DEMOCRACY, JUSTICE, AND TRAGEDY IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*

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"The essential contradiction in the human condition is that man is subject to force, and craves for justice. He is subject to necessity, and craves for the good."
—Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*

The problem of justice preoccupies Cormac McCarthy's Western novels. In *The Crossing*, for example, a group of workers harbor the wounded Boyd Parham, eventually saving the cowboy's life from a nearly lethal gunshot. When Boyd's brother, Billy, encounters this group several months later, one of the workers proclaims, "Hay justicia en el mundo," while the dejected Parham rides away to continue an ill-fated journey (318). This episode is emblematic of McCarthy's notion of justice, for it recognizes the instability of the good in a world where arbitrary violence, inequity, and meaninglessness are pervasive, while there are nonetheless compelling claims by perceptive characters who suggest that the just actually exists "en el mundo." Such a dialectic regarding the problem of justice becomes particularly acute in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* as the assassin Anton Chigurh thwarts Sheriff Ed Tom Bell's efforts to achieve the just in South Texas.[1] Focusing on this novel, I demonstrate that McCarthy's preoccupation with the problem of justice hinges on his complex relationship to Friedrich Nietzsche. Beginning with a survey of Nietzsche's critique of liberal democracies, I argue that McCarthy shares many of Nietzsche's objections to this form of "justice." McCarthy delivers such a critique through the interdependent identities of

Anton Chigurh and Sheriff Bell, depicting these figures as dual subversions of the illusory presuppositions undergirding democratic justice. However, despite his sympathies with Nietzsche, I argue finally that McCarthy rejects the German philosopher's alternative to social democracy through the retention in his novels of the religio-philosophical concept of a transcendent logos. I describe McCarthy's understanding of this logos through an appropriation of the idea of tragedy, which enables McCarthy to be sympathetic to Nietzsche's challenges without embracing his materialist and nihilistic commitments.[2] Through their mystical and non-logical experiences of this transcendent logos, McCarthy's characters are subject to the tragic tension between aspiring for justice and the absence of the good, searching for the real and misunderstanding the presence of the transcendent because of the inherent limits of their world.

This argument therefore extends the concept of tragedy beyond Aristotelian, dramatic categories into the realm of philosophy. This is in fact an extension that the young Nietzsche makes inchoately in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he explains Greek drama as an aesthetic manifestation of an underlying tragic wisdom about the world. It is therefore fitting that my comparison of McCarthy and Nietzsche in the first part of this essay is followed by my drawing distinctions between them in the second section through a common framework. In particular, I cast the mystical elements of McCarthy's later work in the same light as the tragic (or "pessimistic," as Nietzsche also says)[3] vision that governs the American author's later work. I use Plato's metaphysic as a philosophical trope that McCarthy criticizes but also as a position he relates to in specific though limited ways. In particular, McCarthy and Plato both insist that humanity may understand the transcendent only through analogy and metaphor, even if Plato is much more optimistic about the possibilities of this knowledge.

While Nietzsche is not the only thinker to envision philosophical applications of tragedy (e.g., Stanley Cavell), McCarthy's understanding of the world (and its consonance with the concept of tragedy) undoubtedly draws heavily at this point on the German philosopher. In particular, this influence is evident in the notion of "tragedy" as a specific description of epistemic contingency wherein humanity is bound to misunderstand yet compelled to know, enclosed in a world where individuals often accomplish evil even when their highest aspirations are to achieve the good. McCarthy differs from Nietzsche in his tentative suggestions regarding the real *beyond* the world, yet they both share the conviction that humanity is radically subject to the limitations of bodily life. For McCarthy, suffering and violence are therefore consequences—not definitions—of the tragic situation of his characters: the limits of the world cannot sustain either their best or worst cravings (to

borrow Weil's terminology from the epigraph), and thus the good is at best obfuscated in the world, if not at times completely constrained. Even when they crave what they perceive to be the just and the good, McCarthy's characters—and Sheriff Bell in particular—are precluded from having certainty that their pursuits are rightly oriented. This tragic situation paradoxically affirms the *possibility* of transcendent meaning, as will become clear, even though McCarthy's philosophical vision consigns those possibilities to a realm mostly obscured from humanity's volitional and epistemic grasp.

Nietzsche's Critique of Liberal Democracy

Friedrich Nietzsche's repudiation of liberal democracy and its concomitant view of justice are important to consider because this critique conspicuously informs McCarthy's work. There are obvious instances where the author interacts with the German philosopher, such as Judge Holden's Nietzschean subversion of "good" and "evil" through his assertion that the weak create these moral categories to inhibit the strong (*Blood Meridian* 250). The judge's claim is parallel to Nietzsche's famous argument regarding the "slave revolt" in morality, a historical subversion of the aristocratic moral decrees of the strong through the cunning *ressentiment* of the weak (see *On the Genealogy of Morals* I §2, 6-7). Similar corollaries appear in other works, and this parallelism in thought even leads Linda Townley Woodson to argue that the Border trilogy endorses key Nietzschean epistemological and phenomenological concepts (48). Woodson argues that McCarthy's Border fiction "instructs" the reader to have courage in the face of a dying and meaningless world—a distinctly Nietzschean prognosis for how the human animal ought to respond to the subversion of its values. Kenneth Lincoln, Vereen Bell, and Steven Shaviro similarly argue that McCarthy has Nietzschean or nihilistic commitments underlying his work (see especially Lincoln 89, Shaviro 148). McCarthy's relationship to Nietzsche is therefore a central concern in understanding the author, yet the complexity of this influence requires an account of the German philosopher's understanding of democracy in order to perceive McCarthy's sympathies as well as his nuanced differences.

Nietzsche's critique of democratic values is part of a larger exposition on the development of morality throughout European history. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche first expresses his prejudice against the Platonic and Aristotelian structures of thought, which heavily influence later European philosophy. He argues that the early Greek tragedians, in contrast, expose the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses of human existence, holding

in tension life and death, order and chaos. Yet Plato and Aristotle introduced transcendental ideals, effectively inhibiting the tragic genius that the dramatists achieved. Although *The Birth of Tragedy* evinces Nietzsche's early dependence upon the German composer Richard Wagner and the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer—a dependence that he later rejects—it also presents in an inchoate form the foundations of his later critique of democratic values in its rejection of the trascendentalizing doctrines of Plato and the European Enlightenment.[4]

In one of his last works, *The Antichrist* (1888), Nietzsche reengages his repudiation of the transcendental ideals underlying European thought. He says that modern political philosophy depends upon the belief in "the equality of souls before God" (*Antichrist* §62). Democracy, he insists, is grounded in a belief that is antithetical to and exists outside human experience or the natural (bodily) order of the world. As Lawrence Hatab observes, Nietzsche, along with Hegel, reveals the paradox underlying the Enlightenment: "it both was and was not a break with religion" (23). That is, Nietzsche recognizes that the modern European values of justice, equality, and compassion—the central Enlightenment ideals—derive from a Judeo-Christian heritage, which establishes these values based on the doctrine of a creator God. According to Nietzsche, "a divine mind had been the ultimate stable reference point for origins and for truth" (Hatab 11), yet the Enlightenment disdain for authority (see *Genealogy* II §12) and its intellectual skepticism has undermined these origins. Modern society thus has "unchained this earth from its sun," and consequently it is "straying as through an infinite nothing" (*The Gay Science* §125). Nietzsche first articulates these convictions through a madman, who berates a crowd for ignoring the consequences of a momentous death—that is, the famous proclamation that "God is dead" (§125). God's death, for Nietzsche, represents the death of transcendental ideals, and the madman's harangue in *The Gay Science* thus protests that the masses are ignorant of the death of transcendence and its consequences. Through this harangue, Nietzsche suggests that taking the Enlightenment to its conclusions ought to lead European civilization to the subversion of the same values that its modern philosophy promotes—compassion, equality, and justice. Because they are grounded in otherworldly notions (e.g., the soul, God, or heaven), Nietzsche believes that the death of the transcendental correlates to the demise of these values.

