

# PHILOLOGIA

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**Title: A World “Made of Breath”: Cormac McCarthy and the Oral Storytelling Tradition**

Cormac McCarthy is an American author who has written many novels and plays, including literary “hits” such as *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*. Though one may be tempted to categorize him for further study, McCarthy is notoriously difficult to classify; in doing so, a person “pigeonholes” McCarthy in the most negative sense of the word. McCarthy is taught in university courses ranging from modernist American literature and Southwestern American literature to contemporary fiction and Southern literature. As Dana Phillips astutely observes, scholars of the author’s oeuvre are generally divided into two camps: one that classifies him as a Southern writer, and the other that considers him a Western writer of the American notion and tradition. Neither classification, however, captures McCarthy and his works with full accuracy. Furthermore, as Steven Frye and Timothy Parrish have noted in their respective articles that, though McCarthy’s specific reading habits are not readily known, scholars are aware of his literary influences. They range from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Lucretius, St. Augustine, and the King James Bible to William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Ernest Hemingway, Herman Melville, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. In short, McCarthy has been shaped by a Western narrative tradition that both predates literature (“the art of letters”) itself and continues to make its presence felt in contemporary literary realities (Scholes et al. 17).

In light of McCarthy’s relationship and deference to the Western literary and narrative tradition—he himself admits “that books are made out of books”—I will examine McCarthy’s novels *The Crossing* and *The Road* through the theoretical framework of narratology (Woodward 3). Furthermore, I will examine the aforementioned novels alongside *The Nature of Narrative* by Robert Scholes and other studies in narratology. *The Nature of Narrative* tracks the trajectory of the narrative tradition (oral, classical, etc.) to its present status in the form of the novel. An in-depth study of the narrative tradition of which McCarthy was acutely cognizant throughout his writing career begs the question: how are *The Road* and *The Crossing* in dialogue with certain aspects of narratology?

In response to the research question above, two specific areas of study in *The Nature of Narrative* are relevant to this research project: the oral heritage, or tradition, and the dichotomy of “illustrative” and “representational” meaning in narrative. The oral tradition and the issue of meanings in narrative are intertwined. First, Scholes defines meaning in a narrative work of art as “a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the ‘real’ world, the apprehendable universe” (82). As one may surmise, the relationship between the world of the author, transcribed and preserved as a fixed text at a fixed moment in history, and that of the reader un beholden to that same particular time leads to complications: a collision between the reality in which the text was composed and the reality in which the text is read. Scholes notes, however, that in an oral culture, the disparity between the world of the author and the world of the reader is mitigated. As Scholes claims, “In an oral culture, this problem does not exist. Singer and listeners share the same world and see it in the same way” (82). Furthermore, in a more in-depth study of the oral storytelling tradition, Scholes observes that “[e]ach performance is a separate act of creation. Until he actually sings a narrative, that song does not exist, except as a potential song among infinitely many others in the abstract apparatus of the singer’s tradition” (22). Scholes implies that an oral culture better bridges any disparity between

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the world of the performer/storyteller and the world of the audience than its “fixed text” counterpart.

Western literature often aspires to imitate or duplicate the real world despite its status as an artifact one step removed from actuality. Interestingly, although McCarthy is influenced by a Western narrative tradition, his works seem to be outliers in the general mimetic tendency of Western literature. As Steven Shaviro notes, “[t]he language of *Blood Meridian* is not primarily mimetic, as in classical models of the novel; but neither is it turned inward to thought or back upon itself, as is canonically the case with modernist texts. It is rather in intimate contact with the world in a powerfully nonrepresentational way” (153). Shaviro’s observation is crucial to understanding McCarthy not only as a novelist practiced in the art of letters (literature) but also one whose works (especially *The Crossing* and *The Road*) may constitute one extended attempt to examine, endorse, and challenge the oral storytelling tradition as much as possible within the confines of a modern culture of written letters. That is, McCarthy’s attempt at mimesis is not an attempt to capture a “slice” of real life or to pass his works as “real.” Rather, McCarthy’s mimetic effort is directed at the oral storytelling tradition; a tradition that equally may not capture the totality of reality but is simultaneously made true in the very act of telling the tale and in constructing the narrative world to which both teller and listener are privy.

## METHODOLOGY

The primary sources for this project consist of two novels by Cormac McCarthy: *The Crossing* and *The Road*. Of McCarthy’s expansive oeuvre, the oral storytelling tradition is most present as both a plot element and a theme in *The Crossing* and *The Road*, respectively. Through a close reading and analysis of the novels, I examine how the oral tradition is manifest in the plots of these novels and how the oral tradition is constructed (or replicated) and communicated to readers of these novels. Furthermore, I consider this study’s contribution to Cormac McCarthy scholarship and the Western literary/narrative tradition as we conceive it today.

