

Victims of Circumstance: Determinism in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy

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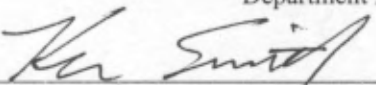
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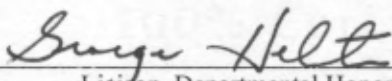
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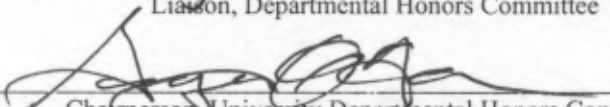

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American novelist Cormac McCarthy is reclusive, preferring to let his works speak for themselves. He has, however, granted a single important interview over the course of his career. In 1992, with *All the Pretty Horses* about to be published, his publisher convinced him to speak with the *New York Times*. In this interview McCarthy only briefly discusses his views on literature and literary theory; what he says, however, is highly important in understanding his ideas about literature. He comments that the works of Henry James and Marcel Proust are not “true literature” (quoted in Woodward). True literature for McCarthy must deal with matters of “life and death”¹ (ibid.). The social commentary and cultural issues to be found in the works of James are not, to McCarthy’s thinking, indicative of the more important, primal forces at work in human existence.

That his own works are concerned with these primal, life and death forces is indubitable. From the retrieval of a corpse from the Tennessee River in the opening passages of *Suttree* and the necrophilic, murderous “hero” of *Child of God*, to the apocalyptic violence and gore that permeate *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy’s novels are consistently and overwhelmingly concerned with death and the end of being. More importantly, they deal with death as it relates to life, how the individual deals with the death that surrounds him or (in the rare instance) her. McCarthy’s characters are

¹ The idea that the proper subject matter of literature can be thus summed up is rather melodramatic and simplistic. One assumes that McCarthy, not being accustomed to interviews and more likely than not annoyed at giving one, is only half-serious in giving this definition. However, he almost certainly believes a more complex version of this maxim, and this is apparent in the very different nature of his works from those he is criticizing.

often murderers, witnesses to massive slaughter, involved in situations requiring them to kill in order to survive, or any combination of these. These characters must maintain themselves in, as John Grammer refers to it, “a dialogue with death” (41), one in which to abstain from participation is to accept destruction. In its most horrific form, such as in *Blood Meridian*, this dialogue takes the form of mass murder, in which the individual’s being is affirmed by the destruction of others; in its least terrifying form McCarthy posits it as the simple struggle to survive in a violent world.

Reflecting the real world, in the worlds of McCarthy’s fiction death is ultimately inevitable. Grammer declares that the most positive statement one finds in McCarthy’s works is when a character claims that “Suttree aint dead” (*S* 420)²; Grammer adds “yet” (41). There is never any question that while Suttree has survived the duration of the novel, he will die. He has merely avoided death until the point at which the narrator concludes the tale. This inevitability is highly important in McCarthy’s works as it naturally leads to questions concerning how the individual deals with death. Essentially, this can be boiled down to a question that humans have been attempting to answer for millennia: what degree of control does the individual have over the events of his or her life and eventual death? McCarthy is continually exploring this question, and this investigation results in the thematic importance of fate and causative forces in his novels. These similar notions in their most absolute forms represent the complete dominion of impersonal, external forces over the life,

² In citing McCarthy’s works the following scheme will be used: *Outer Dark*=*OD*; *Child of God*=*CG*; *Suttree*=*S*; *Blood Meridian*=*BM*; *All the Pretty Horses*=*APH*; *The Crossing*=*C*; and *Cities of the Plain*=*CP*. Also, in all quotations I have remained true to both the incorrect grammar of McCarthy’s dialogue and his sparse use of punctuation.

and consequentially death, of the individual. They are highly important insofar as they represent the degrees of control that the characters in McCarthy's novels possess over their lives. Thus, in *All the Pretty Horses*, one finds a discussion of the infinite regression of the causes determining the results of a coin toss, and *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain* each contain frequent speeches on fate and the possible continuity of history. Jacqueline Scoones states of *The Border Trilogy*, "ultimately, the three novels comprise a meditation on the history of the relationship between sovereign power... and the capacities of human hearts" (132). One of the key interests of this series is the many ways in which individuals conceptualize the nature of the world they inhabit and the forces that may or may not determine that world.

However, it is dangerous to assume that the mentions of fate and causation are a tacit acceptance of their dominion by these works. Large strains of epistemological uncertainty run through McCarthy's novels, and it would be an error to hastily ascribe truth to either causation or fate. In fact, much in his writings would seem to indicate the contrary, that fate and causation are artifacts of human culture applying order where there is none to be found naturally. Despite the fact that many of his characters make stirring and complex arguments in defense of fate and/or causation, these notions are often refuted by the actions and speeches of others, and the landscapes described by and narrative techniques employed by the author.

While the issues of control, and the degrees of it, characters wield over their

lives can be found in McCarthy's earliest novels set in Tennessee,³ it is not until he moved to Texas and began to write "westerns" that the thematic dominance of these issues is fully investigated in his works. It is in *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* and *The Border Trilogy* (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*) that McCarthy's dialogue regarding these forces gains more explicit and comprehensive attention. In particular, *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses* discuss notions of absolute causation and will as agents of change in the physical world. *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, on the other hand, seem to deal almost exclusively with the questions concerning the metaphysical influence of fate (if it is to be accepted as a true and active force) on the life of the individual.

When taken as a whole, or rather when examined in chronological order, one can perceive a subtle shift in the position of McCarthy's works on this subject. *Blood Meridian*, brutal in many ways, seems to reject outright any notions of determinism, specifically causal determinism. *All the Pretty Horses* modifies this position by examining some of its implications in greater detail, while *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, on the other hand, increasingly investigate the efficacy of fatalistic views of the world. *Cities of the Plain*, in particular, flirts with the notion that the idea of fate may have some power. Taken together these novels form an ongoing process of thought on the concept of determinism. Each novel modifies and expands upon the ideas of the previous novels in such a way as to constitute an intertextual dialogue on

³ All of his first four novels are primarily set in northeastern Tennessee, except *Outer Dark*. This novel is never given an explicit geographical setting, but its landscapes bear certain similarities to Appalachia, or at least the south.

the issue. In investigating the changes that occur over the course of these novels the reader gains a clearer impression of the magnitude and complexity of these ideas and their impact on human life. Moreover, in investigating McCarthy's earliest works, one can see the beginnings of his ideas on this subject before they were cast more explicitly in his "westerns," and in doing so we can see how these ideas have been forged and reforged over the extent of McCarthy's career.

I. *BLOOD MERIDIAN: A REFUTATION OF CAUSAL DETERMINACY*

The order in creation which you see is that which you have put there.

—*Blood Meridian* 245

Passages in the opening pages of *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* reveal that determinism and free will are some of the primary issues being dealt with in this novel. The never-named main character, the kid, is born in Tennessee, but within the first four pages of the novel he moves west to Texas. He does so without any apparent purpose, but the narrator informs the reader:

Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. (*BM* 4)

While the kid's life moves along in a random manner, the narrator indicates that what is truly at stake in this work and the kid's life is the investigation of the will, and the existence or lack of external forces determining the course of worldly events. That issue is left open at the time, but in McCarthy's language one can perceive the answer that will eventually emerge. The statement that "His origins are become as remote as

his destiny” suggests two things. The first is that his destiny *qua* deterministic flow of life is a distant, unaffecting force, and the second is that the concept of a destiny is intertwined with and possibly a product of his origins and society. The suggestion is that deterministic models of reality may be the result of human social patterns that create the notion that life is necessarily determined. This would explain why the kid must move west to “terrains so wild and barbarous.” It is there that he joins a murderous group of mid-nineteenth century scalp hunters led by the historical figures of John Joel Glanton and Judge Holden.⁴ If the area they traverse were not already “wild and barbarous,” then the savage, intense violence they wreak across the region would leave it that way. Only in this environment can the kid escape those social illusions, and it is in these terrains that McCarthy’s novel refutes the existence of absolute determinism, and more specifically causal determinism.⁵

An appropriate beginning to the discussion of *Blood Meridian*’s refutation of causal links may be found in the end of the novel. The epilogue reveals the key to understanding the novel’s view of causal determinacy. In this scene a man strikes holes into the plain, and others follow him:

they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it... (*BM* 337)

⁴ Glanton was certainly a real figure and is well documented, but the judge only appears in one historical document, Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confession*, and there is debate over the reality of his existence.

⁵ A statement by modernist philosopher Baruch Spinoza should clarify what is here meant by causal determinism, as opposed to free will; “In the Mind there is no absolute, or free, will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity” (Spinoza 547).

