both sides [Indians are seen to be as depraved as the whites] in the war for the Southwest territories.”32 It is a warrior’s tale; the courage of Jones and Callahan invests it. But such revisionist history may require revision. “Truth” in this context rings woefully false. The judge is not only beyond the pale of social arrangements as Bell acknowledges, but in some
other sphere of imagined being than that commanded by the laws of nature. Not only does he survive all adversity he does so unchanged, with no mark upon him nor sign, decades later, of having aged. After he has overseen the bloody debauches of his degenerate troop in a parody of war and emerged as the only survivor he is seen to dance. Dancing is ordinarily an expression of significant feeling, even of joy, but the judge dances at the end of the novel as perhaps would dance the denizens of Hell.

And they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces. Towering over them all is the judge [always seen as larger than life] and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat. (p. 335)

But any laughter of the judge can only be hollow because he is beyond all sentiment. He has consistently expounded for over three hundred pages a nihilistic philosophy of the meaninglessness of human endeavor and acted in keeping with it. And the narration has conspired to prove it. When the judge seems to show a tincture of sentiment for two pups he buys from a Mexican boy he coolly tosses them into a flooded stream where they disappear in the foam. (p. 192) Earlier he had kept an Apache child with him for two days, dallied on his knee, and then killed and scalped it. (pp 160, 164).

Can this be a more truthful account of the wild, wild West? Or has McCarthy's penchant for fabricating legends lifted him to another level of linguistic poetic? The novel's only strength resides in its language which is both exact and mystifying. As in all his novels he shows, as Anatole Broyard observed two decades ago, "how a good writer can make us care about a 'bad' character." 33

I would suggest that McCarthy's style in his first five novels is a hyperbolic counterpoint to their hyperbolic content. In a perceptive essay, "Folklore and Reality in the American West," Barre Toelken tells of an odd history, that of "the biggest single Indian massacre" of the West. 34 In 1937 citizens of Almo on the Utah-Idaho border erected a monument on the supposed site of the tragedy (295 emigrants were killed) in 1859 (or 1860, or 1861?). Toelken recounts the tale because no one has found any "objective corroboration of it at all." 35 He conjectures that such unproven stories maintain their "hold on people's minds" because they dramatize racial fears, project guilt, and reveal "a strong inclination to select and intensify topics which satisfy (or excite) cultural expectations as the driving forces behind such legendry." 36 He concludes that "hyperbole is the only viable language resource
to articulate the extremes of experienced or perceived reality, whether [it] is constituted of weather or fear or frustration.\textsuperscript{37}

In \textit{Blood Meridian} McCarthy achieves a sort of apotheosis of hyperbole, but he rejects both guilt and fear, however much he may arouse it in his readers. What he has not rejected is that which has compelled his stories forward all along, namely the value of striving, continuing in the teeth of nature and hostile human forces, to whatever end. For the judge that end is nothing more than honor won through survival in war, the overriding value of the first great epic work of literature in the West. Shortly before he murders him he tells the kid that

\begin{quote}
As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior’s right. (p. 331)
\end{quote}

That end is symbolized, as Bell almost says, by the scapular of dried human ears worn by Brown, one of the renegades. When Brown is hanged the kid buys it from a soldier and wears it himself. He still wears it a generation later when he is challenged by a boy on the plains to defend his account of it. The boy says that “you can buy the whole heads [of cannibals or any other kind of foreign nigger] in New Orleans.”

\begin{quote}
The man [a.k.a. the kid] sat holding the necklace in his hands. They wasnt cannibals, he said. They was Apaches. I knowed the man that docked em. Knowed him and rode with him and seen him hung. (p. 321).
\end{quote}

There’s no need to add “he proudly said.” Of course the boy must die and the kid obliges when the boy attempts to shoot him in the predawn following his challenge. “You wouldn’t of lived anyway, the man said” (p. 322).

More than any other work in McCarthy’s corpus \textit{Blood Meridian} frustrates critical expectations. Bell’s rhetoric becomes like McCarthy’s own as he attempts to salvage some particular value from the novel. It has to lift up his argument even as words enable Ballard to survive the flooded stream. “But insofar as this language is a mediation, it is of the world as well, though what it may be said to mean in conventional discourse is beyond claiming.” He goes on to reify McCarthy’s language. It is itself “a presence, and the world as it enters into language is a presence; and whatever it is that this presence may be said to be is precisely [!] what the judge and his cerebral violence have declared war upon.”\textsuperscript{18} I would settle for the simpler view that by pulling a vast array of linguistic stops McCarthy has transformed the vile into “a terrible beauty.” Ultimately this seems to be Bell’s point. At
the start of his critique he says of the villainous Brown that one can come to terms with McCarthy only if one sees him as representative and determines that he is somehow made admirable. That, of course, has been repeatedly done with reference to the West, a region known especially for the violent ways of its most memorable characters, but usually through other resources of drama than language.