Secondary sources will include book length studies and journal articles specific to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing* and *The Road*. Though most secondary sources consist of articles or book chapters dedicated to the two novels, there are also secondary sources that examine other works by McCarthy but nonetheless contribute to understanding McCarthy as a novelist. Other secondary sources pertain to the theoretical framework of narratology through which I examine and contextualize McCarthy’s works. A seminal source is *The Nature of Narrative* by Robert Scholes et al. More specifically, I will focus on two chapters in *The Nature of Narrative*: Chapter 2: “The Oral Heritage of Written Narrative” and Chapter 4: “Meaning in Narrative.” Lastly, secondary sources include texts that clarify terms employed in this project: “the Western literary tradition” or mimesis. Through a diverse set of secondary sources, this project offers contrasting perspectives on often unclear terminology for readers who may not be well-versed on these topics. Some of these works will be selected essays in *Illuminations* by Walter Benjamin and *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* by Harold Bloom.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The range of topics in McCarthy scholarship is as expansive as McCarthy’s writing career of fifty-plus years. They consider McCarthy’s works alongside, for example, American history, historical revisionism, philosophy, mythology, film studies, and most recently, gender and ethnic studies. A case in point is Timothy Parrish’s “Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*: The First and Last Book of America.” Parrish examines *Blood*

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Meridian alongside a study of postmodernist history and contemporary “identity politics.” He asserts that the violence portrayed in *Blood Meridian* is perhaps the continuation of “the original violent encounter between Indians and European interests” and “the collision between the New World (America) and the Old World (Europe) of the fifteenth century” (Parrish 85). Regardless of whether one agrees with Parrish’s interpretations of *Blood Meridian*, one cannot deny his astute placement of *Blood Meridian* in some form of tradition or, to say the least, a lode of discursive continuity, be it historical or literary in nature. As Parrish claims: “If history, and thus civilization, is but the continuation of an eternal violence by different names, then *Blood Meridian* implies both the beginning and the end to human history, and its true concern is with its own status as the book that binds the world together” (85). As Parrish does with *Blood Meridian*, I hope to place *The Road* in a larger, holistic context, that of the narrative tradition.

Though scholars writing on McCarthy’s *The Crossing* and *The Road* have dealt with constructing meaning, they often do not explicate oral storytelling as the specific means by which this construction of meaning is made possible. By way of illustration, Erik J. Wielenberg in “God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” asserts that the man “needs to believe that he is on a divine mission” but does not specify how the man fulfills this mission (3). In fact, as I illustrate below, the character fulfills this mission through the narrative constructs he shares with his son. Similarly, Allen Josephs finds his argument on archival records of McCarthy’s *The Road*. Citing the Cormac McCarthy Papers at Texas State University, Josephs claims, “it is clear from the very beginning that ambivalence about God was to form a central theme of *The Road*” (134). Though I agree with Josephs’ statement, I contend that the narrative oral storytelling tradition fills the vacuum left in a world in which God’s presence is ambiguous at best. For though Dianne C. Luce contends that characters “participate in the life of the world through narrative acts that create meaning and value,” in a post-apocalyptic world such as that of *The Road*, narrative acts may very well be God and the world itself in one (207). More importantly, I take these insights into consideration but also add to the scholarly conversation in the next sections by emphasizing the oral tradition and its far-reaching implications not only for McCarthy’s work but for literature itself.

## THE ORAL STORYTELLING TRADITION IN THE CROSSING

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing* depicts Billy Parham’s journeys into Mexico, some of which are undertaken with his brother Boyd. Though he initially crosses into Mexico to return a she-wolf to her native land, Billy’s life takes unexpected turns, prompting further excursions. During these trips, Billy runs into an array of characters: the old wolf-trapper Don Arnulfo, the priest, the blind man, etc. These characters philosophize about the nature and reality of the world in extended oral monologues that render Billy’s wanderings a mere installment of a story that is a story of the world.

The oral storytelling tradition or some form of oral transmission is manifest in *The Crossing*’s opening passage. The act of oral transmission comes after the action of Billy’s riding into Hidalgo, competes with it for prominence, and ultimately supplants it: “He [Billy] carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both Spanish and English” (TC 3). On one level, Billy’s naming the landscape, birds, and animals in Spanish and English conjures atavistic images or at least subtle evocations of the first and/or primitive man (say, Adam of the Judeo-Christian tradition or simply the first *Homo sapiens* to whom we are all progeny) as well as to English and Spanish settlers of a New World, that “new country” which “was rich and wild” (TC 3). At this point in the narrative Billy does not yet have a name.

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He is referred to as an anonymous “he” of an equally nameless group referred to as “they.” The lack of a name contributes to resonances of a continuous narrative un beholden to a specific individual or a specific time period. Here, Billy (“he”) is merely one installment of a greater “[He]”—humankind—that has woven itself into the landscape as its temporary inhabitant and its inevitable departed.