That each hole is caused by its predecessor is absurd, and the implication is that the very notion of causation is a human invention meant to provide some grounding, “a principle” in the world. That this scene is a denial of causal forces is further established by the similarity the passage bears to similar philosophical tenets held by empiricist David Hume. He states:

Our idea, therefore, of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. (82)

The epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, like Hume, denies the existence of absolute causation, placing it in the realm of incorrect human inference. Individuals assume the connection between two instances based solely on temporal/spatial relationships; simplified, this boils down to the logical fallacy: *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Contrary to this opinion, Hume suggests the possibility that “All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them” (74), and the structure, landscapes, and voices of *Blood Meridian* bear out this view.

The strongest explicit support of this view in the work is the monstrous figure of Judge Holden. Arguably the most important and certainly the dominant figure of the novel, the judge is second-in-command of Glanton’s scalp hunting gang (although in reality he exerts a greater influence than Glanton). He is supernaturally depicted as huge, hairless, and as ageless as he is amoral. He is a fiendish character who expounds at length on the physics and metaphysics of life and often echoes the

sentiments noted above. “The truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is... a fevered dream... bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent” (*BM* 245). The judge posits a world in which all things are possible. The customary conjunction of events discussed by Hume leads to what the judge refers to as the world being “bled... of its strangeness.” This is not a world in which causal determinacy has a place or power. All observable phenomena are the confluence of will and random events. The judge furthers this by stating, “The order in creation which you see is that which you have put there” (*BM* 245). Just as those following the post holes in the epilogue have assumed the causal relationship between holes, so too does man assume that ordered relationships exist in the world based solely on the perceived conjunction of events occurring in a sequence. Moreover, this claim, that man forces order upon nature, is important because it anticipates almost identical sentiments that McCarthy expands upon in *The Border Trilogy*.

The judge’s denial of order indicates that both a lack of determinacy and a total freedom of will are operative in the novel. Judge Holden’s affirmation of this can be seen in his response to Tobin’s statement that “The lad is a free agent”; Holden replies, “Quite so” (*BM* 284). It is a simple statement, but one laced with the judge’s philosophical principles and highly associated with his antagonism of the kid. The kid, like all humans in this world, is an individual will capable of acting on the world; he is free. However, the judge’s antagonism is always phrased in terms of the kid’s

reluctance to exercise his will. His reluctance earns him the enmity of the judge and will lead to his death, but the judge states, “Yet even so you could have changed it all” (*BM* 307). Despite his reluctance, the kid is always free to change, not just anything, but “all.” The kid’s freedom of will is absolutely unrestricted according to the judge, who suggests that the kid could end his antagonism at any time if he would only willfully choose to do so. It is by his refusal of will that he earns the enmity of Holden.

One must be careful, however, in accepting the ideas of the judge as representative of the novel’s perspective on these matters. There is much critical debate over this issue. Vereen Bell finds his arguments to be “sadly persuasive” (121), while Edwin T. Arnold disagrees, privileging another, less important character’s voice instead. He states, “Some readers assume the judge speaks for McCarthy himself, but Tobin, I think, comes much closer” (“Naming, knowing...” 61). Regardless of which side one takes, however, it is clear that if Holden’s metaphysical principles concerning war and violence are debatable, his descriptions of life, possibility, and absolute freedom are certainly supported by the novel as a whole. The very nature of the world of the novel is such that it denies the reality of causal relations. The landscape of *Blood Meridian* is immense; it covers hundreds of miles of snowy mountains and desert heat. However, this variety of locale is always overshadowed by extreme desolation. Freezing cold and blistering heat are not much different; they are both harsh realities that underscore the desolation of the landscape. McCarthy’s language is simple and precise in his descriptions of this landscape.

Everything in mountain, prairie, and town is composed of fundamental building blocks—rocks, mud, bones, and blood. However, the often-dreamlike quality of the narration leads to a state in which the things he has so eloquently described become undifferentiated. All people, places and events, while existing and described autonomously, merge into a commonality that often defies distinction, but allows for the occurrence of anything. “*Blood Meridian* rejects organicist metaphors of growth and decay, in favor of an open topography... in which the endless, unobstructed extension of the desert allows for the sudden, violent and fortuitous irruption of the most heterogeneous forces” (Shaviro 145).

The language McCarthy employs in this work often describes events as though they emerge unannounced from this desolate landscape. For instance, the Comanche attack (*BM* 52-54) that destroys Captain White’s filibusters is described gradually as a group of horses emerging from the horizon. From these horses eventually emerge the Comanche, and the attack that follows is swift, violent, and obscured by blinding light, dust, and blood. It is a chaotic spasm of violence that has erupted onto the scene only to retreat back into the landscape as quickly as it emerged. It is as though the violence were committed by the landscape, like the Comanche are its agents of death.

This landscape, in which unexpected violence emerges seemingly at random, certainly reflects Holden’s view that “anything is possible” (*BM* 245). Furthermore, the narrative voice states, “If much in the world were mystery the limits of that world were not, for it was without measure or bound” (*BM* 138). The landscape of *Blood*

Meridian's world is limitless both physically, in that its desolation and the horizon intimate the infinite beyond human perception, and metaphysically, in the fact that all events are possible. The Comanche attack illustrates this principle, as does a later encounter with a bear. The bear arises unexpectedly from the landscape, and after it violently snatches up one of the party, "the beast loped horribly into the forest with his hostage and was lost among the darkening trees" (*BM* 137). This event, like many others, has no specific cause; it merely happens, illustrating that in this work the openness and desolation of the landscape suggest infinite possibilities. In this respect the seeming randomness of the incidents in this novel and its picaresque form serve as a denial of absolute causal relationships.

Along these lines, the scene at the jakes behind a brothel, during which the kid presumably dies, has been noted as being without definite precedent within the work (unless one wishes to call the unpredictability and randomness of events precedent). John Sepich notes that "the murder seems to occur without intelligible motive" (16). Assuming the validity of causal determinacy, this scene should be the culmination of all previous events, each having a share—albeit passive—in the causation of this end. However, as Sepich has indicated, insofar as motives are indicative of causes, this scene is already lacking any causal necessity. It seems to occur out of nowhere, not exactly blindly—there are indications that something of this nature will occur—but without the necessity that absolute causal relations require.

As Patrick Shaw rightly points out, while prevailing opinion assumes that the Judge kills the kid, it ignores the fact that the text never reveals what has specifically

happened to him (Shaw 103). However, while Shaw makes an excellent argument as to the possibility of more than mere murder in this scene, he avoids examining why it is that McCarthy chooses to leave the kid's fate a mystery.⁶ The answer is suggested by the last few paragraphs of the narrative, where we find a shift from past tense narration to the present tense. The novel to this point has mostly been in the past tense, and the scene at the jakes directly precedes these last paragraphs. Taken together, this shift and the mysterious final treatment of the kid form a subtle argument against causation. What happens to the kid must remain a mystery because it is in the present (or nearly so), and thus undetermined. What is spoken of in the past tense (most of the novel to that point) can be set down because it has already occurred, is definite; there is no other option for those moments than what has occurred. The present, however, is open to innumerable possibilities. The fact that the beginning of the novel and some rare moments within the novel are also in the present tense indicates that the characters occupying the world of *Blood Meridian* "live," according to Bell, "only from one day to the next, in a perpetual, moving present" (118). The framing of the novel with the present tense and its intermittent use throughout the work thus grant an immediacy to the events of that world, creating a sense that the reality of the novel flows through an unbounded present in which all things are possible.

Of course, the world of *Blood Meridian* imposes one implicit limit to the possibilities open to the individual. The intense, continual, and explicit violence of

⁶ Shaw's argument is that Judge Holden's primary assault on the kid is of a sexual nature.

the novel makes it impossible to deny that death is at all times imminent. In *The Crossing* the reader finds the judge's admonition against order amended when Don Arnulfo claims, "There is no order in the world *save that which death has put there*" (C 45; emphasis added). This is an excellent example of the dialogue that exists between and over McCarthy's novels. Each of his "westerns" disputes and modifies ideas presented by the others. More importantly, Don Arnulfo's statement demonstrates the fact that although *Blood Meridian* is a completely separate story from *The Border Trilogy*, it maintains a profound influence over the ideas and philosophies of those later novels. The judge, in particular, and the absolutely free will he represents, loom over the events and ideologies of the trilogy. Moreover, the judge anticipates similar characters (in quality if not degree) in these novels. *Blood Meridian* thus represents one extreme of the argument over determinacy that is so important in these novels, and it is important to realize its influence over the attitudes presented in the subsequent novels.

II. *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES*: THE MODIFICATION OF FREE WILL

Because the question for me was always whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact.

