

**God in Abstentia:
The Impossible Ethics of Absence
in Cormack McCarthy**

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1. Introduction

*“The point is there ain’t no point.”
Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*.*

The reader who puts down his first McCarthy novel might say exactly that, with maybe a slightly different grammar: “The point is that there is no point.” That is, if the reader even finished his first McCarthy novel. This is not surprising though, for McCarthy, an author of ten novels, two plays, and three screenplays, written between 1965 and 2013, is notoriously difficult to read. His writing style, sparing us most of the usual rhythmic punctuation, along with the themes and mythological drive of his work, makes reading him a demanding experience. This certainly affected his recognition as one of the most notable American writers of the past forty years. In fact, McCarthy did not attain wide popular acclaim until thirty years after his first novel was published by Random House.

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McCarthy has developed a rich and complex style, full of metaphors, intertextuality, and even indirect autobiographical references. With McCarthy, plunging into the Tennessee valley, the or Mexican-American border is not to be taken lightly. It is an intense, personal, but also perennial experience. There is a rich interwoven threads of personal and mythological imagery and reminiscences in his work. The setting of his early novels has something autobiographical, with the setting of *The Orchard Keeper*, *Child of God* and *Suttree* being in Tennessee, where McCarthy was raised after his father took a prominent position with a law firm working for the Tennessee Valley Authority. That personal experience likely opened for him an ever-present window on the social constraints imposed on the members of a given society. McCarthy became aware of the extent of control and watchful eye of the Tennessee Valley Authority which came to have oversight of land use and economic development.¹⁾ This certainly informed the deep sense of social injustice and evil which becomes the defining framework of such a society, which is how Lester Ballard, the serial-killer, necrophiliac of *Child of God* slowly becomes what he is, and the reason why he is rejected by his society.

His Christian upbringing also definitely depicted the nature of evil and injustice, which also explains the biblical imagery and allusions we find in some of his works, including the well-known titles *Child of God* and *Outer Dark*, the latter being a reference to the “outer” place of judgment in one of Jesus’ parables: “cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Mt 25.30) Scholars have also commented on the underlying presence of biblical metaphors in *The Road*, albeit less convincingly.²⁾

1) Dianne C. Luce, *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 18.

We could then expect to find in McCarthy a vivid denunciation of the evils of our society. In a way, that is precisely what we find, although he describes these evils in such a radical way as to make the reader think twice before even finishing one of his books. In fact, the presence of evil and violence in McCarthy's works has led many scholars to only see the denial of values in his world. His would be a nihilistic world in which ethics is thus impossible. This paper will show that the nihilism and almost metaphysical presence of evil in McCarthy's actually reveals an "ethics of absence," that is, the impossibility of the complete dissolution of ethics though its necessary presence is best seen through its absence.

2. The Puzzlement of Reading McCarthy

Reading McCarthy is often puzzling. From "there is no point," the reader could easily be pulled in one of the most common conclusion: McCarthy's works introduce us to a world without meaning in which not only "there is no point," but violence and death reign uncontested. At second reading, we might discover more than initially meets the eye. We might become aware of some sort of ordinariness of evil and violence, and we might keep looking for meaning, hope and restoration until the very last page, that we finally turn to face a blank page. Again, the only thing left might be: "The point is there ain't no point."³⁾

2) See for example Christina Bieber Lake, "Christ-Haunted: Theology on The Road," 12 December 2017, *European journal of American studies*, 12:3 (2017), <http://journals.openedition.org>, accessed March 10, 2021; Matthew L. Potts, "There is no god and we are his prophets," *Christianity and Literature*, 63:4 (2014), 489-501.

3) McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 39.

2.1. McCarthy's Nihilism

This reaction is quite understandable, so intuitively evident is the nihilism that transpires through McCarthy's books. Vereen Bell, one of the earliest critic of McCarthy, for example wrote that *Outer Dark* "is as brutally nihilistic as any serious novel written in this century."⁴ The word is out: "nihilism." McCarthy's worlds thus make no sense; there is neither good nor evil; there is nothing to be expected from the world. The only thing there is for certain is that the universe is a dark and cold place completely indifferent to the plights and hurts of those insignificant and pitiful beings we call "humans." Why would things be otherwise? The world is nihil, nothingness.