To illustrate the point made above, at one point in *The Crossing*, Billy and Boyd are reconfigured into historical abstractions and new additions to a subsuming, continuous narrative. As the boys encounter the Tarahumara, we are told:

An old man and a young boy were playing home-made violins and the boy stopped playing but the old man played on. The Tarahumara had watered here a thousand years and a good deal of what could be seen in the world had passed this way. Armored Spaniards and hunters and trappers and grandes and their women and slaves and fugitives and armies and revolutions and the dead and the dying. And all that was seen was told and all that was told was remembered. Two pale and wasted orphans from the north in outsized hats were easily accommodated. (TC 192)

Here, Billy and Boyd are transmuted into “two pale and wasted orphans from the north” as part of a history of at least “a thousand years” into which they “were easily accommodated” (TC 192). McCarthy portrays the brothers not as the central protagonists of *The Crossing* but simply as two additional figures now inscribed into the history of the Tarahumara as artifacts no different than the “names and dates . . . written in the rock by men long dead” (TC 163). More significantly, getting to the crux of the oral storytelling tradition, this history of the Tarahumara is passed down orally as some form of narrative that is simply told and is thus remembered. The claim that “all that was seen was told and all that was told was remembered,” though ambitious, is authenticated prior to the Tarahumara’s “vignette” of a world history by the old man’s and the young boy’s disparate reactions to Billy and Boyd (TC 192).

As the Parham brothers pass through the Tarahumara land, the young boy stops playing his violin. However, the old man’s reaction to them is markedly different from that of the boy’s. As Billy and Boyd pass through, the old man with his homemade violin “play[s] on,” paying no attention to them (TC 192). The old man’s imperturbable demeanor lies in the claim that “all that was seen was told and all that was told was remembered” (TC 192). Through his participation in this oral transmission of “history,” either as listener or teller, he bespeaks “a view of a world provisional” and contingent upon oral transmission for man’s bearing in the world, “[a]s if to steady the world, or himself in it” (TC 193, 284). However, this notion of steadying the world or at least trying to “steady” oneself in it hearkens back to the opening passage in which Billy attempts to find his bearings by naming the features of the landscape, animals, and birds. This continuity of the oral storytelling tradition, its atavistic resonances of the first *Homo sapiens* to the settlement of the New World, its role as the anchor to which the thousand-year history of the Tarahumara is moored, and its prominence not only in the opening passage but in the late 1930s in which the novel is set, suggests that the oral storytelling tradition is the phenomenon or the ultimate contingency upon which a matrix of contingencies depend, binding the world together from its ascertainable inception to its eventual end.

To return to the novel’s beginning, after the Parhams have presumably settled into a new house in Hidalgo County, Billy lies awake at night and listens to Boyd’s breathing. Again, the action of the passage—Billy’s lying awake and listening and Boyd’s sleeping—are succeeded and superseded by an act of oral transmission in the form of storytelling as Billy “would whisper half aloud to him [Boyd] as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have” (TC 3). In an extensive study of *The Crossing*, Dianne C. Luce asserts that Billy’s “mapping the world for his baby brother and telling him stories about the future” is Billy’s attempt “to plot his own course

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even as a child” and “to script his own life” against the currents of a predetermined life woven by a deity or of a life that has a logic of its own (196-197). Luce finds ironic Billy’s charting the features of the landscape, the animals, and the birds in the opening passage. This irony is doubly true when one considers that Grant County and Hidalgo County are themselves evidence of prior people’s efforts to chart what was once a “new country” where one “could ride clear to Mexico and not strike a crossfence” (TC 3). There is, however, a subtler irony in Billy’s naming the features of the landscape when it is contextualized within Don Arnulfo’s notion of the world “made of breath only” (TC 46). When Billy goes to Don Arnulfo seeking counsel in trapping a she-wolf, Don Arnulfo extemporizes that:

Men wish to be serious but they do not understand how to be so. Between their acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them. (TC 46)

This passage implies that Billy’s naming the features of the landscape has only contributed to a world “made of breath” in which humankind sees “the acts of their own hands...or that which they name” (TC 45-46). Consequently, then, the very efficacy of the oral tradition or orality itself in transmitting “true” tales or histories is dubious. For if there is another world that “is invisible to [us]” how “real” is the world created by humankind’s acts of labeling and naming the world (TC 46)? Furthermore, Billy’s naming of the landscape and his mapping the life he will share with Boyd is not only a contribution to the world “made of breath” as noted earlier but is also a continuation of this oral storytelling tradition by which humankind has woven itself into the world as tale. If it is a continuation of this oral storytelling tradition evocative of the first Homo sapiens or New World settlers, then the opening passage’s literal status as “the beginning” to a story (The Crossing) is itself doubtful and readers themselves have entered into “the middle” of a story that is the story of the world. This naming of the landscape is made all the more ironic in that the world “made of breath” to which Billy is contributing and continuing is as fictitious as the “story world” into which readers have entered. Ultimately, The Crossing, then, may be no more than a continuation, an installment of a larger story that cannot be fully apprehended partly due to the oral tradition’s own limitations but also because events that have occurred but are not orally transmitted, recorded, or documented are lost to us. These later conversations with Don Arnulfo give us a new perspective on the opening passage of the novel, to which I will return now.