—*All the Pretty Horses* 230

While *Blood Meridian* posits a world of absolute will, total freedom, McCarthy's next novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, tempers this view. The worlds of these two novels are fundamentally similar in regard to the issue of determinacy, but *All the Pretty Horses* takes a closer look at the implications of the freedom of choice offered

in *Blood Meridian*. More specifically, *All the Pretty Horses* examines the effects of multiple wills. The individual may have an infinitely free will, but if so, how is the situation of the individual affected by the existence of this presumed infinite freedom in all other individuals? There are privileged voices in this work that counter this notion of free will, and the tension between these ideas is the result of the inter- and intratextual dialogues that serve to modify and to an extent truncate the notion of infinitely free will set forward in the previous work. This is not to say that this novel conflicts with *Blood Meridian* on this matter; rather, in *All the Pretty Horses* issues implicitly present in the previous work are given more explicit treatment. The competition of wills in *Blood Meridian* can be seen in its extreme violence, and the judge says that war and games “involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory” (*BM* 249). He tacitly accepts the competition of wills while promoting the infinite freedom of the will. *All the Pretty Horses* takes up these issues in great detail and presents a modification of the original idea. Similarly, these modifications and the intertextual discourse on determinacy begun here will continue through the remainder of *The Border Trilogy*.

All the Pretty Horses is the first volume of Cormac McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy*. In it the reader is introduced to John Grady Cole, a sixteen-year-old would-be cowboy in post-WWII Texas. The novel begins with the funeral of John Grady’s grandfather, the owner of the ranch on which Cole has lived his entire life. However, with the passing of his grandfather, his mother sells the ranch against Cole’s wishes. Dispossessed and unable to accept the changes, the flux, he sees in the world, John

Grady lights out for Mexico with his friend Lacey Rawlins. Their search is an idealistic one, they wish to relocate and live the vanishing and largely fictional cowboy life. Philip Snyder states, “The settings of *The Border Trilogy*... are far removed from the thirty-year post-Civil War heyday of the cowboy and the cattle industry and thus connect themselves mostly to the legend that remains” (198). They believe that they have found what they are looking for when they find work on a Mexican hacienda. However, when John Grady falls in love with the *hacendado*’s beautiful daughter, Alejandra, he incurs the wrath of the *hacendado*, who has them taken to prison. In prison they are subjected to repeated beatings and knife fights until the girl’s grandaunt secures their release (Alejandra has promised to stop seeing him in exchange). John Grady returns to Alejandra only to be left by her. She will not become a part of his flawed idealism; she will return to her family. He finishes out the novel in a failing quest to find the owner of a horse brought to Mexico by another American. The existence he seeks has vanished, if it ever really existed at all, and the novel ends as a small group of Indians “watched him vanish upon that landscape... solely because he would vanish” (*APH* 301). Robert Jarrett states, “In the novels’ concluding scenes, the hero’s journey, although it parallels the escapist desires of the reader of the popular western, is exposed as a failed attempt to ‘repossess’ an identity based on a mythic and unrecoverable past” (100).

That the world of *All the Pretty Horses* is one in which choice is possible, one in which the will has power, is made clear in the opening pages of the narrative. The reader is informed that John Grady “rode where he would always choose...” and “at

the hour he'd always choose" (*APH* 5). Already, choice is privileged in the narrative. Cole's actions are of his choosing rather than the result of some remote, predetermined circumstances. This point is furthered when John Grady and Lacey Rawlins leave Texas for Mexico. In doing so they create multiple options for themselves, which is indicated in the narrative when it is mentioned that there are "ten thousand worlds for the choosing" (*APH* 30). The notion is that they, through the agency of their wills, have the power to determine their own lives. While ten thousand is a finite number, it is one that is sufficiently large enough to reach beyond the complete understanding of the human mind; it suggests an infinite number of possibilities. In this way, the world of this novel is immediately portrayed as strikingly similar to the world of infinite freedom found in *Blood Meridian*.

However, the efficacy of this view of determinacy as it relates to the world of the novel is soon questioned. Rawlins's statement, "Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it... It was always some choice I'd made before it" (*APH* 79), at first seems to support this view of absolute will, and to an extent it does. He tacitly accepts that he has the ability to make choices, and that these choices, his acts of will, determine the course of his life. His statement, however, raises questions about the level of control one has over that course after the choices have been made. That an action can be "dumb" and that this is attributable to a "decision" implies that the individual does not have complete control over his or her situation. One cannot avoid the adverse consequences of a willed decision, and this limits the authority of will, even if only in a minor way.

The extent to which the individual's will holds sway over the events surrounding the individual is further questioned in a passage describing John Grady riding a horse. "While inside the vaulting of the ribs between his knees the darkly meated heart pumped of who's will and the blood pulsed and the bowels shifted in their massive blue convolutions of who's will" (*APH* 128). Once again, that there is such a thing as will is not questioned; it is even affirmed. However, while this statement is descriptive in nature, the use of the interrogative "pronoun *who* suggests a buried question within the description: whose is the will described? While Cole is ostensibly in command of the horse, its heart is not so subservient to his will" (Jarrett 108). The use of "who" does not *necessarily* limit the will of John Grady, but it seriously questions the extent and domain of that will. It posits the possibility of other wills, competing wills that operate outside and perhaps counter to Cole's own sovereignty. The suggestion is that the judge's assertion in *Blood Meridian* that "nothing must be permitted to occur upon [the world] save by my dispensation" (*BM* 199), that he have absolute will over the cosmos, is ultimately impossible in the world of *All the Pretty Horses*. In this world the will is possibly limited by its proximity and relation to other equal or more powerful wills.

While the world of this novel is one of free will (even if the absolute power of said will is being questioned), it should not be assumed that John Grady Cole believes in this will. This, however, is a mistake that many critics have made. John Wegner (quoting Tom Pilkington) claims that Cole believes "in individualism, free will, volition... [and that] every man born on this planet is an Adam, free of memory and

external constraint, able to shape his illimitable ‘self’ in any way he chooses” (76-77). This places Cole partially in agreement with the judge on this issue, but this is simply not accurate. Jarrett likewise thinks that John Grady believes that his will is absolute when he asserts that limits have been placed “on what he believed to be his infinite freedom” (Jarrett 110). Both Wegner and Jarrett are misreading the text; Cole’s own statements directly contradict the notion that he might entertain a belief in free will. When asked if he believes in fate, he responds, “Yes mam. I guess I do” (*APH* 230).

Furthermore, John Grady retains ideas that express the constancy he sees in the world. For instance, when his father claims to have changed since World War II, that he “ain’t the same,” John Grady maintains, “You are inside. Inside you are” (*APH* 12). He wholly believes that there is some underlying principle that preserves the individual against change. That principle is similar to if not actually fate. Fate, in John Grady’s view, preserves the world from change. Change necessitates choices and the facing of possibilities, and choices and possibilities defy the concept of fate. Cole’s hesitance to make choices is apparent in several textual locations. First, when Rawlins questions whether they should go to Mexico, John Grady states that he is “already gone” (*APH* 27). To his mind there is not a decision making process; his leaving is not so much a willed action as it is something that is happening to him. Similarly, when he sits in crossroads near the end of the novel, he decides to retrieve the horses taken from him when he was imprisoned. But to him this is not actually a decision; instead, he ponders the issue for some time and says, “The hell with it... I ain’t leavin my horse down here” (*APH* 257). This is not the statement of someone

who has actively decided to act; it is, rather, a statement made in submission to the perceived circumstances. John Grady believes that it is already determined that he will retrieve the horses; at this point he is just accepting it. Another instance of this occurs when Rawlins says, "I think I knew what you'd say," to which John Grady responds, "Yeah, well. I didn't" (*APH* 79). Once again, Cole does not claim authority over his actions. Due to his fatalistic views he is, as the Dueña Alfonsa suggests, someone "to whom things happen" (*APH* 240). His blind and simplistic belief in the static nature of the world and humanity is the result of and conducive to the fatalistic ideals he stubbornly holds.

Still, it is easy to understand how Wegner and Jarrett might come to their conclusions. It is easy to think that in fleeing to Mexico Cole is searching for freedom from the imposition of modernity and industrialization. According to this reading, in his flight he seeks the possibility of choosing the ranch life that has been stripped from him with the selling of his grandfather's ranch. A more likely interpretation, however, is that with the selling of the ranch Cole is suddenly exposed to the world of possibilities; he was comfortable in his life at the ranch, it shielded him from the necessity of choices, and its sale destroys that comfortable, static existence. Given his static fatalism, Cole cannot accept a world of Heraclitean flux. His departure for Mexico is thus not an attempt to free himself, but rather to repair and maintain his fixed view of the world; it is an attempt to escape change and find an environment more conducive to his fatalistic views. He believes that he has found that environment at the *Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción*, but

the tragic aspect of his quest is that the static surroundings he seeks are non-existent in this world; they never were. Fatalism is not a viable position in this novel. His quest is an absurd one, doomed to failure because he cannot accept change and, more importantly, will as the agent of that change.

While John Grady Cole offers a direct counter to absolute will in an intertextual dialogue with the judge, the Dueña Alfonsa presents something of a middle ground to the two extremes offered by John Grady and the judge. She mitigates the absolute freedom posited by the judge, while checking Cole's idealistic fatalism. However, just as Wegner misreads John Grady as an advocate of absolute will, he also misreads Alfonsa as a fatalist. He implies that she believes "the past influences and controls the present" (77). Wegner is partially right here, she does certainly believe in the influence of the past, but to say that it controls, at least in any absolute sense, runs counter to her attitudes and beliefs. The Dueña's belief in free will is evident when she states, "I've no sympathy with people to whom things happen" (*APH* 241). This statement implies the possibility of human action; will is a necessary component of her worldview. Moreover, when she says, "I think if it were fate that ruled our houses it could perhaps be flattered or reasoned with" (*APH* 231), this is not an admission of fate's rule. In fact, it is an awkward denial of fate; to say that fate could be "flattered or reasoned with" is to essentially destroy its power as a realistic belief, to render it impotent.