Vereen Bell is again one of the first critic who has noted this apparent nihilistic structure of many of McCarthy's novels, including *Suttree*, which according to Bell reflects the chaotic nature of the universe: "Where all of life is motion, rich episodes follow upon one another with chaotic improvidence, the time-spans between them—their temporal relationships unmarked."⁵ The world is absurd, and there is nothing we can really do about it. There is nobody to refer to, no help to turn to.

True enough, McCarthy's works consistently portray the indifference of the universe toward human hope and the schism between the human mind and nature.⁶ In *The Orchard Keeper*, we discover that humanity can be reduced to "the green cadaver grin sealed in the murky waters of the peach pit..."⁷ In *Outer*

4) Vereen M. Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988.), 24.

5) Vereen M. Bell, "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy," *The Southern Literary Journal*, 15:2 (1983), 31-41, here 34.

6) Elijah Guerra, "Nothingness is not a curse" *Suttree's Absurd Revolt*," *The Cormack McCarthy Journal*, 17:2 (2019), 148-170, for example 150-151.

Dark, Culla, her child, and the tinker take a walk in the dark, “stepping softly and soft their voices over the sandy road in shadows so foreshortened they seemed sprung and frenzied with a violence in which their creators moved with dreamy disconcert.”⁸⁾ Dark, cold, and violent: that is the world, and there is no guiding-star making sure we go in the right direction. Thus, in *Child of God*, Lester Ballard “cast about among the stars for some kind of guidance but the heavens wore a different look that Ballard did not trust.”⁹⁾ The stars do not care about Ballard’s perverse evil—why should we? Killer Chigurh, in *No Country for Old Men*, displays the deep-seated conviction that the world is utterly indifferent to human decisions: “A person’s path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning.”¹⁰⁾ The same observation transpires throughout McCarthy’s, whether in his Tennessee, Southern border, or apocalyptic works. In *The Road*, McCarthy described the father walking out “in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe.”¹¹⁾

Even in “The Border Trilogy,” that seems at first less infused with radical evil that some of McCarthy early novel displayed, bears witness that the world is a cold and impersonal place. Thus, in *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole lives in a world that “seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she,”¹²⁾ while in *The*

7) McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 224.

8) McCarthy, *Outer Dark* (New York: Random House, 1968), 23.

9) McCarthy, *Child of God* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 181.

10) McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 259.

11) McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 130.

Crossing, when Billy Parham looks into the wolf's eyes, he sees a "world burning on the shore of an unknowable void."¹³⁾ *Cities of the Plain*, the concluding volume of the Border Trilogy, sees antagonist character Eduardo telling tragic hero-lover John Grady that people "have in their minds a picture of how the world will be... The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of."¹⁴⁾

In this other, and very different work, that is *The Stonemason*—one of McCarthy's play about a stonemason family—Ben reflects on his father's hands and how his work was Sisyphean work in a universe indifferent to human creation: "[H]ands I never tired to look at. Shaped in the image of God. To make the world. To make it again and again. To make it in the very maelstrom of its undoing."¹⁵⁾ The world is in fact a maelstrom of cold and meaningless violence, from which there is no escape. The only question is how we are going to live in it.

Martha, in *The Gardener's Son*, is acutely aware of the disconnection between human values and the reality of the material world. This disconnect leads her to the simple matter-of-fact conclusion: "Once people are dead they're not good nor bad. They're just dead."¹⁶⁾ This simply stated presence of death is infused in the order of existence in *Blood Meridian*: "[T]he order in creation which you see is that which you have put there... For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others."¹⁷⁾ Existence might have its own order, but that does

12) McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (New York: Vintage International, 2010), 301.

13) McCarthy, *The Crossing* (New York: Vintage International, 2010), 74

14) McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* (New York: Vintage International, 2010), 135.

15) McCarthy, *The Stonemason* (Hopewell, NJ : Ecco Press, 1994), 133.

16) McCarthy, *The Gardener's Son* (Hopewell, NJ : Ecco Press, 2015), 94.

17) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), 256.

not mean that there is a human destiny, or at least, not a benevolent one, as atheist White proclaims in *The Sunset Limited*: “[s]uffering and human destiny are the same thing. Each is a description of the other.”¹⁸⁾ The play and the story ends with Black asking God why he was meant to be in White’s life, a question that is followed by God’s silence. If there is a destiny, even it keeps silence faced with this cold-hearted universe.

