

Full Circle: *The Road* rewrites *The Orchard Keeper*

[T]he novel form is, like no other, an expression of ...transcendental homelessness....Artistic genres now cut across one another, with a complexity that cannot be disentangled, and become traces of authentic or false searching for an aim that is no longer clearly and unequivocally given; their sum total is only a historical totality of the empirical, wherein we may seek (and possibly find) the empirical (sociological) conditions for the ways in which each form came into being.

-- Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (1914)

Vereen Bell describes McCarthy's use of language as "dense and portentous" (2).

Portentous seems to me to be right on. Unlike other authors who use language in such a way as to be suggestive or symbolic, deploying it so that it points the way to meanings and interpretations, or semiotic, where one thing stands in for another, McCarthy seems to have a knack for portent, for language that exudes signification without calling for the semiotic substitutions of metonymy nor for the more fragile symbolic structures of metaphor. Which is not to say that his body of work cannot be productively read in these ways, but that the work always seems to exceed the reading. This essay explores the elegiac in *The Road* and *The Orchard Keeper*, acknowledging a tension between a personal model of mourning based on Freud and a broader historical model. These two works not only frame McCarthy's career at present, but demonstrate a larger circle that returns not only to McCarthy's roots in late modernism, but also to the origins of the novel itself in the episodic form of the romance. This paper proposes that McCarthy's latest novel rewrites his first, or, if you will, that *The Road* can be read and interpreted in a context generated by *The Orchard Keeper*. I read both novels as elegies with a focus on loss that occludes other thematic material. Both narratives are built around a generational dynamic expressed in father/son terms. Both essentially exclude other

relationships and appear to be driven by the implication that this is the central human relationship.

The elegiac tradition in literature provides one model of mourning. Traditionally, the elegy allows the speaker to commemorate and confront the lost one, to express grief and loss, and to move toward a resolution, what John Vickery, in his recent study, *The Elegiac Temper*, refers to as “the conventional elegiac triad of lamentation-confrontation-consolation” (1). Vickery contends that this form, once clearly defined and bounded by a series of conventions and subtypes, has metastasized in the literatures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to become a central trait of twentieth-century modernism. It is not difficult to imagine the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s cultural products coming out of states of post-traumatic stress brought on by the horrors of the Great War, the Depression, the Holocaust and the nuclear threat, among others. In Freud’s terms, what was a form of mourning has become a cultural melancholia, a pervasive cultural exploration of loss, expressed on a variety of levels: historical, community, family, interpersonal, and psychological. Vickery attributes this elegiac expansion to “the decline in a rhetoric that provided a series of clearly defined sub-kinds of poetry together with the occurrence of large-scale historical events that created a distinctive cultural attitude affecting the modern Western world” (2). He attributes the cultural expansions of the elegiac to modernism’s recurrent fascination with bygone eras and past.

Vickery’s argument has real potential, but his study has, in my view, two major weaknesses. The first is his tendency to authorize the usual suspects in the Anglo-

American canon of modernist texts. A more significant failure is his dismissal of key modernists such as Faulkner and Lowell as “regional,” in a pejorative sense. In his search for grand narratives, as well as in his overwhelming emphasis on poetry over fiction, he neglects to acknowledge that one of modernism’s major defining losses is that of specific regional cultures; indeed, of the sense that the entire Western cultural matrix is in decline, that the West is **(one might say)** in the redness of evening. Vickery’s hierarchy of loss, tends to privilege the philosophical, downplaying the fact that philosophy can have a grounding in regional culture. Despite these shortcomings, the concept of an elegiac temper as a defining context of twentieth century modernism is appropriate, and McCarthy’s fiction can be seen to appropriate this context as it does so much of modernism’s *donneés*, as a starting point for a step beyond modernism’s pieties to new potentialities.