Nietzsche draws these conclusions from his well-known narrative of the rise and fall of European morality, and he characterizes the "free society" of liberal democracies as the final "degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal" through an erroneous phenomenology of the self (*Beyond Good and Evil* §203). The free subject, Nietzsche says, is merely an

instance of "the seduction of language" (*Genealogy* I §13), a sleight-of-hand in philosophy that posits an action and its consequence as two separate events (cf. *Beyond Good and Evil* §17-19). If this were the case, Nietzsche says, then "*the strong may freely choose* to be weak" and the "lambs" are able "to blame the bird of prey for simply being a bird of prey" (*Genealogy* I §13). Nietzsche thus uncovers the logic of liberalism: if individuals are able to choose freely, then their actions may be viewed as deeds, as meritorious choices. Liberal democracy depends upon individual choice, and it therefore relies heavily upon a recent development within humanity—consciousness (*Gay Science* §11). "The whole of life," he insists, "would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in a mirror. For even now, for that matter, by far the greatest portion of our life actually takes place without this mirror effect" (§354). Human beings are essentially animals oriented toward the will-to-power, not conscious minds or egos.[5] Yet liberal democracies suppress this fundamental nature. These versions of justice obfuscate the power relations governing human interactions, and democracy therefore masks the self-preservation and desire for power of the weak under the guise of being just (*Genealogy* I §13).

Nietzsche also suggests—although incompletely—that the democratic ideal of the autonomous self is disastrous in that it locates moral authority within individual interiority. He explores the problematic consequences of this liberal ideal through Zarathustra's dialogue with a "liberated" interlocutor:

> You call yourself free? Your dominant thought I want to hear, and not that you have escaped from a yoke. Are you one of those who had the *right* to escape from a yoke? There are some who threw away their last value when they threw away their servitude.
>
> Free *from* what? As if that mattered to Zarathustra! But your eyes should tell me brightly: free *for* what? (I §17)

Zarathustra suggests that autonomy from all authorities and values leads the democratic individual to aimlessness. This liberal conception provides no answer to the question, "free *for* what?" The individual is left to choose for him or herself, and Zarathustra suggests that aimless self-destruction is the inevitable consequence. The free individual becomes "a star projected into a desert space, and into the icy breath of aloneness" (I §17). The unqualified liberty of self-creation—at least for the majority of people—leads society into chaos, fragmentation, and radical despair. A democratic societal order, Nietzsche concludes, fosters a culture that has "unchained this earth from its sun" and consequently is "straying as through an infinite nothing" (*The*

Gay Science §125).[6] Therefore, in Nietzsche's view, liberal democratic justice aims at nothing and undermines everything.

The Prophet of Destruction and the Prophet of Despair

No Country for Old Men is the most political of McCarthy's novels, but it also offers in the person of Anton Chigurh one of the most vivid challenges to conventional morality and modern social structures. Ed Tom Bell's reflections and Chigurh's lawlessness uniquely broach the political in two of the concept's most important aspects: the structures of power that govern human relations (Millett 23-24) and the constitution of those arrangements into a *polis*, a society. Because the control of power and the structures of society cannot be isolated from one another, the "political" inevitably refers to both senses of the term. Thus, as Aristotle says, human beings are in fact "political animals" (*Politics* I.2), whether through their penchant for living together or, to expand the concept, through the unavoidable interests of power relations. This is an important perspective to recognize because, if Nietzsche's analysis of modern democracy's origins is correct, then liberal politics (at least in its first formulations) obfuscate the power dynamic governing human relations.

Both senses of the political are implicated in the cultural undercurrents of *No Country for Old Men*. Bell represents, on the one hand, the democratic state and its sense of civic justice. Yet, on the other hand, he also becomes disillusioned with this order, conceding that the nature of power relations obviate the efficacy of the civic justice he tries to institute. This subversion of democratic ideals begins for Bell when he encounters Anton Chigurh, the "*true and living prophet of destruction*" (*NCFOM* 4). Chigurh epitomizes the "*new kind*" of people appearing in Bell's county, signaling a change in its social and cultural composition (3). The world appears to be changing before the sheriff, and it is now full of realities that he finds difficult to comprehend. For example, Bell laments not only that "dope dealers" sell drugs to children, but also that "[s]choolkids buy it" (194). These changes unsettle Bell, and in fact the eponymous allusion to W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" undoubtedly applies to the aging sheriff: "That is no country for old men / ...An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" (1, 9-10). Bell's sense of worthlessness eventually leads him to resign from his position as sheriff, and this stepping down signals not only his personal "defeat" but also the collapse of the civic dimension of the values that he represents (*NCFOM* 306).

Before his resignation, however, Bell becomes disillusioned with his beliefs

about the democratic state's ideal of political justice. Bell's personal disillusionment runs parallel to and ultimately confirms the critique implicit in the narrative because he represents the democratic state itself, serving as its proxy through his role as sheriff. By rejecting the efficacy of his position, he also repudiates its version of justice. Bell recalls that the people of Terrell County elected him as sheriff, and he tells his wife, "*I didnt feel right takin their money*" (*NCFOM* 296). He is literally a democratic official, given authority by an electoral process to enforce county laws. These laws are one of the primary venues for achieving the state's understanding of justice, so the sheriff serves as the local means for enforcing these civic ends. But Bell is also the proxy of democratic justice through his *understanding* of his position as sheriff. He often describes his role as a shepherd-like authority, explaining his interest in Moss's safety as his own benevolent will to "look out" for a "couple of kids from my county that might be sort of involved that ought not to be" (194). He says that the citizens of his county are "People I'm supposed to be lookin after" (194). Therefore, on the most basic level, Bell represents his people as the lawful means for their protection—the means that they have chosen.

Bell's sincere concern is admirable in itself, yet, as shepherd-lawman, his role is nonetheless founded upon disingenuous grounds. He explains that his desire to enter law enforcement is twofold: "*I've thought about why it was I wanted to be a lawman. There was always some part of me that wanted to be in charge. Pretty much insisted on it. Wanted people to listen to what I had to say*" (295). Bell is motivated by a need for authority, and the power endowed upon him through the role of sheriff offers him an opportunity to stay within civically sanctioned confines but nonetheless "*be in charge.*" His desire to find this power within the structures of his community sharply contrasts with Chigurh, who operates wholly outside the law in his expressions of power. The difference between the two is significant, for Bell's democratically endowed power allows him to remain within the community, affording this lawful "*charge*" with a variety of collective advantages (295): "one is protected, looked after, in peace and trust, without a care for certain forms of harm and hostility to which the man *outside*, the 'outlaw' is exposed" (*Genealogy* II §9). Nietzsche says that the democratic community is based on a common concern for self-preservation, the herd instinct to avoid the threat of stronger wills. Bell articulates a comparable concern when he discloses, "*there was a part of me too that just wanted to pull everbody back in the boat*" (*NCFOM* 295). Bell recognizes that the "*boat,*" the collective body, provides security—a disclosure that reveals the sheriff's will-to-survive as much as his will-to-power.