It does not come as very surprising, then, that Bell thought that McCarthy’s works showed us close to nothing about our humanity. In McCarthy, there are no ethical categories to which characters ought to conform, merely “capricious and incomprehensible fates.”¹⁹⁾ In McCarthy, even individual actions become incomprehensible. There seems to be no motivations to understand. There seems to be no reason for violence and evil. They just are, like a metaphysics of evil. Notably, Bell stressed the reader’s inability to read into the character’s motivation and state of mind. True enough, McCarthy’s style of writing, his experiential vision, does not provide us with the thinking of his characters. We are far removed from these novels where the character’s thoughts are verbalized in italics for the reader. In McCarthy’s, if we do not understand the experiences that unfolds before our eyes, we will then not understand. Let the one who has eyes to read understand!

2.2. There is Only the Dance

But if Bell is right and the motivations of McCarthy’s characters are inaccessible, if in a sense even their experiences

18) McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited* (London: Picador, 2006), 55.

19) Bell, *Achievement*, 32.

are impermeable to our understanding, what then is there to understand? What forms the context in which we are to comprehend the life and attitudes of McCarthy's worlds inhabitants? Is there even, in McCarthy's universe something that can serve as a framework for the actions and decisions of the people who inhabit it? In this seemingly nihilistic universe, there is nonetheless one thing that seem certain, absolute, and all-powerful: evil. Sheriff Bell is one of the character who is the most conscious of this quasi metaphysical nature of evil. In *No Country for Old Men*, he remarks: "Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work."²⁰) Evil is almost metaphysical: it is the human context *par excellence*.

In *Blood Meridian*, this nature of the world is represented by Judge Holden's Dance of war. Leader of a cold-blooded gang of murderers, the Judge presents all the characteristics of a prophet of violence and destruction. Ritualized violence, the Dance is Judge Holden's concrete manifestation of the reality of the world, something we cannot hide from. The Dance is the inescapable human reality; evil and violence are the inescapable human reality.

In Judge Holden and his mysticism of war, there is no mystery. Death is not mystery, it is our condition, unveiled in the Dance, a ritualistic celebration of the Judge's mystical and violent worldview. The Judge explains that "the dance... contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is not necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well."²¹) The end point of history is the free and radical exercise of violence. In a world which is molded with violence, that can only be the case.

Blood Meridian is then a world of complete immanence. What we have is what we see; what we see is what we have.

20) McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 4.

21) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 329.

There is nothing hidden. War, violence, and death, are metaphysical. They are the only things left after the physical reality has been pushed aside. Once everything has been dissolved into the stream of history, only war and death are left. They are quite literally what is “after,” or “beyond” physics. *Blood Meridian* certainly provides a depiction of this, albeit in its own aesthetically violently and unforgiving world. This is probably not coincidental, given that it is one of McCarthy’s books that has elicited the most scholarship. The main reason for this interest is not only the rough and beautiful description of the living landscape of the Southern US border, but the bare, cold, ever-present nature of war and violence.

The presence of Death and violence does not only structure *Blood Meridian* but also accompanies Bill Parham’s three journeys in *The Crossing*, closes the Trilogy Border with the death of John Grady, the main character of *All the Pretty Horses*. In *Outer Dark*, the dialogic quests of Culla and Rinthy follows their apparent murder of their incestuous child. Their guilt seems to find resolution only in abandonment and violence, until the conclusion of the book. With any other author, we might have expected a happy resolution, but violence does not disappear at the end of the book. The resolution of violence is the presence of violence and death: the baby is murdered, Culla errs without ever finding peace, and Rinthy unknowingly comes to rest near the place her baby was killed. Death so much qualifies the world on which we live that it even becomes a commodity as with the snakehunter in *Outer Dark*, or character Gene Harrogate’s attempt at trading bat corpses for cash in *Suttree*.

The reader could be left with the impression that McCarthy presents and *defends* the view that the world is cold, forbidding, and unforgiving, in fact that it is one where nothing has meaning. There is no right or wrong, no justice or evil, only *nihil*, nothingness. But there is evil, plenty of it, even: serial-killing,

ritual killing, blood-thirsty rampages, murders, betrayals, cannibalism, incest, necrophilia. This is not nihilism. This is presence of real evil, almost *unbearable* evil. While we could be shocked at first, that should not surprise us: evil is really at work in the world, in an almost metaphysical manner. The apostle Paul did not say differently in his letter to the Romans: “They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” (Rom 1.29-31) There is evil, natural and supernatural, at work in our fallen world. McCarthy has just put flesh, colors, smells, and feelings, on Paul’s description.