In Blood Meridian McCarthy has reached highest for the sublime but has failed to grasp it. Its stylistic elevation of war invites comparison with the Iliad which also disappoints sentiments that it calls forth in us, as in Hector’s touching farewell to his family. But in rejecting all else that is human it rejects the cultural function of epic and fails like some grand and colorful blimp would fail that rejected the gas necessary to uplift it.

McCarthy has stayed on in the Southwest to write All The Pretty Horses, the first of a projected trilogy of novels to be set there. A sure sign that he has “come in from the cold,” is that his hero is a tamer of horses, and thus a human who subdues an elegant and spirited part of nature. John Grady Cole, still a schoolboy, dreams of horses and chooses a life that keeps him among them. It is their nature, unlike that of humans, to be ardent of heart. In a waking dream the old Comanche trace his horse follows connects with “the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation . . . and the young boys naked on wild horses jaunty as circus riders . . . hazing wild horses before them” (p. 5).

John Grady rides off from home sometime in the late 1940s because his mother will not stay the course her father had set for his clan. She has left her husband, a man broken by the war, sold the Grady ranch, and chosen to live in cities and act in plays. His companion is a boy much like himself and they are joined by one still younger who has no more identity than his name. Thus the novel connects with protagonists displaced by alienation or force from their homeplaces back through McCarthy’s work to John Wesley Rattner.

Some of McCarthy’s best writing is about skills and craftsmanship. His descriptions of horsebreaking and the husbandry of horses is convincing and gives pleasure even as a finely crafted saddle might please the eye of a cowboy.

[Rawlins] got the sack and hobbleropes and came up and while John Grady talked to the horse he hobbled the front legs together and then took the mecate rope and handed John Grady the sack and he held the horse while for the next quarter hour John Grady floated the sack over the animal and under it and rubbed its head with the sack and passed it across the horse’s face and ran it up and down and between the animal’s legs talking to the horse the while and rubbing against it and leaning against it. Then he got the saddle.
This simple paratactic style is biblical and appropriate to both of McCarthy's regions. Sharp, detailed descriptions of work are scattered through the novels. In Child of God a smith gives the witless Ballard a tutorial demonstration on how to dress an axehead.

The smith laid the bit on the hardy and with a sledge clipped off the flared edges. That's how we take the width down, he said. Now one more heat to make her tough.

He placed the blade in the fire and cranked the handle. We take a low heat this time, he said. Just for a minute. Just so ye can see her shine will do. There she is. (p. 73).

Through such details a place is conjured and by their precision made convincing.

In this latest work descriptions of nature continue to impress but they are now allowed to move the reader. This is done by connecting them to a subjective (and sane) human presence as in this simile that is filled with the hope of youth.

They rode not under but among [the swarming stars] and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing. (p. 30)

The youths encounter violent storms and violent men but these too connect with human choices and aspirations. The novel has from the start given assurance through familiar conventions that it is a romance. McCarthy works them like John Grady floating his sack to check the reader's fears and give assurance that the merely human hero will live and prosper.

John Grady among the horses, it turns out, is one thing; John Grady among ordinary people is quite another. McCarthy moves him not toward Homeric epic but that of Hollywood. He is more like some character played by James Dean in a movie based on a Steinbeck novel than Telemachus. We see this early on when he watches his mother's performance in a play. Her betrayal of all that is sacred to him is as total as that of the mother-cum-prostitute in East of Eden, in the eyes of her moody son. John Grady assumes an Actors' Studio posture alone in the balcony: "He sat leaning forward in the seat with his elbows on the empty seatback in front of him and his chin on his forearms." He doesn't leave with the audience: "He sat for a long time in the empty theatre and then he stood and put on his hat and went out into the cold" (p. 21).
The novel goes awry when McCarthy attempts to engender “the national in the local,” a normal ploy, according to Wilson, of novelists. In this case national has a double reference. Thus we hear romanticized accounts of Mexico's sad history and are linked to events as American as the divorce of Shirley Temple.

It would be hard to disagree with Donoghue's judgment that in turning to the romance McCarthy "writes adrift from his talent." But he is wrong to say that McCarthy cannot imagine the forms of civil life. He has done so repeatedly and represented them in convincing descriptions. These are not the forms of national life, however, but those of regions fixed in times such that even the most recent, Suttree in the early 1950s, seems remote.

Finally I would say that McCarthy's achievement is one of style. It is an original concoction of elements taken from the full range of literature in English from the Bible through Melville and Hemingway as well as Faulkner. His style transcends region as it transcends period but is suited particularly to the region of southern Appalachia that he best knows. It is perhaps least compatible with contemporary American experience.

