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Beyond the *Border*: Cormac McCarthy in the New Millennium

In April of 2007, a group of Cormac McCarthy readers and scholars came together in his hometown, Knoxville, Tennessee, to share their perspectives on his work as it has been evolving in this decade and its continuities with his earlier writing. Hosted by the University of Tennessee and coordinated by Chris Walsh, visiting lecturer from Great Britain, the conference bore the title “The Road Home, McCarthy’s Imaginative Return to the South.” With that sense of urgency that possesses many long-time readers of McCarthy’s novels, most presenters chose to focus on his newest work, the widely reviewed novel *The Road*, and the stage play *The Sunset Limited*, largely ignored in the press. The conference thus comprised some of the first scholarly responses to these two important products of McCarthy’s seventh decade and remains the most extensive collaborative treatment of them. (A significant follow-up took place in the two McCarthy sessions of the American Literature Association’s convention in Boston in May.) These proceedings preserve the Knoxville conference papers, which point significant new directions for McCarthy studies, and the vibrant discussions which followed.

In different ways, *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*, both published in 2006, are startling works. Together with *No Country for Old Men* (2005), they proclaim McCarthy’s quenchless creative energy and the variety in which that creativity is manifesting itself, from the genre-bending *noir* western, to the existentialist life-and-

death debate, to the disturbingly realistic contemplation of the loss of the world in a future that reinscribes the terrain of McCarthy's personal and writerly beginnings. The publication of the Border Trilogy, together with the concerted effort of Knopf to enhance McCarthy's recognition, resulted in McCarthy's belated acknowledgement in the popular press as one of America's foremost living writers. (McCarthy's earlier novels, published under the Random House imprint, had each sold fewer than 2,600 copies [Tabor]).

However, after the ambitious labor of the Trilogy reached its slow culmination with the publication of *Cities of the Plain* in 1998, many readers (certainly many reviewers) saw him as writing in a western niche. In the seven-year interval between *Cities of the Plain* and *No Country for Old Men*, some had also begun to wonder whether he would close the book on his writing career. But scholars knew that there was still the "New Orleans novel" in the works, and when Richard Woodward interviewed McCarthy in 2005 for *Vanity Fair*, we learned that there were as many as four or five novels underway, even while McCarthy was intensely engaged with the various intellectual activities of the Santa Fe Institute, where he has been an "unsalaried" fellow since 2001 (Woodward 100, 104). It was not surprising to read that McCarthy was working on several projects concurrently; this has been his practice from the beginning. What is intriguing is the revelation that the two most recent novels have been produced in short creative explosions: McCarthy told Woodward he had written *No Country* in "about six months" (103), and he told Oprah Winfrey that *The Road* was composed in just a few weeks after a four-year gestation period when it lay percolating in his subconscious (McCarthy).

No Country for Old Men was published July 19, 2005, in a first printing of 147,000 copies (Publishers Weekly; Maryles, "Hardcover"). By August 1, it appeared on

the *Publishers Weekly* hardcover fiction bestseller list, ranked at nine, and it stayed on the list for five weeks, rising to the rank of sixth in three of those weeks (Publishers Weekly). It was reviewed extensively and for the most part favorably in the U.S. and Great Britain. Consistent with its genre-appeal, film rights to the novel were staked--even before the novel's publication--by producer Scott Rudin, who also owns the film rights to *Blood Meridian* (Woodward 103; "Paramount"). With screenplay and direction by Joel and Ethan Coen, the film features Tommy Lee Jones (Sheriff Ed Tom Bell), Josh Brolin (Llewelyn Moss), and Javier Bardem (Anton Chigurh) and has already won acclaim at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Golden Palm Award. It will be screened as the "Centerpiece" of the New York Film Festival on October 6 (The New York Film Festival—Film Society of Lincoln Center), and its general release to U.S. theaters is set for November 21 (Internet Movie Database).