We are told that Billy and Boyd had lives prior to their moving to Hidalgo County as we are told “they came south out of Grant County” (TC 3). Though Boyd is a baby at this point in the novel, Billy, who is old enough to ride a horse, obviously did not come into being as a boy; he too has a history, a life from birth onwards. However, their lives in Grant County are lost to us simply because we are not told by the storyteller Cormac McCarthy via omniscient narrator. The only detail provided is that “[i]n that country they’d quit lay the bones of a sister and the bones of his maternal grandmother” (TC 3). Yet details of their lives, their histories, their relationships with Billy and Boyd are quite literally buried in the ground, lost to readers, and only scantily exhumed by Billy in the form of stories. The opening passage then implies that what is not told or recounted is lost to us. Consequently, when the prior assertion is contextualized within Don Arnulfo’s notion of the world in which humankind is only aware of the order in creation that they imposed upon it via labels, narratives and histories, oral or otherwise, any apprehension of the world of The Crossing is exposed as forebodingly fragile.

By extension and way of illustration, towards the end of the novel, Billy sleeps on “the broad Animas plain,” in close proximity to the natural world, with “a small fire” as the “winter stars slip their hold and race to

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their deaths in the darkness” amid the “flare of lightning over Mexico” (TC 346). Despite Billy’s closeness to the “real,” natural world, he is denied a communion with nature or a spiritual experience by which he romantically apprehends the totality of the cosmos (TC 46). Instead, Billy soberly comprehends the world as rendered by Don Arnulfo: “he [Billy] said softly...that the one thing he knew of all things claimed to be known was that there was no certainty to any of it” (TC 346). Billy realizes towards the end of his journey that, as eloquently and succinctly put by “the blind man,” “the world [is] sentient to its core and secret and black beyond men’s imaginings” (TC 283). The world is made of breath only to the extent to which humankind has arbitrarily named, labeled and transcribed it and, most forebodingly, may be no world at all, being a fictitious concoction with “varying relationships to truth” as the oral stories by which it is carried down from generations prior (Luce 196).

Having established the unreliable nature of oral storytelling and orality itself in apprehending reality, McCarthy reveals through Don Arnulfo’s world “made of breath” the Borgesian “counterbook” to the “book” that is the oral tradition (TC 46). In other words, to borrow Jorge Luis Borges’s quotation that “a book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete,” McCarthy has included in *The Crossing* via Don Arnulfo’s notion of the world the shortcomings of the oral tradition (77). These shortcomings are ironically conveyed by the oral storytelling tradition, exposing the tradition as artifice and as dubious in veracity. In other words, the oral storytelling tradition is only complete to the extent to which oral storytellers include as part of the world they speak into being their own failures to facilitate a perfect comprehension of reality or capture the world itself by including that which contradicts an oral performance as all-encompassing or all-knowing. Simply put, a complete and accurate oral tradition includes acknowledgement of its own limitations.

The priest acknowledges this when he speaks to Billy about the world that is the world of *The Crossing*. That is, that “this world which also seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale” (TC 143). In what is arguably the central “thesis” of *The Crossing* that binds the novel’s separate narratives together, the priest acknowledges that “[e]verything is necessary. Every least thing . . . Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised” (TC 143). The priest, in offering the “counterbook” to the oral storytelling tradition, is cast in irony in that, as mentioned before, the very medium by which he delivers the limitations of oral storytelling is oral transmission. However, many readers often miss an important and far more subtle third player in the oral storytelling performance in which the priest and Billy are engaged: “the profoundest silence” that intrudes between the priest’s pauses in his extended monologue and serves not to represent a “counterbook” to the oral tradition but to indicate that which precedes and has always preceded the oral tradition itself and thus encompasses it (TC 143).