Alfonsa's rebuttal of fate, however, should not be taken as an expression of a belief in absolute free will. She does maintain that the will has power, but she

tempers the notion of will set forward in *Blood Meridian*. Alfonsa modifies the idea of absolutely free will by recognizing the limits placed on a will by other wills. The will cannot be absolutely free because wills come into conflict with one another, and this conflict requires that one be superior to and limit another. Furthermore, she claims that the power of the individual's will is proportionately related to the individual's relative power. In the case of her relation to Alejandra she states, "It is a matter of who must say. In this matter I get to say. I am the one who gets to say" (*APH* 137). Alfonsa is in charge. She has power, and, therefore, her will dominates Alejandra's; the grandniece's will is thus limited. However, the Dueña does not limit this power structure to the interpersonal level. She asserts that it extends to the larger, societal level of interaction. She says to John Grady, "I am not a society person. The societies to which I have been exposed seemed to me largely machines for the suppression of women" (*APH* 230). Knowing that societies wield a great amount of power over the individual, and that the inclination of these societies is toward the limitation of women's wills, Alfonsa avoids them. She will not have her will limited, and the efficacy of an individual's will is limited by the relative amount of power that individual wields.

The ideas of the Dueña are echoed by Emilio Pérez, a mysteriously powerful inmate at the prison to which Cole and Rawlins are eventually sent. He, like the Dueña, believes in the ability of the more powerful to control the less powerful. Being a relatively powerful individual, "[He] can say certain things about those that come under [his] protection" (*APH* 188). He can control the lives of those who

become supplicants to his power, who willfully decide to subordinate their wills to his own; he has what Alfonsa calls “say” in this situation. Others, however, who do not do so, who refuse to give up their wills, “are simply outside. They live in a world of possibility that has no end” (*APH* 188-189). He views those individuals as willfully beyond his sphere of influence. Without becoming subject to his will they cannot be strictly controlled by that will, and so, the individual is left vulnerable to an infinite number of possible occurrences. The implication is that the individual’s will would then be swallowed, overwhelmed, by the sheer volume of opposing wills beyond the ordering principle of his own. Pérez reiterates this when he states, “There are three hundred men in this institution. No one can know what is possible” (*APH* 195). So many wills working towards contrary positions, exacerbated by the tensions of the prison situation, results in a chaotic blending of wills that renders the individual will relatively impotent. So, the individual can choose the static and knowable situation in which life is governed by a superior will, or the indeterminate life of free will within the chaos of contrary wills. In either event one is deprived of his or her relative power.

Thus, the Dueña and Pérez hold highly similar views. More importantly, it is clear that their defense of free will, albeit limited by the existence of contrary wills, is privileged relative to the fatalistic position of John Grady Cole. This is due to the fact that Cole’s worldview is completely inadequate when compared with the world of the novel. Alfonsa’s, however, is nicely exemplified by the events of the novel. Her idea that the powerful control the wills of those less powerful than themselves is illustrated

by Cole's imprisonment and release. It is Alejandra's father that allows him to be imprisoned, and more importantly, it is Alfonsa that supplies the money necessary for his release. John Grady's life has been controlled by those more powerful than himself. Likewise, Alejandra refuses to elope with him, suggesting that society has power over her actions, and thus, by proximity, his own. John Grady rarely seems to act through any strength of personal volition, but only in a reactionary or maintenance capacity necessary for him to preserve the illusion that his belief in fate and the constancy of the world is correct.

The Dueña's ideas clearly reflect the world of the novel. Moreover, it has been shown that these ideas modify those posited by the judge and world of *Blood Meridian*. However, there is a very important distinction that must be made between the judge and Alfonsa. Judge Holden is at all times confident about what he believes. Alfonsa, on the other hand, is not. She states, "Because the question for me was always whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact" (APH 230). She does not proclaim that the world is definitely as she describes it; its nature is, instead, a "question." A level of uncertainty has crept into the novel. Rather than proclaim, as the judge does, that there is no order, Alfonsa phrases the issue in such a way as to make this simply one possibility. She clearly tends to agree with the judge's position, and the world of the novel bears out this point of view. However, her uncertainty is highly important in the overall scheme of *The Border Trilogy*. *The Crossing*, in particular, will stress this principle, and the human inability to conclusively

comprehend the workings of the world will mediate the argument between fate and free will for the remainder of the trilogy.

III. *THE CROSSING*: INDETERMINACY AND THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

He looked... Like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. If there be such a space. If it be knowable.

—*The Crossing* 22

The Crossing is in many ways the most peculiar volume of McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*. Perhaps the most noticeable and mystifying aspect of *The Crossing* is that while it is the second entry in the trilogy, it is not connected to *All the Pretty Horses* by events, characters, or time. Each novel is set in loosely the same geographical area, and each deals with many of the same themes, but each is a fully self-contained narrative. Moreover, the events of the second novel predate those of the first by at least three years. On first inspection this could be an acceptance of the openness and absolute freedom argued by *Blood Meridian*. The fact that the sequel cannot be causally linked to its predecessor may be an implicit acknowledgement of the failure of causal determinacy to explain the events of the world; McCarthy would thus be making a tacit statement about determinacy by labeling temporally disjunctive (and to this point unconnected) works a trilogy.

This reading may have relevance for the ideas of determinacy as expressed by the trilogy as a whole, but it is virtually irrelevant when considering the novel as a singular text. *The Crossing* is not explicitly interested in arguing which side of the

determinacy debate is correct. Instead, it attempts to explore in greater detail the ways in which individuals view this issue. As a result, the text tends not to come down definitively on one side or the other; the issue is instead left to individual speakers in the novel. They expound upon the issues of free will and fate, and the narrative voice is dialogically filtered through those of the characters such that it appears to support whatever argument is being put forward at any given time. Christine Chollier states, "The blurring of enunciative borderlines makes it impossible to identify the narration as omniscient" (14). It never presents an objective view of the action taking place or issues at hand, but instead floats between the various, often-differing voices of the text. These voices engage in a debate over the matter that in many ways resembles that of the trilogy as a whole.

The narrative of *The Crossing* follows Billy Parham, a teenage boy who has grown up on a ranch in 1930's New Mexico, as he makes three crossings into Mexico. In the first of these crossings he attempts to take a she-wolf he has caught to Mexico, from which she has come. His reasoning is simply, "It's where she come from" (C 68). When the wolf is captured in a village and forced to compete against trained dogs, Billy elects to shoot her and return to the United States, having failed in his quest. However, upon arriving home he discovers that his parents have been murdered and the family's horses stolen. So, Billy and his brother Boyd set off once again for Mexico, ostensibly to retrieve their father's horses. In the process Boyd is shot by men working for the ranch that has obtained the horses, and while he does not die, he deserts Billy with a Mexican girl with whom they have become associated.

Billy once more returns to the U.S. and attempts to join the military and fight in World War II. However, when he is rejected due to a heart problem, he returns to Mexico in search of his brother, only to find that he has been killed. Billy finds his body, unearths it, and takes it back to America for reburial. While the wolf, the horses, and his brother's body are the ostensible reasons for the various crossings, in reality these things are indicative of Billy's search for a greater understanding of reality and humanity's connection to it.

Like his father, Billy is "bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. If there be such a place. If it be knowable" (C 22). These are the questions asked by this novel. Both Billy and the novel seek to know how the individual is connected to the perceived world, and the issue of determinacy is highly intertwined with this issue. The quote also indicates the possibility that these things are ultimately epistemologically uncertain; the human mind is perhaps incapable of understanding these issues. This quote has further import because it is one of the few moments where the narrator speaks of the determinacy issue even in a remotely direct fashion. The rarity of such statements makes it difficult to ascertain the stance of the text on the issue of determinacy, and to know how characters feel about their circumstances, aside from what they indicate in their speech. Since Billy is highly laconic it is extremely difficult to understand both the thought processes accompanying his actions and his own ideas concerning will and determinacy. Each time Billy dramatically alters the course of his life, the reader is blocked from the decision

making process. Each of his crossings into Mexico, his return to the dog fight to kill the wolf, and his attempt to join the military are all presented as though they simply happen; we are not given an explicit reason explaining each occurrence. Nor are we told that there is no decision being made. Billy never states, like John Grady Cole, “I’m already gone” (*APH* 27).