By other measures, *The Sunset Limited* has also been received well. Long-time scholars and readers of McCarthy had no idea that this play existed until Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company announced it for its 2005-2006 season. It played in Steppenwolf's Garage Theatre from May 18 through June 25, 2006. McCarthy's agency had offered the play to Steppenwolf about six months earlier, and director Sheldon Patinkin has said that it was written about the same time as *The Road* (McBride, par. 8), which would place its composition in about 2004. It was attractive to the theatre because they were already set to stage a new play by novelist Don DeLillo, *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, in that season (Patinkin). (The theatre's artistic director, Martha Lavey, introduced DeLillo to McCarthy some time that spring [Lavey, Our Success, par. 3]). Lavey thought the role of White would be a good match for resident actor Austin Pendleton, and Pendleton

himself had already read and been “stunned by” *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*. His response to *The Sunset Limited* is that “you’d think it was his 16th play, at least. The dramatic sense in it is at once traditional and frighteningly original. . . . [I]t’s a mountain I’m very excited to have been asked to try to climb Cormac McCarthy is just a gorgeous writer, that’s all” (Pendleton, Pendleton on McCarthy, par. 3, 6).

McCarthy agreed to work with the director and the two-man cast (Freeman Coffey had signed on to play the role of Black) as they prepared the production. He was in Chicago in spring 2006, arriving for the first table-reading on April 25th and staying on for a week and a half, consulting and rewriting. He was there again for the week of dress rehearsals and pre-review performances in late May (New, par. 1-2; Patinkin). Patinkin found McCarthy “a delight to work with He gave the lie to my own oft-stated maxim, speaking as a director, that the only good playwright is a dead one! At first he was resistant to rewrites but then he realised he had less experience of theatre than we did and he did some major re-writes before rehearsals began. He was very open and very interested in the whole process” (McBride, par. 13-14).

In late June 2006, there were no plans to stage the play again, and no bids for filming it that Patinkin was aware of. But shortly after that, the play was slated for production at the 59E59 Theaters in Manhattan, with the same director, cast and crew. Rehearsals began on October 19, and the play ran there from October 24 through November 19 (Lavey, Productions, par.2). According to Austin Pendleton, there were some significant changes in the staging of this production—changes that the actors and director initially found risky. In April, McCarthy had asked them to perform the entire play “seated at a kitchen table, talking”. Patinkin and the actors had been very reluctant

to stage it in such a static way, and they had built in considerable physical activity within the tiny corner set. But Pendleton writes that they were “haunted by his [McCarthy’s] original suggestion. So when we came back together again for a week in Chicago to rehearse it . . . for this New York run we found ourselves eliminating much of that movement and finally eliminating all of it, except for the two or three specific times that Cormac calls for it in the script. And it works! . . . Even apart from the thrill of doing this play again, with this group of people, there is a thrill to finding something about the power of stillness that I hope won’t ever fully leave my awareness” (Pendleton, Austin in New York, par. 2). Both Austin and Patinkin felt that the play was well received, and building on the successes of Chicago and New York, their *Sunset Limited* moved to the Galway Arts Festival in Ireland this summer, playing at the Town Hall Theatre July 16-21. (McBride, par. 16; Pendleton, Austin in New York).

Meanwhile, *The Road* was published on September 26, 2006, a month before *The Sunset Limited* opened in New York (“Calendar”). McCarthy told Winfrey, “It’s interesting because usually you don’t know where a book comes from. . . . It’s just there, some kind of an itch that you can’t quite scratch.” But *The Road* had its genesis in a very specific moment, when McCarthy had checked into an old hotel in El Paso with his young son, John (probably soon after their relocation to Santa Fe, perhaps not long after September 11, 2001), and stood looking at the still city at two or three in the morning from the window of their room, hearing the lonesome sound of trains and imagining what El Paso “might look like in fifty or a hundred years.” “I just had this image of these fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy. And so I wrote those pages and that was the end of it.” At the time, he did not think of

this as the germ of a novel, but perhaps “two pages” to be worked into another novel. This image of a wasted El Paso seems to have been fixed in his memory in conjunction with that of his small boy sleeping in the bed behind him—an image of paternal care, the father standing guard between his son and the world outside, between his son and a future that implied the loss of the world of the father’s memory. Then, some four years later, in Ireland, he “woke up one morning and . . . realized” that it was indeed a novel, “and that it was about that man and that little boy” (McCarthy). This likely places the early stages of composition of *The Road* in summer 2004, when McCarthy spent six productive weeks writing in Ireland, according to Woodward (104). In the writing process, the emotional grounding of the novel, the city of the father’s past, which he and his son travel through and away from, mutated from El Paso to Knoxville, the town of McCarthy’s own boyhood.