If the Western landscape of McCarthy’s fiction is said to be a type of character, as some scholars assert, this “profoundest silence” too may be a type of character with something to say and something to represent: the world “in its ultimate granulation” (TC 112). Billy encounters this world in a dream, what Edwin T. Arnold claims “may...provide direct contact to the true and essential, unmediated by . . . symbolic substitution or undistorted by intentional misrepresentation” (49). In this dream, Billy sees that which has preceded the world of *The Crossing* with its matrix of oral storytelling performances and what is waiting to claim its original and rightful place the moment any oral storytelling or any form of orality ceases to be:

His father’s eyes searched the coming of the night in the deepening redness beyond the rim of the world and those eyes seemed to contemplate with a terrible equanimity the cold and the dark and the silence that moved upon him and then all was dark and all was swallowed up and in the silence he heard somewhere a solitary bell that tolled and ceased and then he woke. (112)

This “profoundest silence” may represent the world as it once was, prior to human speech, and as it will be again,

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cold, dark, and silent. It renders the oral storytelling tradition as the true anomaly, a type of usurper of a throne upon which once reigned the world that “moved in eternal darkness” as “darkness was its true nature and true condition” (TC 283). Nowhere is this made clearer in McCarthy’s oeuvre than in *The Road*, in which the “cold and the dark and the silence” that lay in wait at the periphery of *The Crossing*, windowed away in dreams, has come to reclaim the world, a world merely “[s]ustained by a breath, trembling and brief” (TR 11). In other words, if we are to discuss McCarthy’s engagement with the oral storytelling tradition in *The Crossing* and *The Road*, we must acknowledge the extent to which McCarthy is aware that as with all performances (of a tradition), the oral storytelling performance too has a beginning, a middle, and an eventual end that is to be followed by that which was always there: silence; whether the performance is held around a campfire or at a grand concert hall is of no matter.

## THE ORAL STORYTELLING TRADITION IN THE ROAD

In *The Road* the matrix of stories of the world as portrayed in *The Crossing* is arguably reduced to a single story about a man and his son struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic reality. As they trudge towards the coast for refuge, they encounter vestiges of the former world—destroyed homes, burned cities, ruined libraries—indicative not only of the apocalypse but of the absolute truth of the world that has accompanied it. The post-apocalyptic world—arguably the only objective truth in the world of the novel—stands in stark contrast to the world the man and his son have created between themselves through oral narratives, which ride on their precious breaths and evoke the ancient oral tradition.

The apocalypse in *The Road* is not a random or meaningless event. Rather, it may be understood as an apocalypse quite traditional in nature, its meaning derived from the Greek term *apokalypsis*— the revelation of something previously hidden. In following the logic of this definition, the apocalypse in *The Road* is not so much concerned with a disaster, man-made or natural. In fact, McCarthy himself has remained mum about the true cause of the apocalypse. By extension, even if the cause were to be revealed, it would only be a physical manifestation of destruction (fire, flooding, meteor strike, etc.) that betrays a far deeper, nuanced apocalypse. This “nuanced” apocalypse of which I speak is concerned with an apocalypse in which *The Crossing*’s “world made of breath” has vacated its provisional position for what always was the “[b]arren, silent, godless” landscape (TR 4). McCarthy’s decision, then, to place *The Road* in a post-apocalyptic setting is not an arbitrary coincidence or his catering to a popular literary genre. Rather, *The Road*’s post-apocalyptic setting is that which was always there, previously hidden but hidden no longer in the world of *The Road*. For Billy, if the world wholly apprehended were merely a dream, for the man and his son in *The Road* it is the reality in which they struggle to survive.

This portrayal of the world as revealed, however, is not a fatalistic dismissal of the oral storytelling tradition. Rather, *The Road* may be interpreted as the ultimate endorsement of the oral storytelling tradition at its most elementary level: its ability to create and recreate meaning through oral narratives that are more or less fictitious amid “the absolute truth” of the post-apocalyptic world. Simply put, the stories between the man and his son are made up. One may go further and call them outright lies. Yet these stories’ power to have “real” effects on the man’s and son’s quest for survival despite their fictitious nature that may, in fact, be the miracle underpinning not only the novel but the very notion of storytelling itself. The ultimate struggle, then, in *The Road* is not between the man and his son against the roving cannibals, nor is the novel solely concerned with a simplistic confrontation of good versus evil. Rather, the central struggle around which the novel revolves is the

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oral tradition's ability to recreate worlds and meaning against and despite a pervasive "absolute truth." If in *The Crossing* the world "made of breath" is portrayed as limited and shortsighted on the part of humankind, in *The Road*, the "precious breath" is all that stands between the man and his son and death (TR 3). Furthermore, its limited and shortsighted nature is seen as inherent to narrative, which makes the narrative's efficacy to combat the absolute truth of the world only that much more miraculous.