The relation of Bell's reflections to Nietzsche's analysis suggests that, when cloaked in the terms of justice, the violence of penal codes and arrange-

ments of power often become sacred, particularly as they are construed as the device of a higher purpose. Bell's uneasy experience during the execution of the young murderer uncovers a similar exaltation of violence: those facilitating the execution "*pulled this curtain around the gaschamber with him in there settin slumped over and people just got up and filed out. Like out of church or something*" (63). The observers do not leave the execution in a solemn manner out of horror; instead, they view the event as a worthy act that accomplishes the just, the good, as if it fulfills a religious duty. Furthermore, they are witnesses that testify to the murderer's guilt, representing a public body that condemns the convicted. When the executioners hide the corpse behind a curtain, they dismiss the community's detritus from the public realm and remove another threat to its stability. The solemn event has thus secured democratic hegemony.

This democratic performance leads Bell to reflect on the "*old timers*," who never had to wear a gun and are thus paragons of the shepherd-lawman ideal (*NCFOM* 64). Yet this ideal is itself shrouded in skepticism, for Bell immediately recalls that there are latent problems in the sanctioned force of the sheriff: "*The opportunities for abuse are just about everwhere*" (64). He later gives the example of "*peace officers along this border getting rich off of narcotics*" (215). The juxtaposition between the "*old timers*" and the instances of abuse are "*peculiar*" to Bell, for even the good lawmen "*have pretty much the same authority as God*" while they are paradoxically "*preservin nonexistent laws*" (64). Like Bell's previous inability to explain his unease regarding the execution (63), the role of a Texas sheriff presents him with a contradiction. Those serving the state have unrestrained authority—the same as God's—and thus can use any amount of force to preserve order. Yet this order is conspicuously "*nonexistent*"—that is, without a definable system of law to determine the civic dimensions of the just—indicating that the force that serves the democratic state is displaced from any ultimate *telos* (64). Like the God-Shepherd of the Psalms, the Texas sheriff protects the herd, but he does not lead them "in right paths" because there are "*no requirements put upon*" him (Psalm 23:3, *NCFOM* 64). For this figure of democratic justice, there are, in other words, no defined "right paths."

Bell's Uncle Ellis later reinforces this aimlessness when he admits to becoming a sheriff without any reference to the causes of the justice system: "Hell, I didnt have nothin else to do. Paid about the same as cowboyin" (*NCFOM* 267). Bell's uncle admits that he would have gone into the army if he were not "too young for one war and too old for the next one" (267). Ellis's statement suggests that serving in law enforcement functions, at least for him, as a surrogate for war. This disclosure is telling, not merely because of the questionable reasons behind Ellis's vocational decisions. But it also

calls into question the assumptions undergirding the benevolent lawman, the meaning of state-sanctioned violence, for liberal democracies are ostensibly founded upon the conviction that the desire for free exchange, not the attainment of power, governs human relations. Jean-Jacques Rousseau says, for example, "War, then, is not a relation between men, but between states" (56). He even claims, "men are not naturally enemies" (55), arguing instead that war "cannot arise from mere personal relations, but only from property relations. Private wars between one man and another can exist neither in a state of nature, where there is not fixed property, nor in society, where everything is under the authority of law" (56).

Yet the rationale underlying Ellis's decision to become a sheriff, along with Bell's earlier reflections, challenges Rousseau's democratic view of the self. Ellis enlists in law enforcement because there is no war to justify enlisting in the military. His aimless life wavers between relations of violence, and he finally chooses the state-sanctioned venue. The nineteen-year-old murderer that Bell sends to the gaschamber similarly admits that "*he had been planning to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember*" (*NCFOM* 3). The young murderer's *telos* is violence, and juxtaposing Bell's uncle and this murderer suggests that Ellis's aimless wavering between law enforcement and war evokes a fundamental order of human relations that is similar to the nineteen-year-old. Perhaps this "*new kind*" is only redirecting the sublimated cultural habits of his predecessors to an end outside a collapsing authority—the democratic state itself (3). Ellis seeks state-sanctioned venues for his impulses, but both characters share an orientation toward violence that calls into question the liberal beliefs about human relations underlying the ideal of the democratic lawman.

McCarthy's characters, despite their bucolic and parochial personae, are not ignorant of the national implications that an American history of violence creates. Ellis, for example, believes that "this country has got a lot to answer for" (*NCFOM* 271), and Bell later suggests that the burgeoning violence in America is "*not even a law enforcement problem. I doubt that it ever was*" (303). Instead, he asserts that it is indicative of a larger cultural crisis: "*There's always been narcotics. But people dont just up and decide to dope themselves for no reason. By the millions*" (303). Law enforcement is only one aspect of the democratic society, and Bell believes that another dimension—the cultural underpinnings that shape public identities—is undermining his enforcement of civic laws. While the "*problem*" is more conspicuous in the area of law enforcement (303), it merely manifests a larger crisis in the democratic state. Bell realizes, in other words, that the people he is "supposed to be lookin after" are part of the problem (194). He says, "*you cant have a dope business without dopers. A lot of em are well dressed and holdin down goodpayin jobs*

too....You might even know some yourself" (304). He connects the demand for narcotics—a market that pervades the populous "*[b]y the millions*" (303)—with the increase in violence. Bell suggests that normal people who are "*well dressed and holdin down goodpayin jobs*" are thus choosing to bring in the violent forces that murder indiscriminately by purchasing narcotics from these traffickers. Through the realization that his constituents are supporting the drug trade and that even "[s]choolkids buy" narcotics (194), Bell doubts not only the possibility of accomplishing civic justice but also the ability of the democratic state to foster the good life. He says, "*People think they know what they want but they generally dont*" (91). Bell insists that the tendencies of his constituency are self-destructive, and thus the same citizens he intends to protect are undermining his pursuit of justice.

Bell's disillusionment becomes final when he realizes that justice actually depends upon violent force, not the goodness of the population. He says, "*if you got a bad enough dog in your yard people will stay out of it. And they didnt*" (*NCFOM* 299). The measure of peace, Bell concludes, is the amount of force employed to deter stronger wills. He seems to come to this conviction throughout his recollections. He says, for example, "*I think for me the worst of it is knowin that probably the only reason I'm even still alive is that they have no respect for me*" (217). Carson Wells confirms Bell's fears: he tells Moss, "I dont think of [Bell] at all. He's a redneck sheriff in a hick town in a hick county. In a hick state" (157). Therefore, Bell's retirement not only expresses his doubts about the democratic state that he represents but also concedes to the Nietzschean view that power and self-interest govern human relations—that the essence of democratic justice is only keeping stronger wills in check in order to preserve the herd's liberty. If justice depends upon "*a bad enough dog,*" human nature is more concerned with dominating others than pursuing individual freedom (299).