3. The Impossible Ethics of Absence

“The world takes its form hourly by a weighing of things at hand, and while we may seek to puzzle out that form we have no way to do so. We have only God’s law, and the wisdom to follow it if we will.”²²⁾ This phrase is indeed by the same author, but it is merely the opinion of one of the numerous “secondary characters” who give depths and richness to McCarthy’s worlds. If evil seems the only metaphysical existent, this is mere observation on the part of McCarthy’s characters, not a philosophical statement by the author. The affirmation of *nihil* is actually guided, illuminated, by the presence of ordinary ethics.

To see only nihilism in McCarthy, to be only witnesses of violence and evil, is to miss that McCarthy is penning, giving

22) McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 195.

life, body, flesh, to entire worlds, inhabited not only by the main protagonists we encounter, but also by numerous others who give a much more complex view of the world. Put differently, in McCarthy, there are no secondary characters. We cannot consider only what the main protagonists do and say if we are to reach a certain understanding of his work. We must look at everything that happens, including the seemingly chance encounters and the trivial discussions.

3.1. Autonomous Ethics

While there is a clear ethical attitude in the face of evil, in the midst of an impersonal universe who has not care for us, the nature of ethics renders it very fragile. First, in a world of nothingness, ethics does not seem guided by anybody, or anything. This statement inhabits most of the characters, though not all of them, as the introductory quote of this section reminds us. If some passing figures—who soon disappear like shadows—express confidence in the transcendent meaning of the universe, most also confess a certain lack of understanding of its purpose. Whether there is, or not, a transcending power, it is incomprehensible, unknowable. Its will and purpose forever hidden from us. The best human beings can do is to live in an ethical universe *they* have created.

An example of this autonomous construction of ethics is found in McCarthy's Grail-like quest, *The Road*. The Wounded father—a Fisher-king figure of the Arthurian world, bound to die at the end of his quest—leads the Boy, luminescent as the Grail at key moments in the book, keeps building a world of meaning for the Boy to inhabit.²³⁾ He is conscious that, for

23) For more on *The Road* as Arthurian narrative see Lydia Cooper, "Cormack

the Boy to continue living after their destination is reached, he will need some guiding. He will need ethical pillar on which to stand and gaze into the future, even if this future was to be only smoke and darkness.

In *The Road's* mumified world, the father will strive, by himself, to give structure and direction to their lives. His is an attempt at autonomous ethics. But McCarthy is too deeply conscious of the impossibility for human beings, to find direction by themselves. This leads the father to the barest ethical affirmations, and the single mantra-like moral definition of “the good guys:” the father and the Boy don’t eat people. This exchange thus structures their ethical attitude:

We wouldn’t ever eat anybody, would we?

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving?

We’re starving now.

You said we werent.

I said we werent dying. I didnt say we werent starving. But we wouldnt. No. We wouldnt. No matter what. No. No matter what.

Because we’re the good guys.

Yes.²⁴⁾

The father is trying to re-establish an ethical value-system. It is not an ethics of motivation or goal. It is purely an

McCarthy’s *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative,” *Studies in the Novel*, 43:2 (2011), 218-236.

24) McCarthy, *The Road*, 136. See for example 154, 304.

autonomous ethics of action, the barest decent human action in this mythological empty world: “We do not eat people.” Respect for oneself and others is affirmed to its bare minimum. Whatever was, or is, human in other will not completely disappear. In a world where humanity might have left the hearts and minds of most, the physical humanity—the flesh—will not disappear. It will not be eaten. At least not by the father and the Boy, and in that, they are an embodiment of remnantal ethics.

Throughout the book, the quest for autonomous ethics continues. But in a world of ashes, fire, and dissipating memories, this endeavor is almost impossible to achieve. The competitive opposition between ethics and survival is embodied by the father’s heartless drive forward. One episode is telling: one unspecified day, the Boy and his father discover that their provisions, their blankets, waterbottles, their shoes were all taken by a thief.²⁵⁾ They pursue the thief, quickly overtaking him on the Road. They, in turn, take everything he has, and leave him there, “raw and naked.” As they walk away, the Boy keeps turning back to this traumatic vision of death they have caused. For a long while, the Boy keeps crying because he simply cannot understand his father’s unforgiving persistence to turn away from this certainty of death he has caused:

The boy didn’t answer.