While *The Crossing* commences with Billy's naming features of the landscape, the animals, the birds, and the world being made and remade through oral transmission, *The Road* begins with the world as is, as finally revealed. The world of *The Road* consists of "[n]ights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before" (TR 3). Furthermore, we are told that the man "looked toward the east for any light but there was none" (TR 3). The lack of light and the pervasive darkness is significant for several reasons. On a superficial level, it is a result of the ash clouds that have obscured the sun. However, on a deeper level, the grey days may simply be the culmination or a reflection of the way the world was (as apprehended by Billy in his dream) in which the sun that "sank eternally" is truly no more and the world-as-tale has been exposed as a farce and a performance that has ended (TC 6). There are also cosmological undertones in this passage in that most cosmological or creation stories begin with the advent of light. In the world of *The Road*, however, this light is no more and the darkness approaches, in what may be interpreted as events indicative of an anti-creation (destruction) myth. Subtly hidden in this passage of receding creation, however, is "the precious breath" of the child, the first inklings of a type of "creation story 2.0" not heralded by light but by the breath upon which ride the words and stories shared between the man and his son (TR 3).

By way of illustration, the notion of a "creation story 2.0" is depicted further in the opening passage in which the world is revealed and subsequently departs. In a dream, the man enters a mysterious and unnamed cave, what Walter Benjamin would call "the innermost chamber of the realm of created things" or what is perhaps the literal manifestation of "hyponoia": the under-meaning or meaning beneath the surface (107). In this cave imbued with cosmological undertones ("the black and ancient lake"), the only "dialogue" that breaks the silence is from the earth itself: "[t]olling in the silence" are "the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease" amid "[d]eep stone flues where the water dripped and sang" (TR 3). In this dream, the man and his son encounter a mysterious creature. While Lydia Cooper calls this creature a "monster" that "strikes a terrifying note" by its "possession of a heart and a mind," there is no indication in the novel that this creature is terrifying (221). Rather, the man and his son remain coolly detached when they encounter this creature and are even physically distant from it as the creature is on

"the far shore" separated from the man and his son by a body of water (TR 3). The lack of any interaction and the physical apartness between the man and his son and the creature is more telling; it is indicative of a worldview present in both *The Crossing* and *The Road* of a world which functions irrespective of and ultimately eludes human enterprises.

Keeping in mind that McCarthy is greatly influenced by Plato and remaining cognizant of the dream's

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cosmological undertones, readers may conclude that this creature may be the Living Creature from Plato's *Timaeus*. In Plato's words, "this world came to be...in very truth a living creature with soul and reason" (qtd. in Fraser 142). This Living Creature is the world in literally its clearest and most transparent manifestation, "pale and naked and translucent" while the man and his son observe its inner workings: "Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell" (TR 4). As examined by J.T. Fraser in *Of Time, Passion, and Knowledge*, Plato's Living Creature has "no eyes, for there is nothing external to it to behold" (142). Fraser's image is corroborated by McCarthy's description of the creature as having "eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders" (TR 3-4). Though the extent to which McCarthy intended to portray or replicate Plato's Living Creature is unknown, the creature's departure as it lopes "soundlessly into the dark," presumably forever, may be interpreted as the world finally made transparent to the man and his son in keeping with the traditional definition of an apocalypse as noted above (TR 4). By extension, an attempt to reconfigure the opening passage as a type of prologue to *The Road* would not be off the mark. In this "prologue," the world prior to the apocalypse is rendered as an illusion by the Living Creature, after which readers are introduced to the new world: the post-apocalyptic reality heralded not by any light but by the "first gray light" (TR 4; emphasis added). In this new, post-apocalypse world reduced to a "raw core of parsible entities" grand notions of an oral storytelling tradition (or literature and the art of letters, for that matter) have suffered a similar end (TR 88). *The Road* dismisses the art of letters and the notion of a tradition, a canon, or *The Crossing's* matrix of stories in a challenge to a modern culture of written letters. What endearingly remains instead is that which undergirds literature, McCarthy's oeuvre, and the oral tradition itself: the individual act of storytelling. In other words, the final disclosure and departure of Plato's Living Creature (the world) along with the subsequent depiction of the man and the "first gray light" lends cosmological weight and authority to a tale of a man and his son who confront a post-apocalyptic reality through acts of creation in the form of oral narratives (TR 4).

It is important to note that in *The Road*, the notion of an oral storytelling tradition is moot. What is instead depicted in the novel is oral storytelling or, put more simply, stories, understood by the man's son to simply be "like dreams" or "just things that you think about" (TR 268). The son's rudimentary understanding of stories, however, is understandable given not only his young age but also his having been born after the apocalypse. The man reflects that "[s]ometimes the child [his son] would ask him questions about the world that for him [son] was not even a memory....There is no past" (TR 53-54). This reflection is the means by which the notion of a tradition of oral storytelling comes apart. Walter Benjamin claims that "memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation" (98). Furthermore, Harold Bloom asserts that the notion of a canon is "identical with the literary art of Memory" (17). For the son, who has no memory of the former, pre-apocalyptic world and by extension has no formal education whatsoever upon which to build the notion of a history, a tradition, or a canon, a tradition of oral storytelling is insignificant if not completely obsolete.