The version of democratic justice that undergirds the sheriff's Texas government is further interrogated through the interdependent identities of Bell and Chigurh. For example, the sheriff is "*glad*" of the fact that he has never killed anyone (*NCFOM* 64), while Chigurh is the "*prophet of destruction*" who, in substitution of his conspicuous lack of sexuality, finds pleasure in murdering his victims (Tebbetts 72). Bell cares for his people, but Chigurh dehumanizes them by performing their executions with a cattle gun. Bell is also well-acquainted with the past and discusses it often. He loves stories about the "*old timers*" (*NCFOM* 64), the early Texas sheriffs, and his single conversation with his uncle centers on family history: Ellis's regrets, his tenure as deputy, a relative named Harold who died in the first World War, the Texas Ranger Uncle Mac, and finally Bell's own experience in Korea (273-79). Yet Anton Chigurh has no past, no fingerprints. Bell cannot even

find his name: Chigurh is essentially a "*ghost*" (248).

McCarthy's device of revealing the interrelations of Chigurh and Bell's identities indicates, among other things, that human constructs (particularly regarding the just and the good) often inadvertently affirm a common vision of reality. In the case of *No Country for Old Men*, Bell understands Chigurh as the embodiment of "*another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it*," a view that he says "*has done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd come to*" (4). By exposing the parallelism of their identities, McCarthy reveals that Bell's role depends upon Chigurh. This arrangement is therefore not strictly dualistic, for the characters are not discrete from one another. Corey Messler's review of the novel in *The Memphis Flyer* asserts, "Perhaps not since Satan vs. God has the battle been so Manichean, so explicit," yet the interdependence of the two figures suggests instead that democratic justice exists because of a destructive force like Chigurh. The democratic community requires its peacekeeping force in order to keep a more powerful will at bay, and Bell's view of justice thus ironically and inadvertently affirms Chigurh's power- and violence-governed "*view of the world.*"

If this is the case, then Bell's version of justice is not actually founded upon the (illusory) ideal of the goodness of society and its fundamental convictions about individual choice. The respective principles guiding Bell and Chigurh undermine this proposition, for they evoke another interrelation that leaves the sheriff wanting. Bell says that his peacekeeping role is "*peculiar*" because there are "*no requirements in the Texas State Constitution for bein a sheriff. Not a one. There is no such thing as a county law*" (*NCFOM* 64). Bell is instead given nearly sovereign force—"*pretty much the same authority as God*" (64)—to keep people in the "*boat*," preserving the community (295). Yet this lack of determinable direction leaves the liberal democracy afloat. It introduces a state of societal disequilibrium. As Moss says, "Suppose you was someplace that you didnt know where it was. The real thing you wouldnt know was where someplace else was. Or how far it was. It wouldnt change nothin about where you was at" (226). Applied to society, Moss's reflections suggest that the liberal social order has lost not only a sense of its direction but also of its relation to reality. Like the provincial "*old people*" who frequently question Bell, the sheriff's democratic society "*dont know how [it] got where [its] at*" (304). Despite Bell's assertions that this loss of equilibrium is a recent phenomenon, the "*old people*" reveal the historical roots of a society "straying as through an infinite nothing" (*The Gay Science* §125).[7]

Anton Chigurh, in contrast, has a determinable view of an *ought* based on an *is*, to borrow the classical ethical formula. The assassin's notorious "principles" represent his understanding of an underlying logos, which, for Chigurh, is a deterministic order of material chaos, an unintelligible nexus

of cause-and-effect. Chigurh's order is a valueless realm for expressing a will-to-power and justifies his sense of administering the "luck" latent in the choices of others (as well as his own). Indeed, Chigurh believes that departing from this logos will make him "vulnerable" (*NCFOM* 259). Carson Wells explains that Chigurh's principles "transcend money or drugs or anything like that" (153), and Chigurh himself later suggests that his "one way to live" is supra-human, a mode of existence that the common populace cannot embrace (259-60). Chigurh's principles are of course multifaceted, but they ultimately depend upon a conception of an order of chance and power driving the world. Such a logos "transcends" money and drugs only in the sense that it views them merely as tools for manifesting the immanent flux of *doing* that characterizes human existence (this is akin to Nietzsche's concept of the "eternal recurrence"). Things "just are," for Chigurh—"That's the way it is" (56)—so he cannot transgress his commitments to dominate, to his inevitable *doing* (cf. 255). (However, as will be seen below, Chigurh's conception of a radically immanent logos ironically misleads him into believing that he can live above "money or drugs or anything like that" [153].)

Chigurh's discussion with Carla Jean reveals both his skepticism regarding the notion of individual uniqueness and his relativization of personal volition. Before he murders Carla Jean, they discuss her inevitable death: Chigurh says, "I see people struggle with it. The look they get. They always say the same thing," and then Carla Jean, in keeping with her murderer's assertion, says that he does not have to kill her (*NCFOM* 257). This assertion does not provide any comfort to Carla Jean, so Chigurh asks,

> So why do you say it?
> I aint never said it before.
> Any of you.
> There's just me, she said. There aint nobody else.
> Yes. Of course. (257)

Chigurh's "of course" is ironic, for he believes that the majority of human beings respond in the same way to "bad luck" (257): they view it exclusively as a consequence of their free selves, a result of their choices. Chigurh repudiates this naiveté, for it tacitly insists that a person is able to determine his or her own fate, that human beings are sovereign over their lives. Chigurh, in contrast to Carla Jean's pretensions of uniqueness and sovereignty, tells her, "None of this was your fault.... You didnt do anything. It was bad luck" (257). He suggests that human existence is subject to exterior forces, to the choices of others and the random results of chance. Everyone, for Chigurh, is subject to the (material) logos of luck and power. This is precisely why Chigurh often flips a coin to determine whether he will murder a person:

he believes that external forces inevitably impinge upon the volitional will.

Chigurh's complex philosophy further insists that the relativized human will chooses blindly within the chaotic order determining the world. He tells Carla Jean, for example, "Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased" (*NCFOM* 259). Despite the fact that he believes Carla Jean's death is "not [her] fault" (257), Chigurh maintains that human volition puts the agent on a path that does not change. Luck, for Chigurh, effectively replaces God, becoming a nexus of chaotic interconnectivity that predetermines the universe. Human beings navigate this logos, although it ultimately determines their path. As Chigurh tells Carla Jean, "I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding" (259). Her choice only manifests the chance-logic of external forces governing the world. Chigurh's philosophy therefore challenges the naiveté of a sovereign self by insisting that chance, the forces exterior to an individual will, shape all consequences, while the will only chooses blindly among those ends.

A governing logos—whether Chigurh's chaotic material order or, as I later describe McCarthy's view, a transcendent real that humanity incompletely perceives—is conspicuously absent from Bell's society. In addition to the "*nonexistent*" laws of Texas (*NCFOM* 64), Ellis says that his youth was without a logos, an order directing it (267), and similarly that God did not "come into my life" in his old age (265). Ellis speaks for others, for Bell says that many people have not had an encounter with God (283). Moss Senior similarly laments that America sent soldiers to Vietnam "*without God*" (295), and there are a variety of other complaints about the waning place of religion. Indeed, despite many critics' view that Bell is a social conservative who calls for the return of Christianity to society (Oates 44, Ellis 238), he admits that he is not a "spiritual person" (*NCFOM* 303). He often expresses his ignorance of the Bible, regarding, for example, Mammon or the Book of "Revelations" (298, 304). Bell seemingly embraces Christianity while remaining ignorant of the religion's actual content. He is therefore another example of the absence of any logos suffusing democratic society.