This is not to claim that the reader is kept entirely in the dark on this issue. There are indications of how Billy relates to the world of the novel and what he thinks, and in the beginning at least, he appears to be somewhat fatalistic, although he never explicitly says so. At the moment that he changes course and begins to take the wolf to Mexico, Billy exclaims, “Damn all of it... Just damn all of it” (*C* 63). The possible implication is that the change runs counter to what he would will to occur if he were so able. Furthermore, Christine Chollier points out the passage in the novel that states, “the wolf stood up to meet him” (*C* 52). “Billy does not meet the wolf in the mountains; he is met by her. She is reported to be the agent of the encounter” (Chollier 7). Billy acknowledges his passivity in the matter when he repeatedly relates his relationship to the wolf as being one of obligatory protection; “He said that he was custodian to the wolf and charged with her care (*C* 118). His position would seem to him to be beyond his election. In each of these instances Billy is, as the Dueña would say, “[a person] to whom things happen” (*APH* 241), and he seems to accept this fatalistic view of the world. His acceptance of fatalistic forces can also be seen in his admonition to the captured wolf, “It aint no use to fight it” (*C* 56),

suggesting his belief that the wolf ought to simply accept what has already been determined, just as he will in taking it to Mexico.

Billy does not, however, stubbornly adhere to this fatalism like John Grady Cole. He is instead much more inquisitive into the true nature of the world, and often holds notions in opposition to that of fate. For instance, before he buries the wolf he imagines that in life it possessed “what we may well believe has the power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world” (C 127). In this passage he appears to accept that individuals are at least partially able to enforce their wills upon the world.⁷ Furthermore, other passages involving the wolf indicate the difficulty of fixing Billy’s ideology as strictly fatalistic at the beginning of the novel. As he rides his horse with the dead wolf in front of him, “he put his hand to his leg and tasted the blood which tasted no different than his own” (C 125). Billy is thus equated with the wolf, to which will has earlier been ascribed. Also, earlier in the novel, he engages in a conversation with Don Arnulfo, an elderly Mexican, who tells Billy, “El lobo es una cosa incognoscible”⁸ (C 45). Furthermore, says Don Arnulfo, “The wolf is made the way the world is made. You cannot touch the world. You cannot hold it in your hand for it is made of breath only” (C 46). The wolf and its life are intangible, unknowable, and not bound to any particular course; their equation with Billy and his life renders those things also unknowable. While this does not affirm the power of the will, it does render it impossible to determine the level to which will has any

⁷ While the phrase “may well” expresses doubt as to the truth-value of the passage, it does not deny the possibility being expressed. Instead, it indicates the indeterminacy to be found throughout the novel.

⁸ “The wolf is an unknowable thing.” Billy’s actions may indicate that he questions this statement to a small extent, but he is unable to discern the truth one way or the other.

efficacy and power, and this simultaneously places fate in a similar state of indeterminacy.

This indeterminacy presumably occupies Billy throughout the novel. There are few moments after the incident with the wolf when the reader is given any insight into his thinking on the matter. When the Mexican girl the brothers take along with them says that she believes that God governs the course of events, “that one could no more evade his care than evade his judgement,” Billy states that he “[has] no such idea of God” (C 325). Billy clearly questions the idea of fate at this point in the novel, but he is not convinced that will is absolute either; he is undecided. This is illustrated when, near the end of the novel, he asks, “No one can tell you what your life is goin to be, can they?” (C 387). This demonstrates that Billy questions the ability of any human to understand the forces that may or may not control existence.

The indecision Billy displays in the course of this novel is exacerbated and mirrored by the conflicting voices of those he encounters on his journeys. These voices can be divided into those that espouse fate or some determinacy akin to it and those that do not. The character who most strongly supports a form of fatalism is the man Billy meets in a town virtually destroyed by an earthquake. Billy speaks to this man, an ex-priest, in a destroyed church in which he lives. The man states, “For the path of the world also is one and not many and there is no alter course in any least part of it for that course is fixed by God and contains all consequence in the way of its going and outside of that going there is neither path nor consequence nor anything at

all” (C 158). As this man sees it, the world is governed strictly by the will of God. Nothing is allowed to exist outside of God’s determination.

The same man introduces another issue that is extremely important for this novel: the idea of “the corrido,” which is intimately intertwined with his fatalistic beliefs. “The *corrido* is a kind of collective diary, an ethnohistorical document containing facts about society and history” (Wegner 80). The ex-priest is very concerned with the role the *corrido* plays in the workings of the world. “The corrido,” he states, “The Tale. And like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one to tell” (C 143). The only story that can be told is the one that reflects the one reality that God has determined. He furthermore insists that the tale told is reality; he states:

For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale is the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them. So everything is necessary. Every least thing. (C 143)

The world is basically a singular tale. Those tales of which it is composed are in actuality that same tale folded back into itself. Moreover, the teller of this tale is God, and all things necessarily flow from him. Thus, the *corrido* is of extreme importance to the ex-priest, as it is part and parcel with the fate of the universe. What maintains this tale against the multiplicity of human experience that would render the world chaotic, a multiplicity of tales, is the presence of God who determines this fate/tale in a unified manner. According to this conception, the *corrido*, which has greater importance later in the novel, is an illustration and expansion of the ex-priest’s fatalistic ideologies.

The fact that Billy meets and converses with this man in the remnants of “the church of *La Purísima Concepción de Nuestra Señora de Caborca*” (C 149) is highly significant. The name of this church reminds one of the ranch on which John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins work in *All the Pretty Horses*, *La Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción*. The similarity of the names ascribed to these two locations suggests a connection between them, and the position of the man in the church certainly comments on the positions held by the Dueña Alfonsa and John Grady. His speech most specifically refutes the notion of free will espoused by Alfonsa, as is seen when the man rhetorically asks, “Can God be cajoled?” (C 149). This question closely matches Alfonsa’s statement, “I think if it were fate that ruled our houses it could be flattered or reasoned with” (APH 231). Of course, as the man is a fatalist, his answer to this question is resoundingly negative, and his posing this question is meant to counter Alfonsa’s claim. However, it should not be immediately assumed that the ex-priest agrees with John Grady Cole. John Grady is, granted, a fatalist, but his idea of the fatalistic world is simple and static. The man who speaks with Billy has a more complicated view. He modifies Cole’s concept in one important way: he thinks that fate *qua* God’s will is “perilous and transitory” (C 152). The man admits that the world is constantly changing, but this change is not random; it necessarily follows from God’s will. Moreover, this man points out that the workings of fate often leave one feeling “severed from both antecedents and posterity alike” (C 147). Though fate determines the course of human events, it is often hidden by the sudden changes it incites in the ephemeral reality of human perception. Such

sudden changes obscure the links between past and present, leaving the individual with the impression that random chance has entered into the world.

Later in his journeys, Billy encounters a blind man who agrees that the world is brought about through the will of God, but he differs from the ex-priest in many ways, some that reinforce a fatalistic viewpoint and others that would seem to oppose it. He states, “The world was new each day for God so made it daily” (C 279). This, along with his statements that he is directed by “the will of God” and that human will is illusory (C 279), indicates the fatalistic bent of his ideology. However, when he says, “For the world to survive it must be replenished daily” (C 293), he seriously departs from the ex-priest’s thinking on the subject. While the ex-priest maintains that there is a oneness to all things, the blind man allows for a multiplicity of experience and events. This multiplicity admits an openness of possibility not found in the ex-priest’s view, and this creates the perception that fate is weaker, less determinate, in his understanding of it. The creative process is perpetual, with God constantly molding the world. Such a conception gives primacy to the present, and this conjoined with the openness of the possibility leaves room (on some small temporal/spatial level) for the individual to assert his or her will. This is illustrated in his statement that with the daily reformation of the world, “This man will be required to begin again whether he wishes to or no” (C 293). The man can willfully live within the confines of God’s creation, but that creation is continually impinging upon and often countermanding the will of the individual; it limits the will.

The blind man's ideas further diverge from the ex-priest's on the issue of order. The ex-priest believes the world to be a story; it is singular and highly ordered by God. The blind man questions the reality of order. "This man of which we speak," he states, "will seek to impose order and lineage upon things which rightly have none" (C 293). Order is apparently not a divine product; it is falsely applied to the world by humans. Or at least any true order is beyond human understanding. This statement also implies that the individual can willfully act in some capacity; it can impose order. More importantly, however, this statement contends with the idea of fate. If humans falsely impose order upon things, then fate too might be a false imposition. So, there are contentious strains within this man's thought that are never fully resolved.