Approximately midway in the novel, we see a poignant scene involving the man and a ruined home library. The man observes "[s]oggy volumes in a bookcase" and we are told, "[h]e took one down and opened it and then put it back" (TR 130). That the man encounters "volumes in a bookcase" is significant in that it implies a type of contingency: a single volume depends on what precedes it and is redefined by that which succeeds it (TR 130). It is this type of contingency upon which a tradition or canon is founded. Perhaps more consequently, for a writer who has admitted "books are made out of books," a scene in which the notion of a tradition or canon (literary or otherwise) is arguably dismissed by the novel's protagonist (the man simply opens a volume of a series and puts it back) is unexpected, if not alarming; it is also, however, rife with deeper meaning (Woodward

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3). Though this scene portrays a possible dismissal of a tradition or canon, this is not to say that the act of storytelling itself is forced to the same fate.

What follows the man's interaction (or lack thereof) with the volume seems to endorse the act of storytelling at its most basic, even primitive level: an individual orally transmitting a narrative construct to another individual in a world in which books have become mere artifacts. One of these narrative constructs shared between the man and his son contends that they are "carrying the fire" (TR 83). In the library scene, after the man puts back the ruined book, we are told that "he found a candle . . . and put it in his pocket" (TR 130), the candle being a physical manifestation which lends a tangible credence to the man's and son's narrative construct of "carrying the fire." As the man walks out of the ruined home in which the library was situated, he sees "the absolute truth of the world . . . The crushing black vacuum of the universe" (TR 130). At this point, there seem to be two competing "truths": the absolute truth of the world in its "[d]arkness implacable" but also the narrative construct of "carrying the fire" (TR 130, 83). Simply put, which is more real: the world as revealed or the oral stories through which the man and his son find meaning?

Returning to the narrative constructs between the man and his son, though the truth of the world is "implacable," this does not mean that orality (not only stories but the very words spoken) is without the ability to remake or contribute to the reality in which the man and his son find themselves. In two separate scenes, the man and his son share a conversation in which the father tells his son to watch what he, the son, says in a matter-of-fact display of a parent disciplining his child:

[son] I wish I was with my mom.

He [man/father] didnt answer. He sat beside the small figure wrapped in the quilts and blankets. After a while he [man/father] said: You mean you wish that you were dead.

Yes.

You mustnt say that.

But I do.

Dont say it. It's a bad thing to say.

I cant help it.

I know. But you have to. (55)

In a separate occasion, we see a similar scolding:

[man/father] There's no one to see. Do you want to die? Is that what you want?

I dont care, the boy said, sobbing. I dont care.

The man stopped. He stopped and squatted and held him. I'm sorry, he said. Dont say that. You mustnt say that. (85)

In both scenes, the reason for the man's reprimanding his son is unclear. Given the post-apocalyptic setting, it is unlikely that the man is trying to teach his son proper social conventions for their own sake. Furthermore, as heartbreaking and as difficult as it may be for a father to hear his own child say that he wishes to die, this explanation too falls short. Though the possibilities above are not invalid, they are encompassed by the notion that the words spoken through our "precious breath" have immense power to recreate reality (TR 3). The man tells his son that he must not say that he does not care or that he wishes to die merely because the remarks are impolite, insensitive, or even painful for the father. Rather, words which have not been spoken into being don't have a reality yet, known or unknown, and words spoken out of rage or by one's feeling upset (in both instances the child is upset), cannot be unspoken and only contribute to a reality that can be remade through orality but not unmade. In other words, the reality prior to the child's negative remarks cannot "be made right again" and

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this may be one of McCarthy's most foreboding lessons: something, anything that once was, can, in an instant, never be again (TR 287). What the man most fears, then, is that the child may very well come to believe that which he has carelessly spoken; that in fact he does wish to die; that he really does not care anymore, which runs counter to the father's narrative that the good guys "keep trying. They don't give up" (TR 137). The very act of orality, then, and of speaking realities into existence that we then subsequently inhabit, known or not, is portrayed as terrifyingly powerful in its ability to beautifully sustain life but to also contribute to one's premature demise.

If we are to take at face value McCarthy's belief that "books are made out books . . . . The novel depends for its life on novels that have been written" we may surmise that *The Crossing* and *The Road* are in dialogue with one another; they are, after all, the two novels among McCarthy's many works that, in my opinion, examine and challenge the oral tradition (Woodward 3). If *The Crossing* is a type of precursor to the *The Road* in its portrayal of the oral tradition, the concluding passage of Part I of *The Crossing* may contribute to further understanding not only of *The Road* but of McCarthy's views on storytelling that bind his various works together as a collective whole. This passage serves as a beautiful but also foreboding tribute to the deceased she-wolf, which as explained by Don Arnulfo, "is made the way the world is made," that is, out of "breath only" (TC 46). It is also, however, a tribute to the sheer power of storytelling, orality, and the words we contribute to the world we inhabit and perpetually recreate for better or for worse, corroborated by *The Road*'s man and his son. They have constructed a relationship in which they are "each the other's world entire" through the narratives they share, by the words they speak but also withhold from each other (TR 6).