One type of traditional elegy is the pastoral elegy, a form set in an artificial, neoclassical rural world, often exemplified by Milton’s mannered and controlled *Lycidas*, and by Shelley’s somewhat more free-flowing *Adonais*. McCarthy scholarship has tended to emphasize the pastoral over the elegiac, resulting in such studies as John Grammer’s “A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in *The Orchard Keeper*” and Georg Guillemin’s masterful book-length study, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*. Both acknowledge the primacy of material nature in McCarthy’s fiction, and suggest a value-system that sees all forms of life as equal—a boitic democracy. I agree that what Guillemin calls ecopastoralism, or a bioethic, informs McCarthy’s perspective, even to the extent that, in *The Road*, he sets himself the

challenge to write nature out of a fictional world, to eliminate an aspect of the equation which has loomed large in all of his other work. Another way of saying this is that he has expanded the object of grief to an almost unthinkable level—to an ecopastoralist, what is a world without nature? Looking at McCarthy’s first and latest novels, I want to compare their use of the elegiac voice, an expression of mourning at the social level. An elegy of any kind is an attempt to express and communicate grief at loss within a broader context than the therapeutic or personal one. However, since elegy must start with personal loss, I start with Freud’s basic distinction between mourning and melancholia, states of mind that relate to, but are not coterminous with Guillemin’s stylistic use of the term melancholy.

**In the following account, I use the masculine pronoun because Freud does, noting that he presented it as representing a universal.**

Sigmund Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* argues that the basic point of mourning is to individuate the mourner by allowing him or her to leave the mourned object behind. Melancholia, what clinicians today refer to as depression, occurs when the subject transfers his grief to himself through identification with the dead person. This recreates a self-destructive structure from an early stage of development, what Freud calls the “oral or cannibalistic” (249) phase of identification with the lost object. The subject thus individuates too far and fixates back on himself, thus creating a sort of pathological feedback loop. In this way, the melancholic subject figuratively devours himself, and demonstrates “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his

ego on a grand scale” (246) that results in a self-perception that occludes the past, resulting in a denial that he has ever been different. This feeling of worthlessness is not accompanied by shame; indeed, it is characterized by an “insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure” (247). Melancholics are often manic and are sometimes suicidal. Melancholia, to Freud, is mourning gone amuck, a temporary state transferred into a permanent pathological condition by this shift in object-identification. Mourning is a temporary state, one that need not concern the analyst, but melancholia cries for intervention.

Unexpectedly, Freud does not deal directly with the Oedipus complex in this essay; instead it serves as a kind of deep structure to the discussion of the pathology of regression brought on by loss. McCarthy’s fictional world has been widely acknowledged to be a masculine-centered world, defined by male relationships and patterns of homosociality. Given this focus, women tend to have temporary, idealized, or ghostly roles, so it is not surprising that both of these novels focus on father/son relationships. In this context, loss always has the tendency to bring the Oedipal fantasy to the fore. Any mourning thus brings on the issue of the death of the father, at least on the level of the unconscious. *The Road* presents us with a father and son mourning a dead mother. In *The Orchard Keeper*, John Wesley, the fatherless child, tends to ignore his hysterically fundamentalist mother in favor of the teachings of two substitute father figures, Snyder and Ownby, who present him with contrasting ways to deal with loss. Even though the father’s death occurs at the beginning of one novel and at the end of the other, the loss of

the father is the central event in each, and the process of teaching the son to deal with that loss—directed mourning— takes up the bulk of each narrative.

Each novel deals with the process of mourning, and provides a child mourner and an adult melancholic father. We can also contrast John Wesley's process of mourning, where, in Freud's words, "time is needed for the command of the reality-testing to be carried out in detail" (252) after the death of a father he barely remembers, with his mother's melancholia, which expresses itself in her violent, obsessive, insistence on revenge. Both her inability to let go of Rattner's loss and her projection of her own traits onto Rattner (with no evidence) signals that she is trapped in her identification with the lost object. Much has been made of Ownby's mentorship of John Wesley, but we can see that Ownby's mental processes are also melancholic, clinging to his memory of a past trauma—the loss of his wife—which is connected to a nostalgia for his youth and results in a variety of manifestations, including his obsessive tending of the body, his fear of a childhood bogey, and his suicidal actions against the authorities. What saves him, keeping him from being engulfed in his melancholia, is his caretaking—of John Wesley, of the body, of his blind dog. In like fashion, in *The Road*, the child provides a focus that keeps his father from falling into the suicidal melancholy that took his wife. When he has two bullets left, he cannot bring himself to kill the child and then himself, to go against the order of how things should be even for a brief time. This is the significance of his obsessive creation of a "dummy" bullet out of wood when he should be using his energies for survival. It not only there to fool the enemy—what enemy will ever see it?—

but to fool the child should *he* try to kill them both. The dummy bullet is for the child, to keep him alive, to keep things right.