The crisis that Bell identifies is of course more significant than the superficial loss of religion from society—taking God "*to war*," for example (*NCFOM* 295)—or the recovery of hollow bourgeois morality. These facile proxies for a societal logos create the problems that often lead Bell to confess despairingly, "*I dont know what to make of that*" (3). Bell's inability to reflect substantially on society is indicative of a general cultural displacement. His disillusionment with democratic justice is thus only one dimension of a larger societal malaise. As W. B. Yeats describes European civilization in

the wake of World War I, "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" ("The Second Coming" 4-6). The civic *and* cultural pretensions of liberal democracies are collapsing, and Bell unwittingly chronicles the crisis. The only principles that exist in his American West are Chigurh's, and this leads Bell to his resignation. He retires from his post as sheriff because "*I'm bein asked to stand for somethin that I dont have the same belief in it I once did. Asked to believe in somethin I might not hold with the way I once did. That's the problem. I failed at it even when I did. Now I've seen it held to the light. Seen any number of believers fall away*" (*NCFOM* 296). "Things fall apart," as Yeats says ("The Second Coming" 3), and Bell cannot conceive of an alternative (at least until his final dream).

Bell's resignation completes his despairing subversion of social democracy that parallels Chigurh's own challenge. Whereas the sociopath refuses to depart from his "one way to live" (*NCFOM* 259), the sheriff finally abandons his "way" and experiences "defeat" (306). Chigurh loyally and solemnly orients his life according to his principles, yet Bell only waivers. This inversion thus fulfills Yeats's dire description, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" ("The Second Coming" 7-8). Indeed, if there is a determining order throughout Bell's reflections, it is a despairing one. He says, for example, that he lost belief in Satan as a boy, but "[*n*]*ow I'm startin to lean back the other way. He explains a lot of things that otherwise dont have no explanation*" (*NCFOM* 218). Bell is unable to stop evil, which apparently governs society, and so he abandons this losing battle in contrast to the "*prophet of destruction*," who is incessantly violent. Therefore, as the inverse of Chigurh, Bell's hopeless jeremiads and final retirement make him the prophet of despair, the harbinger of resignation.

The realities of self-interest and the exterior forces that impinge upon the sovereignty of the human will thwart Bell's commitment to justice. The liberal democratic state that sanctions his position defines his role as a protector: insofar as he keeps peace, liberal democratic justice is achieved. Yet the naiveté and banality of this view of justice is undermined by the fact that human relations are not so simple. In McCarthy's vision, human beings are political animals—they are oriented toward power and they bring this interest with them as they structure society. The democratic refusal to debate the substance of the "good life" beyond individual freedoms leaves justice without an order, a logos for the just to labor after and institute. In Bell's case, this arrangement eventually leads to the collapse of the democratic order, and competing wills-to-power fill the vacuum. Covert interests, such as the unnamed Man-Who-Hired-Wells, or chaotic dominating forces, such as Chigurh, begin to direct society. Even if Bell's Texas government is

formally democratic, he concludes that competing wills, the logoi of self-interest, are actually determining "*where we're headed*" (*NCFOM* 303).

"Hay justicia en el mundo"

McCarthy shares Nietzsche's criticism of democracy and its liberal underpinnings, yet in the remainder of this article I argue that tragedy (as a philosophical vision) allows McCarthy to retain such a critique while nonetheless affirming, along with his disinherited characters, "Hay justicia en el mundo" (*Crossing* 318). What I describe as McCarthy's tragic vision is a nuanced religio-philosophical perspective that the author formulates in response to a complex history of thought, reacting to thinkers as diverse as Jacob Boehme and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In order to provide a clear view of McCarthy's understanding of the transcendent, I compare this vision with Plato's metaphysic. I draw this comparison not to suggest that McCarthy is a Platonist or even neo-Platonic,[8] but this comparison instead reveals how the author's Nietzschean sympathies regarding humanity's contingent, continuously changing capacity for knowing determines his intimations (contrary to Nietzsche) that a transcendent real exists. I argue that such tentative occurrences of transcendence "ground justice," but by this phrase I am not envisioning the kind of "Socratism of morality" that Nietzsche attacks ("Attempt at a Self-Criticism," *Birth of Tragedy* §1). In the Platonic view, happiness and knowledge are attainable through virtue (especially wisdom and justice), such that there is a direct correspondence between epistemic possibility and virtuous living—the latter fulfills the former. In the Platonic schema, the virtues yield understanding of the real. McCarthy, in contrast, maintains that human understanding is circumscribed by contingency and the realities of an un-virtuous world, such that its epistemic possibilities are not determined by its virtue, but by its tragic situation. McCarthy's dire view—not quite agnosticism, not yet unremitting skepticism—affirms the real while avoiding the "Socratism of morality" by denying direct, lucid correspondence between transcendence and humanity's constructions of the just, the good, and the sacred. The grounds for such constructions are glimpses only of images, not revelations of reproducible realities or prudential intuitions of the real.

Many critics read McCarthy's religious and philosophical position along at least two lines of interpretation. Dana Phillips describes these as two "schools" of thought: what he calls the "Southern" school of critics, who find a commitment to transcendence in McCarthy's novels, and the "Western" interpreters, who read the author as a post-transcendent nihilist (434-36).

Such "schools" have contributed much to understanding McCarthy's philosophical commitments, yet employing the concept of tragedy to interpret the author's novels reveals that binaries, such as hope/despair or redemptive/nihilistic (as well as Phillips's alternative), fail to treat the complexity of the narratives—indeed, the complexity of the world.[9] McCarthy's tragic vision reveals that a commitment to belief in the transcendent does not (and should not) lead to the "Socratism of morality," the obfuscation of the fact that the just is circumscribed by the violence and contingency of humanity's world. McCarthy's investigation instead moderates and limits humanity's possibilities for understanding the transcendent and striving for the just.

McCarthy criticizes the crisis underpinning Bell's society and its predominant understanding of justice by revealing that the logos actually governing human relations is a chaotic "order" of violence and power, not a democratic realm of benevolence and freedom. As the epigraph from Simone Weil says, humanity's situation is thus "subject to necessity" (150), and, for McCarthy, this situation obviates the possibility that a desire for liberty defines either society or interpersonal relationships. Yet even though contingency and violence circumscribe the lives of McCarthy's characters, they nonetheless crave for the good and the just. In this tension McCarthy finds a paradox, which leads him to suggest that there is in fact a transcendent order, a logos beyond the world. The justice "en el mundo" relates to this order as a worldly construct based on visions of the transcendent, as if they were only metaphors drawn from already imperfect glimpses of the order itself.

The just is therefore not an ideal but a quality of the transcendent, the logos beyond the world. Earthly forms of the just are attempts (often radically mistaken, as in the case of democracy) to conform public and private anthropocentric realities to perceptions of the real. However, for McCarthy, human beings cannot fully know this order, and their incomplete knowledge of it derives from dreams and metaphorical stories. This is indeed the primary point of comparison with Plato, for both thinkers employ analogy and indirect language to discuss the real. Even as a blind man (who is likely an allusion to the wise Theban prophet Tiresias) tells Billy Parham, the contingent things of the world "[a]t best...are only tracings of where the real has been" (*Crossing* 294). In McCarthy's tragic vision, the real—the logos that provides meaning and order to the world—cannot inhabit or be embodied by the structures of the world. Instead, only tracings of the transcendent appear "en el mundo."