The breath motif depicted in *The Crossing* also makes a presence in *The Road* in a passage involving the man and his wife. Prior to the wife's departure and subsequent suicide, she tells him:

The one thing I can tell you is that you won't survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. (57)

Here, the fictitious and intangible nature of narrative is laid bare. At best, it is a "passable ghost" that subsists on "phantom crumbs" equally unreal as the "ghost" to which they are contributing (TR 57). Though the scene portrays a struggle between the man and his wife, with the man imploring his wife to stay while she is determined to end her life, a much subtler struggle is occurring simultaneously between the objective truth of the apocalypse and a fictitious meaning or purpose the man must concoct in order to survive. The wife insists that she is "speaking the truth" and later tells the man "[y]ou have no argument because there is none," to which he quietly acquiesces perhaps in agreement (TR 56-57). In the argument between the man and his wife, the wife wins; she eventually leaves and commits suicide. In the struggle between the truth of the apocalypse and phantom narratives, however, the intangible "passable ghosts" that are oral narratives prevail, to which *The Road* is a testament (TR 57).

The tale that is *The Road*, then, is arguably one to which all tales and stories stand subjugate in that the very essence of storytelling—fictitious creations breathed and spoken into being—is challenged, threatened, but ultimately victorious. The man himself states: "there is no other tale to tell" (TR 32). Though his claim may be interpreted as a type of literary trope regarding a man having a single life to live or being unable to change the past, its implications run much deeper. McCarthy ambitiously, perhaps even audaciously, suggests that *The Road* is the story underpinning all stories in its vindication of fictional narrative's power "to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can," to borrow a phrase from *The Crossing* (TC 127).

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In other words, *The Road* is a novel that examines the very efficacy of storytelling, and McCarthy suggests that only after storytelling is justified at its most elementary level—as portrayed by the man and his son—can there be other tales to tell.

The ultimate truth, however, which renders the notion of competing truths a secondary concern is the son's appropriation of storytelling as a means of survival despite his lack of any notion of a storytelling tradition. The son only becomes aware of some form of a storytelling tradition at the very end of the novel when he is told by the woman who adopts him into her family after his father's death that, "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (TR 286). Yet interestingly the boy survives until the novel's conclusion and finds meaning in the world through narrative. What McCarthy may be suggesting here is that, much like the jar of clear water on which the man and his son depend for survival, and in which he sees a "single bit of sediment coiling in the jar on some slow hydraulic axis" there is a cosmic, even mechanical precision untraceable by the naked eye on which humankind, the purest form of which being the child, depends for sustenance (TR 123). This may be the "divine" truth of the novel to the extent to which something can in fact be divine in the "godless" landscape of *The Road*. As the man himself says: "If he [the child] is not the word of God God never spoke" (TR 4, 5). McCarthy suggests here that if there is to be some form of truth divined from the post-apocalyptic world, we may observe the child. In observing the child, we see a truth to which competing truths stand subjugate: the jar of clear water within us, which houses a narrative-making or storytelling instinct inseparable from the human constitution.

## CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the introduction, Cormac McCarthy is notoriously difficult to categorize. Scholars agree that he is an American author. However, this categorization is made ironic in light of McCarthy's expansive literary influences, many of which date back to several millennia prior. Furthermore, attempts to label McCarthy as a Southern writer or as a Western writer within the American literary tradition have failed to quell debate about McCarthy's place in the literary tradition whether it be that of the United States or that of the world. I assert that McCarthy is not so much a willing participant in the American Southern literary tradition nor in its Western counterpart as he is an author who attempts to examine, endorse, and even challenge the oral storytelling tradition: a phenomenon that marks the beginnings of a narrative tradition. In *The Crossing*, a matrix of oral storytelling performances is the way in which the world is apprehended, though its relationship with truth is eventually exposed as dubious. This matrix harkens back to Scholes' and Shaviro's assertions about the oral tradition and McCarthy's mimetic practices, respectively. According to McCarthy, oral storytelling comes closest to capturing and ascertaining the "real world" (mimesis) but ultimately falls short. In *The Road*, the rich matrix of oral stories as portrayed in *The Crossing* is reduced to a single tale of a father and son. At stake in this story is not only the survival of the father and son but also the very efficacy of stories, despite their fictitious nature, to remake the supposedly absolute truth of the post-apocalyptic landscape. McCarthy, then, may be best termed as a writer not limited by temporal and geographical realities and whose true role in the literary tradition is that of a curator acutely cognizant of the enduring constant underlying the narrative tradition from its oral-based beginnings to a modern, still prevalent, culture of literature as the art of written letters: the act of storytelling itself.

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