Knopf ran a first printing of 250,000 copies, and *The Road* was also a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection. The novel hit the *Publishers Weekly* hardcover fiction bestseller list at number two on October 9, and remained on the list, gradually declining in sales, for six weeks (Publishers Weekly). That fall, producers Nick Wechsler and Steve and Paula Mae Schwartz acquired the film rights to *The Road*. John Hillcoat (“The Proposition”) has signed on as director, and the novel is being adapted for screen by Joe Penhall (“Enduring Love”, “The Long Firm”) (Fleming).

The Sunset Limited was published by Vintage International in January 2007, three months after *The Road*, to almost no critical notice in the popular press. In the same month *The Road* was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award (“Book Critics”), but in March, Kiran Desai won the award for *The Inheritance of Loss* (National

Book Critics Circle Award). By March 29, when Oprah Winfrey announced that *The Road* would be her book club's next selection, the novel had sold 138,000 copies by Nielsen BookScan figures (Van Gelder, "Arts"). The next week, McCarthy was nominated for the \$135,000 International Impac Dublin Literary Award (Van Gelder, "Impac")—although in May his novel was edged out by Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses* (Impac Dublin Award, par. 1). On April 16, however, the announcement came that *The Road* had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (Rich E1). And it has also been nominated for Edinburgh University's James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, the most long-standing literary award in Great Britain, with winners to be announced August 25 (McCarthy and Waters).

The publication of the trade paperback was moved up from its previously planned release date in September 2007 to take advantage of the recognition the novel was receiving. Vintage published a printing of 950,000 copies in April, and only a little more than a week after Oprah Winfrey's announcement, on April 9, the trade paperback hit number one on the *Publishers Weekly* bestseller list in its very first week on the list (Maryles, "Paperback"), remaining at number one for six weeks. It had dropped to number five by the first two weeks in June, then popped back up to number one in the rankings on June 18 and 25, after the June 5 televising of Winfrey's taped interview with McCarthy. By July 23 the novel had been on the list for sixteen weeks, always ranked at six or higher. It has now been ranked first a total of eight weeks (Publishers Weekly). (In the previous year, for Elie Wiesel's *Night*, the "Oprah effect" meant a total of forty-one weeks on the list, twelve of those at number one [Maryles, "Bestsellers '06"].)

In their various ways, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Sunset Limited*, and *The Road* have been critically and commercially successful, and they give ample and admirable evidence of the continued vitality of a formidable writer. The papers presented at the Knoxville conference and made public here represent the very earliest efforts by the scholarly community to assess the significance and place of *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* in McCarthy's canon. The authors of these papers take varied productive and often original approaches to the work. Keynote speaker Jay Ellis discusses *The Road* from a personal, reader-response perspective, focusing largely on the father/son relationship. There are also Wes Morgan's tracing of the realistic geography of the journey in *The Road*, Euan Gallivan's and Phillip Syder's considerations of ethics in that novel from the contexts of Schopenhauer and Derrida, respectively, Tim Edwards' examination of its pastoral imagery and themes, Randall Wilhelm's study of its pattern of framed, still-life imagery. In addition to Ellis's summary of the ways in which *The Road* revisits the key themes of McCarthy's earlier works, several other presenters focus on the continuities between the new works and McCarthy's earlier Tennessee novels. Chris Walsh discusses McCarthy's return to the south in *The Road*, his reinscribing it as a post-modern imaginative space. Louis Palmer and Rick Wallach explore the novel's relationships with McCarthy's two most personal earlier Tennessee novels, *The Orchard Keeper* and *Suttree*, respectively. Other papers examine the thematic continuities between *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*: Susan Tyburski treating their invocation of the mystical concept of the darkness of unknowing as a pathway to the divine, a philosophical orientation of the new works that scholars have also noted in earlier southern and western novels; and Andrew Husband focusing on their shared themes of

death within a context of Epicurean thought. All together, these papers comprise an admirable introduction to the works published in 2006, one that will surely stimulate further thought and debate about McCarthy's latest work and its place within his career.

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