In Plato's *Republic*, metaphysical "forms" ground justice. The guide of Plato's dialogue, Socrates, offers several metaphors regarding these transcendent forms, and these descriptions provide a helpful metaphysic for juxtaposition

with McCarthy's philosophical vision, primarily in the analogous claim that the transcendent is not immediately present to humanity. Socrates provides three complex metaphors for his belief in transcendent forms: the Sun analogy (507a-509c), the Line analogy (509d-511e), and the famous Allegory of the Cave (514a-518a). These metaphors are complex, but they vividly communicate Platonic convictions about knowledge and virtue. Socrates says, "we customarily hypothesize a single form in connection with each of the many things to which we apply the same name" (596a). He insists that the epistemological grounds for justice lie in its single transcendental form. Each nameable thing—or, in Socrates's view, each thing that shares a common function and essence—has its own form, which is a transcendent reality that constitutes the essence of the thing itself. Socrates says, "we speak of beauty itself and good itself," and each thing-in-itself has "a single form" that is also its "being" (507b). There is, on the one hand, the real form of justice or beauty. These forms are "intelligible but not visible," meaning that humans may understand them by the intellect but not by their senses (507b). Yet, in the Platonic view, earthly beauty and justice are the opposite: they are "visible but not intelligible" (507b). Socrates apparently means that when humans reflect on earthly properties (i.e., trying to understand them according to the intellect and not the senses), they indirectly contemplate transcendent forms through their earthly *derivatives*. (This view is distinct from McCarthy, who depicts earthly "justice" as a human construct that does not have a derivative essence from the transcendent.) For Plato, an earthly thing is an "offspring of the good" (506e), and humans discern the good itself by contemplation.

Plato distinguishes transcendent reality from its earthly shapes, and he insists that only philosophers may know the former. Philosophers have access to these life-giving forms, such that they develop partial hypotheses regarding the nature of the good (510c). Philosopher-kings may use these hypotheses to shape the "likenesses" of these forms on earth (476c, 510d), and they thus "make or draw...shadows and reflections in water" of the forms themselves (510e). For Plato, everything apparently has a form from which it derives its nature and earthly shape (596a), and thus only those who know how to use their intellect properly—the men and women who practice the contemplative life—are able to create the things of true beauty and justice in the world because they can perceive the "intelligible but not visible" forms (507b).

The hesitant commitment to transcendence underlying McCarthy's vision suggests in a way analogous to Plato that human constructions of the just are not the things themselves. Yet McCarthy differs from Plato in that these human constructs are not even tentative creations of the real. This

distinction becomes clearer in their respective uses of analogy, metaphor, and particularly McCarthy's episodes of non-logical encounters with the transcendent. Plato relies on metaphors to describe this reality, insisting that such venues for intuiting the real are not the things themselves. "Sight," Socrates explains, "isn't the sun" (508a). Yet, for McCarthy, rationality is a human construction that further problematizes "sight" of the transcendent—the real that exists beyond the world of language and contingency. The transcendent itself exists beyond the anthropocentric orders brought to the world "like a string in a maze" (*Blood Meridian* 245). Dreams, visions, stories, and metaphors are therefore necessary to discern the real, even though these moments of transcendence are not "the sun" (Plato, *Republic* 508a), because they are less constrained by the limits of the world. Such encounters thus offer glimpses of the real and sparks of illumination.

McCarthy's hesitant commitment to the transcendent further differs from Plato's metaphysic in that, for the Greek philosopher, transcendent reality encompasses earthly existence, such that the real provides the earthly order with a transcendent inner form. McCarthy, in contrast, suggests that the consonance between the earthly and the transcendent is not one of mirror images or inner forms, but the world instead finds its "meaning" (insofar as it has any) in the real, much like a metaphor finds its meaning in relation to its object of comparison. The constructs of the world therefore cannot be the "truth" itself, if the transcendent may be thus described. Furthermore, humans are even at times drastically wrong in their attempts to explain and express the transcendent that is inchoately and sporadically present to their world. One of the most vivid but enigmatic instances of this perspective appears in the unnamed traveler's story in *Cities of the Plain*. The traveler recalls a convoluted dream to Billy, and in this dream he sees a man who is also dreaming. Billy responds to this dream-within-a-dream with skepticism, and he and the traveler debate whether this dream-man's vision is "real" (284). The unnamed traveler protests (to Billy's consternation) that the man exists outside his mind, even outside the dream-world, and he thus evokes a "history [that] is the same as yours or mine. That is the stuff he is made of" (285). The traveler argues that there is a ground reality that provides the story even for dream characters, a narrative to which other stories and dreams only vaguely allude.

The traveler's claim recalls the discussion in *The Crossing* between Billy and the priest of Huisiachepic, who says, "all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one" (*Crossing* 143). Unlike Plato, the non-logical encounters with the transcendent in McCarthy's novels do not provide a clearer understanding of that reality. In fact, due to the contingent nature of their knowledge, such experiences often create more obscurity than wisdom about the nature

of the real. McCarthy's vision of the world, as Dianne Luce says, is thus "a matrix of intersecting stories, partial or complete, often competing, with varying relationships to truth..." ("The World as Tale" 196). For McCarthy, human narration—indeed, each human life—is a tentative participation in and partial understanding of "truth, ultimate essence, the sacred heart of things that inspires reverence" (208). But because such encounters are only "tracings" (*Crossing* 294), they inevitably engender confusion and at best only facilitate limited expressions of the transcendent. McCarthy provides the contours of what this logos is *like* through tales, dreams, and metaphors, but he never suggests what it *is*.

Thus, as I suggested above, McCarthy's view of the way in which human beings perceive the logos is quite distinct from Plato, for the author is less optimistic about the degree to which humans may understand the transcendent. The priest of Huisiachepic articulates this component of humanity's situation when he insists, "This is the hard lesson. Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised. Because the seams are hid from us, you see. The joinery. The way in which the world is made. We have no way to know what could be taken away" (*Crossing* 143). There is an obscure interconnectivity within the transcendent logos that humanity perceives as chaos, as "joinery" that is impenetrably convoluted. McCarthy narrates a world that is in fact governed by an order, woven together with "seams" (143), but this logos is obscure and thus ironically furthers the problematic presence (or absence) of the good in the world.

McCarthy's well-known interest in chaos theory contributes to his skeptical view of the transcendent, for this theory illustrates the mysterious as well as revelatory dimensions regarding humanity's relation to the world and thus the language that it uses to pursue the real. The gypsy, who tells Billy a series of spurious tales in *The Crossing*, describes the contingent possibilities that obscure humanity's understanding of this logos. The gypsy surmises,

> if a dream can tell the future it can also thwart that future. For God will not permit that we shall know what is to come. He is bound to no one that the world unfold just so upon its course and those who by some sorcery or by some dream might come to pierce the veil that lies so darkly over all that is before them may serve by just that vision to cause that God should wrench the world from its heading and set it upon another course altogether and then where stands the sorcerer? (407)

While the gypsy's view of the transcendent contradicts other characters' statements, he expresses the chaotic dimension of McCarthy's sense that humanity experiences the real in ways that thwart, not enlighten, their understanding. Human beings cannot know the logos completely, for a "veil lies so darkly over all" (407). Even if they do perceive parts of the real, this

perception may lead to chaotic error, a change that alters their path.