The blind man's thoughts on order echo those presented earlier in the novel by Don Arnulfo. He says, "There is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (C 45). Arnulfo thus rejects fatalistic views of the world, and more importantly, his statement provides a key to understanding how it is that characters come to have fatalistic beliefs. On the surface he is simply saying that everyone must die and all else is undetermined, a belief echoed later in the novel when an incidental character says, "Our graves make no claims outside of their own simple coordinates and no advice as to how to arrive there but for the assurance that arrive we shall" (C 186). There is an openness here that allows the possibility of willful human action on even the absolute scale found in *Blood Meridian*. However, Don Arnulfo's statement can further be taken to indicate how it is that individuals come to believe in fate,

regardless of its truth-value. Notions of fate flow from the perception of death as an inevitable end, and of the passage of time and change that lead to that inevitability. The same man quoted above on graves goes on to say, “That far from making men reflective or wise it was his experience that death often leads them to attribute great consequence to trivial things” (C 186). The idea of fate is thus simply the imposition of great consequence onto the trivial events in life; and to presume the presence of a grand force ordering the cosmos is simply to construct meaning from essentially meaningless events. This conception bears a close resemblance to the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* in which people assume a causal link between postholes simply because one follows another. Here the individual retrospectively assumes a fatalistic connection of the events in life simply because they are perceived to have occurred sequentially.

An interesting aspect of this reading is that many of the characters that promote fatalism also tacitly accept the idea that this belief is due to the perception of death. The ex-priest admits, “Men spared their lives in great disasters often feel in their deliverance the workings of fate” (C 146). While what he means is that it is because of one’s perception of death that the individual learns to acknowledge the true authority of fate, he simultaneously accepts that death is often the reason that one adopts a fatalistic view. Also, the blind man, who is to a degree fatalistic, admits that it is after the traumatic experience of being blinded that “The bonds that fixed him in the world had become rigid” (C 279). Prior to his blinding he presumably had a much more open view of the world, but after that severe change his ideas concerning

his connection to the world solidified. Because of his trauma he ascribes connectivity to the events of life.

The *corridos* of the novel can be seen in much the same way. When Boyd has been killed, and Billy is searching for his body, he repeatedly hears a *corrido* that has assimilated the story of his brother's death. The tale is based on true events, and if we accept the ex-priest's stance on *corridos*, it cannot be anything but the absolute truth, the story of the world even. The fact that Boyd's story is absorbed into an already existent tale would seem to support this. However, there are serious problems with this analysis. The reader knows that these stories tend to falsify events, as can be seen when the girl accompanying them informs Billy "That all the world knew that the güerito had killed the gerente from Las Varitas" (C 322). This is, of course, untrue, as Billy points out; the man broke his back falling off his horse, but this alteration demonstrates the tendency to exaggerate and distort reality in its retelling. Quijada, a Yaqui rancher, says of the *corrido*, "It tells what it wishes to tell. It tells what makes the story run... It does not owe its allegiance to the truths of history but to the truths of men" (C 386). Such tales represent the false imposition of order onto events after the fact, and they suggest the individual's desire to find a connectedness of past events, to assert the efficacy of fate. George Guillemin agrees when he states of these tales, "To read reality and history alike as a chronicle of sequential events implies a shift away from a descriptive to a prescriptive mode of discourse" (104). Rather than describing reality and the forces at work in it, the tellers of the *corrido*

determine the reality they will present, and this involves the falsification and warping of events.

Quijada's rejection of the *corrido* would imply that he also counters a notion of fate, and this is supported by some of his statements. He says, "The world itself must be surprised at the shape of that which appears. Perhaps even God" (C 387). Quijada indicates that there is an openness to the world that suggests multiple possibilities, that the present and future are ultimately unpredictable. However, while he denies determinacy, he simultaneously advocates it in the same speech. "Your brother," he tells Billy, "is in the place which the world has chosen for him. He is where he is supposed to be. And yet the place he has found is also of his choosing" (C 387-389). That Boyd "is where he is supposed to be" indicates the presence of fatalistic forces, but that "the place he has found is also of his choosing" suggests free will. This is somewhat contradictory. Quijada may be suggesting something along the lines of what Alfonsa suggests in the previous novel, that free will is tempered by opposing wills and other pressures. But regardless, his statement is more important because it is indicative of the struggle between the ideas of will and determinism. In Quijada we find a summation of each side in the debate. Rather than espousing any one view, he represents a skeptical middle ground between these points of view. In listening to Quijada, Billy represents his role as the skeptical observer. He cannot accept fatalism because by the end of the novel he recognizes the epistemological limitations that prevent him from gaining any absolute knowledge of the situation. The novel, likewise, refrains from making any absolute statements on fate. *The*

Crossing is less an assertion of will (like *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*) than an exploration of the efficacy of fatalism. Rather than discounting fate entirely, it offers an explanation of why it is that many humans feel the need to believe in fate, regardless of its truth-value. *The Crossing* insinuates that while fate may be true, it is ultimately inscrutable, and therefore the belief in it is false because it is falsely inferred that past events are connected based solely on the perception that they are sequentially ordered.

IV. *CITIES OF THE PLAIN*: AN ASSERTION OF FATALISM?

...And all continued on to their appointed places which as some believe were chosen long ago even to the beginning of the world.

—*Cities of the Plain* 261

After the numerous and weighty orations of *The Crossing* one finds *Cities of the Plain* unusually terse and unconcerned with the issues previously raised in *The Border Trilogy*, but this is illusory. It takes time for the narration to finally encounter these issues, and it often does so in a curt manner, but the issues, including determinism, are definitely present in this work. It is in this novel that Billy Parham and John Grady Cole are finally brought together and the overarching principles of the trilogy are revealed. With this union comes the combined views and histories of the previous novels. John Grady's fatalism is pitted against Billy's skepticism, and while McCarthy's previous western novels either reject determinism or refrain from passing judgement on the matter, *Cities of the Plain* contains passages that would seem to reveal an acceptance of fate's dominion. Of course, this novel maintains the

epistemological uncertainty of the previous novels, and this uncertainty hinders the individual character's ability to know or understand the workings of the world of the novel in any concrete way.

Cities of the Plain finds the central characters of the previous two novels, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, working together on a ranch run by Mac McGovern in the early fifties. The opening scene of this last volume of the trilogy places the two characters in a brothel on the Mexican border. While there, John Grady falls in love with one of the prostitutes and spends the rest of the novel attempting to pursue and marry her, all against the will of Eduardo, the pimp who owns and loves her. *Cities of the Plain* is structured and paced differently than the novels before it; more clearly plot-driven, it seems to go lighter on the metaphysical and philosophical contemplation that permeates McCarthy's previous novels. As the narrative progresses, however, it slowly becomes apparent that this work is commenting on those that precede it. One finds hints of Judge Holden and Alfonsa in Eduardo, and the stories and advice of the blind musician and the epilogue's storyteller are reminiscent of speeches given by various characters in *The Crossing*. Moreover, John Grady and Billy comment on each other in this novel, which means that they implicitly comment on those thoughts expressed elsewhere in McCarthy's previous "western" novels.

From the start of the novel it is readily apparent that John Grady's thoughts on determinism have not changed much in the two or three years since we last saw him. He is as stubbornly and simplistically fatalistic as ever. When some men attempt to

sell a lame horse to the ranch he catches the trick and refuses to let them leave the horse with him for a short period of time. He states, “I cant do it,” and later, “I dont believe I can do that” (*CP* 46). John Grady consistently speaks in terms of ability, not will. It is not that he refuses to take the horse; he is unable to do so because he has no will in the matter. In this exchange the only time that he speaks in terms of his willingness to comply is while responding to another’s question:

You wouldnt help a man out though, would you?
Not that way I wouldnt. (*CP* 47)

In his response John Grady merely appropriates the other man’s language. He is not making a claim about his ability to willfully affect the situation. Or rather, he is making a negative claim of will; he is marking its absence in him. He does this once more in a conversation with Billy. Billy asks what John Grady would do with his life if he could not be a cowboy. John Grady responds, “I wouldnt be nothin else” (*CP* 95). The hypothetical situation is not a possibility for John Grady’s fatalistic sensibilities. To not be a cowboy is to cease to exist. The irony is that this is not a hypothetical situation, as Billy realizes and accepts, and it is thus fitting that with the death of the cowboy life and the closing of the west, John Grady also dies. In his death he further reveals his fatalistic views. He has been terribly wounded in a knife fight with Eduardo, and refuses the medical attention offered by Billy. Once again he does not phrase his refusal in terms of his will, but rather in terms of possibility. “You couldnt get me across the border noway,” he says, and, “I cant make it” (*CP* 258). Even in his very death, John Grady refuses to accept the possibility of willful

change; he always believes that he is constrained by external forces that control the possibility of his life.

It should be pointed out that there are times in this text in which it appears as though John Grady believes in the will's power to affect the world. A representative occasion of this is during one of his games of chess with Mac McGovern. Chess in itself appears to be a game of opposed wills, and one thinks of Judge Holden's views on gaming when it is being played in *The Border Trilogy*. At one point Mac concedes to John Grady, but this angers the cowboy. He states, "You could still win" (CP 40). He appears to be acknowledging that that possibility is still open, and he proves it by playing Mac's pieces to the point of victory. However, given John Grady's fatalistic ideas his position here must be rethought. Throughout the novel he repeatedly says things along the lines of "For a thing once set in motion has no ending in this world until the last witness has passed" (CP 205), and, "I didnt have nothin to do with it. Like its just the way it is. Like it always was this way" (CP 121). He rejects the notion of choices, and his opposition to Mac's choice to quit should not be seen as an acknowledgement of possibility, but the rejection of choice in the matter. The chess game must go on to its natural conclusion, and so John Grady plays it out in order to maintain his opposition to will and maintain his fatalistic views. For John Grady the game cannot be aborted, just as fate cannot be aborted, simply because one does not see the future clearly. Possibility, for him, is thus merely human ignorance of the future. According to John Grady fate rigidly determines life, although it is not always apparent where it will lead, and he feels that he must play life to its

determined end. This attitude is endorsed by Mac when in reference to a game he says, “Its a long road... that has no turning” (*CP* 93). For this attitude, chess is ironically a microcosm of the rigidly deterministic functioning of life.