Perhaps Freud's schema needs a new category, a directed melancholic, to describe these mentor-fathers. In each case, we have a young mourner paired with an adult melancholic who is held back from full melancholia by enabling the mourning process of "reality-testing" for the child. This is signified by the fire that the man is keeper of, and by the body in Ownby's tank. When the child's mourning process is over, the father's melancholia takes hold, and the expected and appropriate death of the father follows.

This may provide some insight into the characters' motivations, but what do we make of the larger historical context of the lost world? In "The Lay of the Land in Cormac McCarthy's Appalachia," K. Wesley Berry makes the prescient statement, "McCarthy's prose implies a vision of an ecological holocaust, as if the collapse of the earth as we know it lurks in the near future." He adds "Destruction to life is overbearing" (55). *The Road* certainly provides us with multiple ways of looking at loss. The father and son are both mourning the lost mother, but their loss is much greater; they have also lost most of the necessities of life, and live in a world that has lost its ability to reproduce life. At one level they are mourning Nature itself. One wonders, in such a radically transformed context, if the rules that govern such processes as mourning should survive. The novel's answer seems to be yes, that humans persevere in their basic orientations even in the absence of rational reasons to do so. In a way, *The Road's* natureless world literalizes the lost world described in the ending of *The Orchard Keeper*, where a still-burgeoning

Nature presides over the bones of a lost people. The unexplained force that took Nature down in *The Road* is prefigured by the iron fence “grewed all up in that tree” (3) like cancer, as well as by the broken boundary imagery. Guillemin points out that the “they” in the last paragraph, whose names have become “myth, legend, dust” (246) may only refer to the novel’s main characters, since the natural world of the mountains is in such an unthreatened state. We can see that the culture that Ownby, the Rattners, and Slyder share is threatened, however, if we remember the events of the early sixties when the book was written. The story refers a variety of traditional cultural practices, such as hunting, trapping, cooking, ballad singing, and subsistence living that were fast disappearing. This was the era of the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty. Expectations were high that the Appalachian region would soon become just another part of the uniform American mainstream. In 1963, Appalachian scholar Cratis Williams had just completed his encyclopedic study, *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction*, which he reportedly referred to as “putting the mountaineer to bed.” This was years before the *Foxfire* books and the Appalachian cultural revival brought Appalachian culture to a broad audience, and before cycles of governmental attention and neglect caused the War on Poverty to be a short-lived phenomenon. So the loss lamented here can certainly be seen as a mourning for the old ways, as the novel can be read as a tempered celebration of them.

Comparing the style of the novels, we can see that McCarthy has become minimalist in plot and setting as well as in characterization, removing the distractions and compensations of a democratically-rendered natural world which have been present in all of the proceeding works. But *The Road’s* world is not only an experiment in style. It



demonstrates that mourning and melancholia, keeping the fire and putting it out, are activities appropriate to bioethical relations as well as internal and interpersonal ones.

Finally, what are the historical implications of *The Road's* odd conclusion? The novel's final, prelapsarian image of trout in a clear mountain stream, burns itself into the reader's consciousness, in sharp contrast to the scorched and dusty sterility of the novel's setting. It is like a breath of fresh air, as the cliché suggests, or a drink of fresh water. If we had any doubts, here is the fire. This final image is a icon of hope, a recognition of what we have not yet lost, but still may. Instead of the vague regret for lost possibilities that closes *The Orchard Keeper*, here we have a concrete emblem, a chilling reversal of the Orchard Keeper's "et in Arcadia ego."

The final stage of mourning is consolation, and both of these endings eschew consolation, except, perhaps, to suggest to the audience that we have certain personal, cultural and historical responsibilities. Perhaps McCarthy is an activist after all?

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