He just sat there with his head bowed, sobbing.

You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.

The boy said something but he couldn’t understand him.

What? he said. He looked up, his wet and grimy face.

Yes I am, he said. I am the one.²⁶⁾

25) McCarthy, *The Road*, 271.

If the father is the builder of autonomous ethics—the incarnation of the remnant of human values—the Boy is the guarantor of the ethical nature of humanity. He is the almost invisible manifestation of real, universal, and complete ethics founded on love and compassion. He “has to worry” because he can now see, at the end of their quest, that his father is can only prevent their humanity from falling into nothingness, swallowed up in this world of destruction through which they move and have their being.

For the Boy, the ethical attitude is not motivated by an economy of survival but by foundational ethics, an attitude nourished by what humanity still remains. Zlatan Filipovic has shown that “the boy’s responsibility for the frailty of the stranger beyond any judgement of his intentions breaks the circle of economy that dominates our relations with the other in ontological terms and contests every inch of the novel’s established narrative.”²⁷⁾ The Boy really becomes the Surety, the one who tries through his tearful resistance, to manifest the persistence of ethics for ethics’s sake. Through the Boy we contemplate the “irrecusable presence of goodness, a light that never goes out.”²⁸⁾ The generosity of being, which might well be the Quest they set out on the Road for, is fulfilled at the end, after the death of the Fisher-king father.

There and then, at the end of all things, the Boy is taken by a woman, who, “when she saw him put her arms around him and held him,” and said, “Oh... I am so glad to see you.”²⁹⁾

26) McCarthy, *The Road*, 277.

27) Zlatan Filipovic, “A Light That Never Goes Out Bare Life and the Possibility of Ethics in McCarthy’s *The Road*,” in *Broken Mirrors. Representations of Apocalypses and Dystopias in Popular Culture*, eds Joe Trotta, Houman Sadri and Zlatan Filipovic (New York, London: Routledge, 2020), 15-32, here 29.

28) Filipovic, “Light,” 29-30.

29) McCarthy, *The Road*, 306.

Nothing more. There is no suspicion, no hesitation. With this final encounter the book can close its final line: "In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery."³⁰) The Quest is complete.

If the quest for autonomous ethics in *The Road* is incomplete but leads to an unexpected fulfillment, the resolving conclusion of autonomous ethics in *Blood Meridian* is at the complete opposite. As we have stated, the world of *Blood Meridian* is not one of mythology, not one of transcendent creation. It is a purely immanent world where what you see, the bare desert, is what you have, where there are no other motivations than the gruesome actions we are the willing witnesses. Judge Holden knows that and exudes a desire to embody his mythology of violence as life's meaning. With Judge Holden, we find a different autonomous ethics: the autonomous affirmation that there is no ethics. In fact, the Judge clearly lives out his observation of the absence of law. As Shaviro explains: "[T]he Judge also knows that it is impossible to transgress when there is no Law to violate, and when there is no final accumulation of goods or knowledge to be gathered together and no ultimate boundary to be attained."³¹) With the Judge, death is always there. Death and violence, like his weapon, never miss.

That is not to say that the Judge does not justify his autonomous a-ethical worldview. He actually often seems the only fully conscious character in all of McCarthy's books. Conscious of his own supposed autonomy, he is reminiscent of a certain kind of Nietzschean attitude. Many McCarthy critics have actually commented on the Nietzschean nature of the Judge's outlook. One of the most immediate resemblance is

30) McCarthy, *The Road*, 307.

31) Steve Shaviro, "'The Very Life of the Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*," in Cormack McCarthy, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Bloom's Literary Criticism), 9-22, here 13.

between the Judge and Nietzsche's Zarathustra affirmations that values are created by man.³²⁾ Judge Holden and Zarathustra share a certain construction of value. Like this Nietzschean figure, the Judge completely rejects the legitimacy of a "true," objective moral system.