In addition to revealing the chaotic nature of knowing the logos, the gypsy's open view of a dark God also begs the question of whether McCarthy understands the transcendent to be a benevolent and sentient force. When asked in his only televised interview about his beliefs regarding the divine, McCarthy responded, "it depends on which day you ask me" (Winfrey). He explains that it is not necessary to understand a determinable divine character—that is, "who or what God is"—in order "to pray." The context of his disclosure is a discussion on luck and "blessing," and the author explains that he is not "superstitious" about why good things have happened in his personal life. He does not dismiss faith in God, although he seems hesitant to make definitive statements about the divine. While these answers are only partial disclosures (in response to perfunctory questions), they illustrate that the author's vision of the world affirms that the transcendent is apparently impartial. "Good things" do not equate to God's blessing but only an impartial series of chance events (Winfrey). The material order of the world is not directly connected to the transcendent one beyond it. Like the "right and godmade sun" that rises at the end of *The Crossing*, visions of the transcendent in McCarthy's novels suggest that the real is an impassable, indiscriminate order (*Crossing* 426). It rises "for all and without distinction" (426), being distinguished from the world, which is subject not only to its own tragic limits but also to impartial chaos. McCarthy's characters therefore live in a world where a coin can become the instrument of their destruction, but, as the Dueña Alfonsa says, "the coiner cannot" be "flattered or reasoned with" (*All the Pretty Horses* 231).

McCarthy's understanding of the real is finally distinct from Platonic realism in the sense that the author associates transcendent reality with tragedy, not philosophy. Plato argues that philosophers are the only ones who have access to transcendental forms through the rigorous training of their intellects, and thus the good—the real beyond the world—is "intelligible" (509d). He further insists that these forms are not only discernable through the intellect, but also they are definite, having concrete ontologies outside the present world (see Plato, *Euthyphro* 6d-e). Thus, for Plato, these essential forms may be defined and even understood by philosophers because of their relationship to wisdom. That Plato conspicuously associates forms with wisdom reveals his presupposition that the essence of the world is its *sophia*. McCarthy's reading of the world, in contrast, most often articulates the transcendent through the dreams and stories of those who have experienced loss, tragedy, and disinheritance. The Dueña Alfonsa's understanding of the world avowedly derives from her story of the Madero brothers and specifically the death of her lover, Gustavo (*All the Pretty Horses* 237). The

homeless narrator at the end of *The Cities of the Plain* articulates a dream-within-a-dream, and the gypsy in *The Crossing* is similarly accustomed to penury and dislocation. These characters' stories suggest that McCarthy associates encounters with the transcendent with experiences of personal tragedy.[10] McCarthy's vision thus insists that the disinherited validate the existence of the good and the just: what Nietzsche perceives as spirituality serving the causes of *ressentiment*, McCarthy describes (at least in certain cases) as tragic wisdom about what lies beyond the world and fails to be understood by it.

McCarthy's philosophical vision also recalls certain aspects of Chigurh's "*view of the world*" (*NCFOM* 4), although McCarthy undoubtedly interrogates the "principles" that the prophet of destruction follows (153). In particular, Chigurh's view depends upon principles that he believes enable him to transcend common human experience, much like Nietzsche believes that the *Übermensch* can rise above and dominate a contingent world. Speaking of himself, Chigurh tells Carla Jean, "Most people dont believe that there can be such a person" (260). Chigurh is a "*ghost*" who does not leave behind fingerprints (248). The only sign of his existence is the destruction left in his wake. Indeed, as Tebbetts observes in his juxtaposition of Chigurh with Faulkner's Popeye in *Sanctuary*, "Chigurh shows no interest in women, no sexual interest at all throughout the novel" (72). This lack of sexual interest renders Chigurh "impotent" in the sense that he is "uninterested or incapable of using sexual expression as a means of relating to and bonding with other human beings" (73). Violence and relations of power are his only outlets for pleasure, but this ironically leaves both Chigurh and Popeye "locked into themselves" (73). In his lifestyle oriented to becoming supra-human, Chigurh essentially strives to become other-than-human: he lacks "an essential quality distinguishing human life" (74).

While Chigurh correctly relativizes the human will to chance, he neglects to relativize his own identity to the human predicament. Chigurh's adherence to supra-human principles is thus distinct from McCarthy's depiction of humanity's situation because every human being in McCarthy's novel lives within a world circumscribed by the limits of contingency and the painful, tragic absence of the good. To be human, for McCarthy, is to suffer this absence, whether in bodily, ethical, or epistemic form. There are no possibilities for being anything other than human. The failure of Chigurh's supra-human aspirations becomes apparent in his final appearances during a car wreck, which occurs after he murders Carla Jean. He even has principles for such an occurrence: "Chigurh never wore a seatbelt driving in the city because of just such hazards" (*NCFOM* 261). Despite his cunning, Chigurh nonetheless leaves the accident with a broken arm and ribs as well

as deep cuts in his head and legs. These injuries separate Chigurh from his gun, which David DeMarco and his friend later sell. This impairment subjects him to the contingency of human relations. He needs the shirt off DeMarco's back in order to create a sling for his arm and bandages for the cuts. He cannot *take*. In the least, Chigurh tries to locate the exchange on a purely economical level by paying DeMarco one hundred dollars, and in fact this appears initially successful. DeMarco later refuses to provide Bell with a description of Chigurh (289-90), and Bell remains uncertain about whether "*he's a man*" or something more (282).

Yet through the accident Chigurh is unwillingly removed from a realm of pure *doing* and enters the realm of human exchange. He not only bleeds—an indication that, contrary to Bell's doubts, he is in fact only a man (*NCFOM* 282)—but Chigurh also becomes subject to the human predicament of being "vulnerable" to contingency, the state he purports to avoid by following his principles (259). Chigurh refuses to "second say the world" by departing from the decisions of chance, yet he also strives to live a life that transcends the possibilities of "[m]ost people" (260). The car accident thus challenges Chigurh's supra-human lifestyle, although this event is not definitive, for the assassin's death or capture would undermine the tragic situation that even the just suffers from human limitations in the world. If Bell were to arrest Chigurh, it would compromise the subversion of the sheriff's democratic view of justice. Instead, Chigurh leaves wounded, bound to contingency, and subject to human relations while still escaping the reach of the just. This, for McCarthy, demonstrates that the consequences human beings suffer are never commensurate with their virtuous or malevolent behavior. The present world is instead unjust, and Anton's supra-human principles devolve into grotesque dehumanization, not transcendence.

McCarthy's vision, in contrast to Chigurh's, retains the possibilities of the good, the just, and the real by making them tragically human. McCarthy's vision admittedly relativizes such concepts by depicting them as anthropocentric orders, and thus the transcendent lies beyond the limits of the world. For McCarthy, the human situation can make no pretenses to represent a universal rationality or moral order. Human beings simply cannot conform the world to the transcendent that they incompletely perceive. Yet, for McCarthy, this obscurity does not correspond to despair or an underlying nothingness: the existence of the real makes contingent expressions of justice possible, albeit extremely difficult to achieve because the character of the good is hidden from humanity. Again, as in the case of democracy, humanity will inevitably misconstrue the constitution of the good.