The clearest opposition to John Grady’s views comes from Eduardo, the pimp who owns and loves the prostitute whom John Grady wishes to marry. Their physical opposition may spring from their relationships with the prostitute, but it also reflects their deeper philosophical antagonism. In a conversation he has with Billy, Eduardo defines John Grady’s ideals:

He has in his head a certain story. Of how things will be. In this story he will be happy... What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story. Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world it will never be and that is the world they dream of. (*CP* 135)

In this speech Eduardo demonstrates that he understands the way John Grady thinks, and his understanding matches the one we have been given. Furthermore, he dismisses Cole’s concept of fate as too simple; it is merely the imposition of human desire onto the world. Eduardo, moreover, accepts that there are “many different” possibilities for the unfolding of events. Later in the novel their physical opposition comes to a head when they engage in a knife fight. Here, their ideological stances are brought into direct conflict as Eduardo probes and questions John Grady between exchanges with the knives. He begins by telling the youth, “Change your mind... Go back. Choose life” (*CP* 248), and repeatedly during the fight he gives him opportunities to abandon his current course. He is trying to make John Grady understand that he need not die here; he can consciously choose to alter his future.

Eduardo, however, realizes that he will not relent when he states, “Yet how many times was he warned? And then to try to buy the girl? From that moment to this all was certain as dark and day” (CP 251). It should not be assumed that Eduardo is asserting a deterministic stance in this exchange. He is merely acknowledging his understanding of John Grady’s fatalistic tendencies. The knife fight is “certain” only because John Grady will have it no other way. Eduardo certainly believes in a multiplicity of possibilities, and his assertion of the will coupled with his cruelty echoes the sentiments of Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*. Simultaneously, his warnings to John Grady and his offering of options even while controlling certain events in the boy’s life, are suggestive of the Dueña Alfonsa in *All the Pretty Horses*. In this respect, the relationship between John Grady and Eduardo is an intertextual continuation of the boy’s adversarial connection to Alfonsa. His death at the hands of Eduardo reminds the reader of Alfonsa’s saying, “Those whom life does not cure death will” (APH 238). The tragedy of John Grady’s inability to accept the flux of life in *All the Pretty Horses* has carried on through *Cities of the Plain* to its conclusion with his death at the hands of Alfonsa’s literary successor.

Ironically, John Grady’s best friend, Billy Parham, agrees with Eduardo, and this somewhat privileges Eduardo’s position. He cannot simply be dismissed as evil and therefore wrong. When Eduardo tells him that John Grady’s fatalism is false and idealistic, he asks Billy if he agrees. Billy reluctantly responds, “I dont know... I guess probably I do. I just don’t like to say it” (CP 134). Philip A. Snyder points out, “In *Cities of the Plain* Billy and Eduardo form an unusual union of pragmatists whose

antipathy for one another is balanced by their mutual disapproval of John Grady's courtship of Magdalena" (218). Billy, like Eduardo, consistently tries to persuade John Grady to choose a different course. They each want him to recognize his own power to change the future.

As Snyder suggests, however, their agreement is limited. Eduardo's views are concrete; he states them with confidence. Billy does not. His response to Eduardo begins with "I dont know" and contains the word "probably." Billy is ultimately uncertain and speaks only in terms of the probability of truth. This is a continuation of his attitudes in *The Crossing*; he is unable to absolutely reject or accept the concept of fate. Billy thus represents the human inability to come to any absolute conclusion on this issue (and perhaps all others). He is, as Snyder indicates, a "skeptic" (214), but it should not be assumed that in skeptically denying fatalism he accepts will. He often displays skepticism for his own actions. When John Grady says that he "dont know what [Billy has said] means," Billy responds, "I dont know either... I dont know why I said it" (CP 43). Billy's skepticism extends to his own thoughts and motives; he cannot assert that will is absolute because he cannot be sure of his own actions.

While Billy continues the thread of uncertainty that is central to *The Crossing*, some of the minor characters in *Cities of the Plain* extend and modify arguments presented by many of the lengthy speeches in the preceding novel (as well as earlier books). For instance, the blind musician, also called the maestro, whom John Grady repeatedly talks to in Juarez, Mexico, combines many of the ideas found in characters of previous novels. He asserts that a person can be forced into a certain mode of life;

“Such a man,” he states, “can scarce be said to author any longer his own path” (*CP* 193). This statement is interesting because it assumes that a person does have choices and can influence the world, but this power can be taken away by various social forces. The blind man echoes the Dueña Alfonsa’s thoughts on competing wills and power structures, not to mention her deeply held concerns about societal pressures. The maestro further states that this web of influences is highly constrictive and that it is difficult to understand the power of individual will. Moreover, he states, “The world takes its form hourly” (*CP* 195), which serves to combine Alfonsa’s ideas with those of the blind man in *The Crossing*, who believes, “For the world to survive it must be replenished daily” (*C* 293). Additionally, the maestro states, “I only know that every act which has no heart will be found out in the end” (*CP* 196). This bears an eerie resemblance to Judge Holden’s criticisms of the kid in *Blood Meridian*. He tells the kid, “You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (*BM* 299). That which sets the kid apart from others in the gang is that he does not totally commit to the atrocities they are executing, and he has been “found out,” just as the maestro warns John Grady. The blind musician, like the judge, believes such holding back is criminal, sin-like. All actions must be total; if the will is to have worth, it must be absolute. The maestro at least partially suggests the judge, and thus in him we find a confluence of the three previous novels within *Cities of the Plain*. The blind man is an acknowledgement of the intertextual dialogue that has occurred through and among these works.

In the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain* an elderly Billy Parham encounters a fellow drifter under an overpass who tells the story of a dream he had. In many ways this situation is suggestive of the encounters Billy had in his youthful adventures in Mexico. This storyteller states:

You think men have power to call forth what they will?... Nor is this life of yours by which you set such store your doing, however you may choose to tell it. Its shape was forced in the void at the onset and all talk of what might otherwise have been is senseless for there is no otherwise... That we have no power to guess it out beforehand makes it no less certain. That we may imagine alternate histories means nothing at all. (*CP* 285).

The drifter's speech more eloquently states some of the principles in John Grady's thoughts, and these statements (along with his thoughts on storytelling) also bear a striking resemblance to the ideas of the ex-priest whom Billy meets in *The Crossing*.

There is an important difference, though, between these two meetings. While the ex-priest is left to tell his story and explain his views without interruption, Billy is highly inquisitive during the storyteller's speech, interrupting him frequently with questions. Christine Chollier posits that these interruptions indicate that Billy is highly "naive" (30); Billy simply doesn't understand the truth of what this man is telling him. Edwin T. Arnold likewise asserts, "At heart Billy knows, or hopes to discover, that what the stranger says is so" (66). Both of these readings misunderstand Billy's inquisitive nature in this dialogue. Billy does not tacitly accept the storyteller's conclusions, nor does he misunderstand them. Rather, he has become actively skeptical. He has heard all of this before, and he can no longer quietly listen to such tales. His questions are a counter to what the storyteller is telling him; Billy understands, due to his experiences with the *corridos*, that in telling a story one

falsifies events. He knows that the individual places his or her own order onto those events. Therefore, any value an individual places on these schemes is purely personal. That he thinks this can be seen when he tells the storyteller, “I think it would matter to you” (CP 286). This is not Billy’s naiveté speaking, it is his skepticism; he knows that it is impossible for one to have an absolute grasp on these issues.

Billy Parham is quite possibly the ideological center of *The Border Trilogy*, and while he ultimately cannot accept a fatalistic view of life, *Cities of the Plain* contains a passage that appears to indicate that his skepticism is not supported by the narrative voice. The last passage of the narrative prior to the epilogue says, “And all continued on to their appointed places which as some believe were chosen long ago even to the beginning of the world” (CP 261). This strongly intimates the ideas of the storyteller in the epilogue, and gives those ideas a privileged place in the novel. However, it must be noted that this is the only passage in the narrative voice that advocates determinism. Furthermore, just as the narrative voice often inhabits the voices of others in the novel, in this passage it inhabits the voice of “some” individuals. J. Douglas Canfield states that these sorts of passages in McCarthy “are the rhetoric of desire for a Transcendental Signifier whose Signified... circles back to that desire itself” (266). This passage is, therefore, not an assertion of fate’s existence, so much as it is an acknowledgement of the power the idea of fate holds over so many people within the worlds of McCarthy’s novels. In particular, this passage suggests the influence this myth has held over one of the trilogy’s main

characters, John Grady Cole; but his *unnecessary* death as a result of his fatalistic views indicates the novel's anti-deterministic stance. Still, the inclusion of this passage is enough to demonstrate that a subtle shift has occurred over the course of these novels. Whereas the earlier "westerns" reject fate as myth, *Cities of the Plain* acknowledges the power this myth has over the many characters who believe it. Regardless of the efficacy of fate, however, *Cities of the Plain* must be seen as a continuation of the uncertainty exhibited in *The Crossing*. The privileged position ascribed to Billy and his skeptical views in each novel are indicative of the epistemological limitations that obscure the human ability to understand the workings of the world and the individual's connection to that world.