There are no laws to which man should subject himself. There are no moral and universal laws, only historical ones made to be subverted by those who burn with a desire to affirm themselves. There are only human motivations guided by human desires, the most vibrant of all being violence and death. The Judge explicitly restates this in one of his "speeches" to his band of scalp-hunters: "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak," he proudly declares, "Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test."³³⁾ The only ultimate test of the autonomous creation of ethics as mere individual action is to keep living. Quite literally, the last man standing, is the man of real (autonomous) ethical value.

If the God of Christianity is really dead, Judge Holden's Dance is a proclamation of freedom from objective and normative values. It is a celebration of autonomy, to the point that it embraces the most gruesome violence. Like Zarathustra, Judge Holden recognizes that there is something almost mystical in this dancing: men becomes gods, their own generators, and gods dances through them.³⁴⁾ In his affirmation of self-created meaning the Judge often acts as his own proselyte on a mission to propagate his new ethical system. He tries to convince them

32) Zarathustra proclaims: "Values did man only assign to things in order to maintain himself," Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, chapter XV, *Project Gutenberg*, <http://www.gutenberg.org>, accessed March 8, 2021.

33) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 250.

34) This bears similarities to Zarathustra's confession: "I should only believe in a God that would know how to dance." Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, chapter VII.

of his love for the earth and to reject any holy books, concluding, elevating a rock in the air: “He does not [lie]. And these are his words... He speaks in stones and trees the bones of things.”³⁵⁾ It seems strange to see a rock as a conflictual ethical agent, but in Judge Holden’s mind it is the case. There appears a conflict of ethical frameworks.

3.2. Ethics of Resistance

At one point in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy the observer notes that all pass in the “problematical destruction of darkness.”³⁶⁾ *Problematical* destruction of darkness. Here, the reader pauses. If the destruction of darkness really is problematical, is there any hope for real ethical value? Not chose, but given, not autonomously constructed but divinely revealed? There is, but as always with McCarthy, it is almost better seem through its absence than its presence. Paradoxically, ethic is present in its absence. It is *because* it is not there, it is *when* it is not there, that its presence is most acutely needed and required.

Blood Meridian Kid’s attitude is a seemingly absence of ethics. It is ethics *in absentia*, though it is not the absence of an ethical attitude towards a violent world. Shaviro notes that the Kid is “sidestepping mortal engagements and warily refusing the judge’s continual seductions.”³⁷⁾ This statements is remarkably correct and mistaken at the same time. Its fundamental mistake is mirrored in a piercing insight: the Kid is one of the rare scalp hunters to resist the metaphysical attraction of the Dance of War embodied by the Judge. His passive resistance is resistance nonetheless. His ethical attitude is, *in fine*, not passive. It takes

35) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 116.

36) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 105.

37) Shaviro, “The Very Life,” 15.

great moral strength to resist the Judge and his myth of immanent War.

In fact, the Kid at times unconsciously manifests an implicit “faith” in Christian morality by occasionally refusing to participate in the gang’s murderous rampage. The key moment is his refusal to kill the Judge in the desert.³⁸⁾ Pushed by one of the gang members, a former priest, the Kid refrains from killing, even though he knows the potential consequence: Judge Holden will hunt him and try to kill him. That is indeed what happens at the very end of *Blood Meridian*. Refusing to kill when knowing it might well mean his death: that is the ethics of resistance manifested by the Kid.

The Kid’s usual deferral to Judge Holden’s worldview indeed affects the possibility of ethics, but does not obliterate it. Ethics, in McCarthy, is often seen in “absence,” as it is here in the absence not of participation, but of approval, assimilation, and exemption of the savageness of life. Thus, due to the Kid’s perceived subversion of his rule, the Judge murders, or otherwise dispatches, the Kid in the outhouse at the end of the novel. As Bloom notes: “To have known Judge Holden, to have seen him in full operation, and to tell him that he is nothing, is heroic.”³⁹⁾ Even refusal is an act of resistance, it is a strong ethical proclamation.

Another resistance, resolved in a more violent and gruesome manner, is the mystifying spell cast by Rattner on Sylder in *The Orchard Keeper*. Here also we find an example of ethics as resistance. Everything about Rattner, in particular his demeanor and manner of speech, exudes an unnatural and unsettling atmosphere. It his voice which is the agency of the evil magical bounds Sylder seems to be the victim of.⁴⁰⁾ His

38) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 285-288.

39) Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2009), 1-8, here 7.

power comes from his voice itself, not from an oratory skill to convince. His power lies in his voice, able to attract others into his own world, in which he is the maker of meaning. Sylder lives in Rattner's world and sees it through him. Merely resisting his voice is an extraordinary act of resistance, one of ethical reclamation. There is no escape, unless Rattner loses his voice, which he does when Sylder murders him. Then and there reality transpires again from the dead body: "He looked at the man again and time was coming back, gaining, so that all the clocks would be right."⁴¹) Ethical affirmation through resistance comes back again and again in McCarthy.

The Crossing's Billy's defense of a captured she-wolf he intended to release takes the radical form of mercy-killing. While others around him would make the she-wolf fight to death for pure entertainment, Billy "made his way through the crowd and when he reached the estacada the wolf was alone in the pit and she was a sorry thing to see."⁴²) He shoots her. Billy resists this non-ethics by killing the wolf out of mercy. This other instance of ethics as resistance, a sort of negative, still violent, ethical action. Ethics is always there: mysterious, seemingly impossible.

4. Conclusion

"People complain about the bad things that happen to em

40) "As outlined above, the evil of Rattner's voice lies in its power to diminish one's ability to critically assess reality, making what is false appear true and what is evil appear benign." Rick Elmore and Jonathan Elmore, "I made a mistake, he wadn't for sale": Resistance to Evil and the Positive Ethics of McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 72:2 (2019), 253-272, here 262.

41) McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper*, 40.

42) McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 121.

that they dont deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did.”⁴³⁾ Thus spoke sheriff Bell in *No country for Old Men*. This sets us on the path to our conclusion. McCarthy’s supposed nihilism is replaced by an ethics of resistance in the perceived absence of God. It is certainly not what we expected it to be. It is often passive, at times violent, often borders on the unseen. Most of the time, even ethical actions do not seem to follow from a conscious decision. In this sense, the nature of ethical decision is very similar to the nature of truth in McCarthy’s, as the narrator states in *The Crossing*: “In the end what the priest came to believe was that the truth may often be carried about by those who themselves remain unaware of it.”⁴⁴⁾ Truth and ethics might not necessarily be that inaccessible. But they might come from something consciousness cannot consciously understand. Ethical decisions often seem remote, removed from the protagonist’s consciousness. Still, it resists destruction. Ethics *remains* present in McCarthy’s worlds.

What explains the nature of ethics as resistance? Why is there, in McCarthy’s works this ever-resent, inexplicable presence? I submit that the answer must be anthropological. There is something deeply human at work, but also deeply veiled, unconscious, inaccessible. However, if we do not have access to this “something,” which explains the persistence of ethics, the answer must then be not merely anthropological, but more precisely theological. In other words, if we cannot discern by ourselves the foundation of ethics in a *nihil* world, it must be revealed to us. Calvin points us in the most promising direction in the opening of chapter three of the first book of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “There is within the human mind,

43) McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 64.

44) McCarthy, *The Crossing*, 46.

and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.”⁴⁵) If that explains for Calvin why there is no real atheists in the world, and that everyone really does believe in something, it also explains the radical presence of ethics. Calvin thus comment on Ps 8.5-6 writing: “The reason with which they are endued, and by which they can distinguish between good and evil; the principle of religion which is planted in them.”⁴⁶) In that limited sense, a general imprint of duty and morality, confirms Calvin, is a remnant of the image of God. There is an imprint of God’s ethical requirements, even though the presence of radical evil always attempts to compromise the working out of this *sensus divinitatis*.

McCarthy’s world is one in which evil seems to display its most radical consequences. It seems complete—almost total. The imprint of the *sensus divinitatis* on the human nature will always leave a remnant, a remaining trace of the revealed ethical law of God. The ethics of resistance in McCarthy is, in the strictest sense, “remnantal ethics,” which confronts the radical presence of evil. But a remnant of ethical consciousness is still a remnant, because the Fall and sin cannot completely erase the imprint God made through his creative act. In McCarthy, we find this imprint transpiring through the almost complete manifestation of the Fall.

So, indeed, McCarthy unveils before our eyes a world in which there is no escape. We can never transgress the limits of our human finitude. The human context is a world of exile. We cannot escape the reality that Reality is not what we expected, not what we think we know. We are exiled in a world of evil and violence. That is the context of ethics. McCarthy has decided

45) John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), I.iii.i, 43.