Bell's final vision of his father illustrates McCarthy's commitment to the pursuit of the good in the midst of inevitable chaos and tragedy. The sheriff's

dream preserves him from settling conclusively into his role as the prophet of despair. He dreams that he and his father are riding through a pass in the mountains. Bell's father rides beyond him "*and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it*" (*NCFOM* 309). Bell's dream overtly alludes to the Prometheus myth—a significant subtext in *The Road*—but this vision provides a unique turn on the bearer of the human spark. Instead of being a demigod or even Bell's progeny, the bearer is a figure of the past. Bell continues, "*And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up*" (309). The dream is a poignant reversal of the relationship to the past in McCarthy's earlier novels (e.g., Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*). Instead of eliding prior traditions, Bell encounters hope for finding the spark, the contingent expression of the logos, by following his father into the darkness. Unlike the *ignis fatuus* of *Blood Meridian*, this dream-encounter does not offer "fraudulent destinies" (*Blood Meridian* 120). It is instead a legitimate fire, one that illuminates a path to the good life. Indeed, Bell describes it as "[*a*]*bout the color of the moon*" (*NCFOM* 309), comparing it to the satellite that illuminates the night by reflecting in lesser degree a true fire, the sun itself. Bell's vision, although not fully comprehending the real, suggests that such an encounter causes him to "*w*[*a*]*ke up*," to move beyond his despair by glimpsing a reflection of the transcendent.

The conclusion to *No Country for Old Men* also echoes Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium." The novel takes its title from the poem's early despondency, but neither Yeats nor McCarthy's work finally affirm that "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" (9-10). In a subtle instance of intertextual metalepsis,[11] Bell's dream also signals the hope "Of what is past, or passing, or to come" ("Sailing" 32). Facing the world's chaos and violence requires justice—a distinctly human disposition to pursue the good in the face of its tragic absence. Bell encounters the possibility of the just life through the promise of a fire that is paradoxically found in the past, a reflection of reality encountered "*somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold*" (*NCFOM* 309). Bell's vision thus suggests that the good life lies on a dark path through an inevitably tragic world.

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NOTES

1. Subsequent references to *No Country for Old Men* will be cited parenthetically as *NCFOM*.

2. To be fair, Nietzsche says that many of his opponents—especially Christian theologians—are "nihilists" because of what he perceives to be their denial of the body and the world. Therefore, to describe Nietzsche as a "nihilist" reveals an interpretation of his philosophy that he would reject. Yet the descriptor of nihilism is important not only because it offers a perspective that may be juxtaposed with McCarthy's complex reading of the world, but also because this term features centrally in the critical work on the author (e.g., Vereen Bell's "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy").

3. Regarding the important connection between philosophical pessimism (e.g., Schopenhauer) and tragedy, see Joshua Foa Dienstag's excellent chapter in *Rethinking Tragedy*.

4. Nietzsche later collapses various ethical positions under the critique of "transcendentalizing doctrines," dismissing, for example, "feminism, which likes to go by the name of 'Idealism'" (*Genealogy* III §19). He insists that feminism, Marxism, Christianity, liberalism, and (neo-)Platonism all commit this error.

5. Nietzsche's totalizing view of the will-to-power is a "grand narrative," as Jean-François Lyotard describes it (*The Postmodern Condition*, esp. 60-67). Nietzsche even describes this force as the "essence of life" (*Genealogy* II §12). It is ironic that Nietzsche's analysis is, at least in the terms of Lyotard's argument, redolent of modernity. Yet it is important to note that Lyotard's view of modernity is not coterminous with Nietzsche's, for the latter does not undermine narratives of authority and power shaping society (and indeed seems suspicious that humans can exist without them). Instead, Nietzsche observes the "true" undercurrent among all the other competing descriptions of civilization's origins. Therefore, insofar as the will-to-power serves as the force underlying and directing human history, Nietzsche's view is clearly an example of Lyotard's "grand narrative," a totalizing view that explains history. While Hatab argues that Nietzsche's perspectivism subverts "the hope that thought can be governed by some unifying metanarrative" (161), Nietzsche grounds his epistemology in the will-to-power, in the form-giving capacity of force (e.g., *Will to Power* II §461, *Genealogy* II §11, *Beyond Good and Evil* §257). He is therefore best viewed as both a product and critic of modernity.

6. Nietzsche's conclusions regarding the nihilistic possibilities of democracy conflict with the popular misunderstanding that he promotes unqualified nihilism. In fact, Nietzsche's views of this term are quite complex. He argues—at least in most cases—that nihilism is only one necessary step in humanity's development. He looks forward to a time beyond nihilism, for a "man of the future, who will redeem us as much from the previous ideal [i.e., slave morality] as from *what was bound to grow out of it*, from the great disgust, from the will to nothingness, from nihilism, this midday stroke of the bell...this Antichristian and Antinihilist, this conqueror of God and of nothingness—*he must come one day*..." (*Genealogy* II §24).

7. This loss of equilibrium features centrally in *The Road*—McCarthy's post-apocalyptic reflections on a world that has destroyed itself. Like the society that has shaped him, the father often experiences the disorientation of the vestibular nerve in his inner ear (15, 98). This disorientation of up and down, left and right, mirrors the world's moral disequilibrium, as McCarthy explains in his only televised interview (Winfrey).

8. The central critical work on McCarthy's relationship to Plato and neo-Platonic philosophy is Dianne C. Luce's *Reading the World* (see also Juge's essay). Luce argues that McCarthy's early work—beginning particularly with *Child of God* and his subsequent Tennessee novels—employs Platonic myths to create tension with the violent, isolated, and valueless world of his characters. My reading of McCarthy's distinction from Plato deals with different

novels and therefore does not contend with this perceptive work.

9. The division into "schools" of McCarthy criticism is obviously simplistic. As a representative of the so-called "Southern" school, Edwin Arnold says that the nihilistic forces in McCarthy's work evoke the need for a moral order and point toward "the possibility of grace and redemption" (31). Steven Frye, while sharing sympathies with the "Southern" school, claims that characters orient their lives toward the just and the good by grounding their actions in brotherhood. Phillips understands Vereen Bell and Steven Shaviro as the primary proponents of the (early) "Western" vein of interpretation, and these critics, too, differ from one another. Phillips admits that these categories are simplistic, and he even participates in what I consider a third critical view, which is the insistence that McCarthy's work is non-moral (neither nihilistic nor concerned with an ethical world). Despite the fact that the nihilistic/redemptive binary is too simplistic, it provides a framework to explain what I call McCarthy's tragic vision, which holds in tension (and interdependence) the realities of meaninglessness with the author's tentative commitments that the transcendent broaches the limits of humanity's world.

10. This is not to say that a series of *individual tragedies* constitutes McCarthy's reading of the world, nor does "tragedy" in all cases refer to suffering, for I have also described McCarthy's understanding of human contingency and the ubiquitous inability to achieve the good as tragic. These individual tragedies of suffering and the local obfuscation of the good only enables particular experiences of the transcendent. Indeed, such individual instances become *meaningful* (as opposed to meaningless) only in a world where the absence of the good and the limits of humanity are seen to be both tragic and pervasive.

11. The narrative device of metalepsis is notoriously misunderstood and misused. In most cases literary critics use it to refer to metonymic references that have their primary significance in what is only remotely associated with the metonymic term itself. I employ "metalepsis" to describe a literary allusion that links McCarthy's text to another source, particularly when the significance of the allusion lies in what is left unstated or directly referenced.

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