Near the end of Suttree the eponymous character recants one thing: he had vainly said that he would confront oblivion by standing "a stone in the very void" where all would read his name. (p. 414). If language is the stone from which novelists sculpt their work it would appear that McCarthy has found a stratum within it that is incomparably hard and lustrous. From it he has carved images more durable than those fashioned by hosts of his contemporaries.

Endnotes


3. "Dream Work" (June 24, 1993), pp. 5-10.

4. But see Bell's annotated bibliography which gives a fair account of the range of critical opinion about him prior to 1988. Achievement, pp. 137-40.

5. "Inner Dark: or, The Place of Cormac McCarthy" 26 (1990), p. 294. The other is John Ditsky, also included in Bell's bibliography.

6. Ibid., pp. 297, 302.

Regions of the Damned: Cormac McCarthy as Regional Writer 27
7. Through the first five novels at least he doesn't egregiously sin against region by using it, in William Wilson's terms, "as an 'exotic' trope" to represent a larger whole. "Family Values I," The Hudson Valley Regional Review 10 (1993), p. 129.

8. The singular one that almost all critics have noticed is that of the incompatibility between the human and the natural worlds. But in All the Pretty Horses McCarthy seems to have found some resolution of this.


10. More than any other creature the panther was still the principal mythic beast of the southern mountains in the period of the novel.

11. "Beyond the pale" is an expression used by McCarthy and stands as chapter title for Bell's critique of The Orchard Keeper. Eric Auerbach's distinction between history and legend is to the point. "Their structure is different. Even where the legendary does not immediately betray itself by elements of the miraculous, by the repetition of well-known standard motives, typical patterns and themes, through neglect of clear details of time and place... It runs far too smoothly. All cross-currents, all friction, all that is casual, secondary to the main events and themes, ... which confuses the clear progress of the action and the simple orientation of the actors, has disappeared. Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1957), p. 16. There is something almost miraculous about Owby's stamina. But the concerted attention given to his progress through both civil and natural storms is structural indication of the legendary.

12. Weather combines with landscape to induce tall tales in perhaps most rural traditions of storytelling in the United States. Larry Danielson observes that "if the weather can change suddenly, and if [it] plays an important role in the regional economy, it is to be expected that people in the region follow it closely. And it is to be expected that certain kinds of weather stories will be shared over and over again and invested with meanings particular to the region." "Tornado Stories in the Breadbasket," in Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures, edited by Barbara Allen and Thomas J. Schlereth (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), p.38.


15. Winchell "surmise[s] ... that we are someplace in the rural South toward the end of the nineteenth century." "Inner Dark," p. 297.

16. McCarthy represents dialogue without quotation marks.


18. Achievement, pp. 34, 38.

19. Wilson warns that there is danger of ironic condescension when one brings assumptions and values from a wider community into accounts of regional life. "Family Values I, p. 129. But in Outer Dark McCarthy writes as an insider however displaced in time.

20. He does succumb "to the tabloid temptation to sensationalize" violence. Perhaps the most quoted passage form Outer Dark exquisitely describes the slaughter of Culla's and Rinthy's infant by the cutthroats. One of them drinks its blood. (p. 236). The quoted phrase is Wilson's, "Family Values I," p. 129.
21. Doubtless such passages have contributed to assessments of McCarthy as a writer "of religious feeling." See especially Bell's entry for Robert Coles in his bibliography, *Achievement*, p. 138.


23. In "The Genealogical Landscape," Barbara Allen discusses the southern idiomatic reference to place as "the x place" where "x" stands for a family name. Thus one might continue to say "the old Ballard place" although no Ballard continued to live there. In Sense of Place, pp. 152, 156.

24. The irony of Ballard's situation is enhanced by Greer's status as an outsider. The first narrative voice identified him as "from up in Grainger County. Not sayin' nothin' against him but he was" (p. 9).

25. Of course another is that she is cheaper. This Bell suggests when he says that Ballard's story makes a "sly allusion" to a well known limerick about a hermit who keeps a dead prostitute in his cave. *Achievement*, p. 58.

26. Ibid., p. 54.

27. Ibid., p. 68.


33. See the entry for Broyard in Bell's annotated bibliography, p. 137.

34. In Sense of Place, pp. 14–27.

35. P. 21. Massacres, or traces of them, are commonplace in *Blood Meridian*, but see especially the description of massacred pilgrims, p. 313.


37. Ibid., p. 25.

38. *Achievement*, p. 128.

39. Ibid., p. 117.

40. Donoghue says the novel "may indicate McCarthy's desire to come in out of the cold of those Tennessee mountain winters." "Dream Work," p. 10.