CONCLUSION

The final scenes in *The Border Trilogy* follow an elderly Billy Parham as he wanders across the Southwestern United States "in the second year of the new millenium" (CP 264). He is a man apart from others; he is isolated from those that surround him. "The [old men around him] had little to say to him or he to them" (CP 265). Billy is temporally distant from the scalp hunters and manifest destiny of *Blood Meridian*, and he is vastly changed from the idealistic youth he was in *The Crossing*. Cormac McCarthy has shown in these tales and all those intervening the complete change that the Southwest has undergone in the past century and a half. From men dependent upon horses for transportation in *Blood Meridian* to the cars and airplanes that intrude in *All the Pretty Horses*, and from the atomic bomb at the conclusion of

The Crossing to the computer age and radar-tracking stations in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy has endeavored to display the ways in which people experience, interpret, and organize their existence in an ever-changing landscape.

The dialogue forged across these four novels closely analyzes the concepts of will and determinism (be it causal or fatalistic). At times these works seem to espouse one side or the other; *Blood Meridian* appears to accept a world of absolute will, whereas speeches given by characters in *The Border Trilogy* emphasize the opposite extreme of absolute determinism. In either case the individual is confronted with an absurd reality, in which his or her interaction with and understanding of the world are ineffectual and limited. And while at times one side of the debate is privileged over the other, the overriding concern of these works tends to be the inability of the individual to completely understand the forces that influence the world. *Cities of the Plain* ends with Billy's inability to know or understand himself or his life. Moreover, *The Crossing* shows that regardless of fate's possible truth, the belief in it can be explained as the imposition of human desires and order onto what is essentially without order. Hume's arguments against causal determinacy reflected in the epilogue to *Blood Meridian* might equally apply to those who believe in fate. They are like those who wander after the post-hole digger, and looking back at the holes, assume a causal connection between them based solely on sequence. If fate truly does exert a force on human events, then these novels would seem to suggest that it is ultimately unknowable. This is not to say that all of these novels absolutely reject fatalism; *Cities on the Plain* even goes so far as to acknowledge the power the

idea of fate can have. However, that this novel does this is indicative of how, by subtle shifts, each novel contributes to and modifies the views of the others, such that the absolute freedom of will espoused by *Blood Meridian* has given way to an acknowledgement of fate's power as myth in *Cities of the Plain*. Over all of these discussions, however, what ties these novels together is the epistemological uncertainty of human perceptions. Even Alfonsa, who is one of the staunchest supporters of will in McCarthy's works, says that her concerns take the form of a question. She says, "Because the question for me was always whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact" (*APH* 230).

It would be unwise for a reader of McCarthy's work to believe that the issues discussed in these novels are confined to these novels. Robert L. Jarrett states, "The Border Trilogy do not reflect a complete break from the earlier praxis of McCarthy's fiction; rather, they more clearly expose... tendencies already at work within the earlier fiction" (96). The philosophical and metaphysical inquiries being made in these texts are not new to them. The issues of fate and determinism are very present in McCarthy's earlier works, but they do not receive such explicit treatment as one finds in his "western" novels. Arnold agrees when he says, "To divide McCarthy's works in this fashion, to separate the trilogy from the stories and characters preceding it, misreads in both directions" ("Go to Sleep" 39). Instead, one must realize that the rudimentary aspects of the arguments made in these "western" novels can be found imbedded within his earlier works.

In form all of these novels, with the possible exception of *Cities of the Plain*, share many similarities with his older novels. They are all picaresque tales of travel, of journeys both temporal-spatial and psychological. The narratives of *Child of God*, *Suttree*, and *Outer Dark* are each to varying degrees picaresque like their successors, and this jolting manner of storytelling creates the impression of temporal displacement that tacitly questions the efficacy of any deterministic view of the world of the novel. *Child of God* has an especially chaotic plot. Vereen Bell states of this novel, “Even by McCarthy’s ordinary standards, an unusual degree of unassimilated raw material impedes—or seems to impede—the central narrative flow” (53). This style can most similarly be found in McCarthy’s first western novel, *Blood Meridian*. *Blood Meridian* is his most anti-deterministic novel in both what it explicitly states and implicitly presents through its form. That *Child of God* has a similar form shows that there is an intrinsic link between them and demonstrates that the lack of order indicated by the form of *Blood Meridian* is present also in the earlier work, although perhaps unconsciously, coincidentally, or secondarily.

The rudimentary aspects of an attack on determinism can also be seen in McCarthy’s novel *Outer Dark*, in which the wanderings of brother and sister Culla and Rinthy Holme revolve around finding their newborn child.⁹ This child provides the impetus of the novel; its presence (or lack thereof) is the determining factor in the events that unfold, driving the labyrinthine journeys of both Culla and Rinthy. Bell

⁹ Actually, Rinthy is explicitly looking for the child, Culla is not. However, his separate wanderings are indirectly brought about by the birth of the baby and his feelings on the matter.

states that the “child, rather than being proof against the world, is proof of it” (34). It is the being whose presence orders the world and narrative of the novel. However, this world is also dominated by the presence of three nightmarish figures that wander through it randomly wreaking havoc and murdering those they meet. Bell identifies them as being “anomic;” “They not only are bound nowhere but are bound, as the leader sardonically says, ‘by nothin’” (ibid. 41). These beings run counter to the notion of order, and when they come upon the child they cruelly murder it, undermining the very principle of order that has governed the novel to that point. Without the child the world of the novel becomes anomic, and the reader realizes that all of the order that was once in that world was imposed upon it by the characters in the novel. Although the landscapes are intrinsically different, the chaotic feel of the world in *Outer Dark* is suggestive of the world one later finds in *Blood Meridian*. In each, the landscape has a dreamlike quality that is intrinsically without any order save that which is placed upon it by individuals. This imposition of order can further be seen in *Outer Dark* when it is stated, “Besides names dies with the namers” (*OD* 236). This statement anticipates many in *The Border Trilogy*, and it implies that the order bestowed on places and things by naming them is not inherent to the things themselves, but belongs to the “namer;” it is imposed upon that which is inherently without order.

One finds in the title character of *Suttree* a predicate for aspects of both John Grady Cole and Billy Parham. One of the key observations Cornelius Suttree makes

in this novel is, “Nothing ever stops moving” (S 461). Moreover, as John M. Grammer notes, “The river [upon which Suttree lives] is, to put it mildly, a symbol: of life... and ultimately (as for Heraclitus) of the mysterious flux at the heart of existence” (40). As has been seen by now, this is a great concern of John Grady’s. However, while Suttree eventually comes to accept the ephemeral nature of the universe, John Grady fatally rejects this tenet. They represent two opposed positions of this argument that finds its most explicit voice in McCarthy’s western works. Arnold further connects these two characters when he discusses a dream John Grady has in *All the Pretty Horses*. “The resonance of the dream repeats a long-held McCarthy concept that all life is flux, that all being is energy... as we read in *Suttree*” (“Go to Sleep” 53).

While the connection between Suttree and John Grady is largely one of ideological antagonism, that between Suttree and Billy Parham is one of similarity. Bell states of Suttree, “He... is capable of understanding and of subscribing to any one of a number of the theories of existence..., but he eschews theory as vehemently as he does middle-class industry and sobriety” (73). Suttree is an intellectual with an analytic capacity far beyond that of Billy’s, but they are similar in that each regards theories of existence with skepticism. Billy does so more passively than Suttree, but each finds it difficult to wholeheartedly subscribe to any philosophical view.

These earlier novels all display interesting connections in thought, substance, and form with McCarthy’s later novels of the American Southwest. The reader finds in them the rudimentary antecedents of issues that will become some of the central

concerns of his later works. In his later, “western” novels, McCarthy takes the bits and pieces he has previously stated about matters of will and determinism and marshals them into a powerful intertextual dialogue on the nature and perception of human existence, and all of the confusion and chaos attendant with it. Many of these problems are summed up in a surprisingly poignant scene in *Child of God* in which it is stated, “Given charge Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men’s souls” (CG 136). Regardless of the efficacy of fate or will, the chaotic and absurd worlds of McCarthy’s novels reflect an existential void, one that obscures the individual’s connection to reality and the forces that may or may not shape it.

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