46) John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://ccel.org>, accessed March 5, 2021.

to paint this world in black and red, and ethical decision are written only in these two colors. As exiles baptized by the Fall in violence and blood, we are nonetheless creatures of ethical decisions, even when these are hardly identified as such. In fact, “McCarthy inscribes ethics as a possibility in bare life itself,”⁴⁷⁾ because human beings are acting beings.

In fact, there are plenty of attitudes describes in a very moral, or even virtuous manner, even though there are often seen through their absence. There are many instances where words and adjectives underline the existence of a moral standard: “horrible hell,” “barbaric celebration,” “walked off in disgust,” “spat in the ground in disgust,” “turned away in disgust,” “desolate scene.” In McCarthy’s worlds, ethics often transpires best when it is seemingly absent. In this sense, McCarthy bears resemblance to another Southern author, Flannery O’Connor. She uses a concept, that of “displacement,” to describe how characters are displaced from a world where there is a God who is the standard of all things—especially of right and wrong—into a place where there the Fall had radical consequences, even affecting the physicality of her protagonists.⁴⁸⁾ The same phenomenon of displacement is at work in McCarthy: we are displaced in a world where God is, by almost all accounts, absent.

When God seems absent, what can ordinary men and women do? They can often do nothing more than rely and act upon this remnant of the imprint of God in them. The impossible ethics of absence in Cormack McCarthy is the living witness that we inhabit a world profoundly affected by sin. The struggle for daily subsistence can lead to violence; society can indirectly and unwittingly provide a framework where evil will grow and

47) Filipovic, “Light,” 26.

48) The concept is introduced in creative manner in her novella “The Displaced Person,” in Flannery O’Connor, *Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009), 194-235.

flourish. Piercing the darkness McCarthy has become a master at describing, ethics as resistance is a clear incarnation of the human *need* for ethics, but something that can only be truly recovered if our God-given imprint is itself restored. Even if there was such a thing as a manifest absence of God, there would still be an ethical attitude bearing witness to the enduring presence of the Creator.

<주요어>

코맥 맥카시, 미국 작가, 윤리의 부재, 하나님의 부재, 남은 자의 윤리, 신성에 대한 감성

<Key Words>

Cormac McCarthy, American writers, ethics of absence. absence of God, remnantal ethics, *sensus divinitatis*

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<Abstract>

God in Abstentia:
The Impossible Ethics of Absence
in Cormack McCarthy

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Cormac McCarthy is without contest one of the most significant American writers alive today. Author of over a dozen novels, plays, and screenplays, he has, over a span of more than thirty years, built rich, complex, and mythological worlds. For the new reader, opening a McCarthy novel might be somewhat uncomfortable, especially for the Christian reader. Evil and violence seem to transpire through every page. This has led some scholars to characterize his work as nihilistic. The world is cold, unforgiving, and meaningless. There would be no possibility for ethics in McCarthy's worlds. First, this article looks at the supposed nihilistic nature of McCarthy's novels and the almost metaphysical description of the presence of evil. Second, this article looks at the persistent presence of ethics in McCarthy's novels. Far from being absent or impossible, his novels are full of ethical judgments and attitudes. The puzzlement of reading McCarthy comes from the fact that, in his worlds, ethics is best seen through its absence. Remnantal ethics in McCarthy is seen when evil seems all-powerful. This article concludes that this persistent presence of evil, in the perceived absence of God, is the result of the imprint God made in man at creation. Thus, no matter how deeply McCarthy's characters are affected by sin, there will always be something of the *sensus divinitatis* transpiring through their actions.

<초록>

부재 중의 하나님

코막 맥카시의 부재 윤리의 불가능성

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코막 맥카시는 현존하는 미국 작가들 중 가장 탁월한 분 중 한 명이다. 그는 수십 편의 소설, 연극, 영화의 대본을 썼으며, 지난 30여년 동안 풍부하고 복합적이며 신화적인 세계를 구축하였다. 그렇지만 맥카시를 모르는 새로운 독자들에게 그의 소설은 다소 불편할 수 있으며, 그의 책 페이지 마다 악과 폭력이 난무하므로 특히 크리스천들은 강한 거부감을 느낄 수 있다. 따라서 어떤 학자들은 그의 작품을 ‘허무주의적’이라고 부른다. 그의 세상은 차갑고 가차 없으며 무의미하다. 맥카시의 세계에는 윤리의 가능성이 없어 보인다.

필자는 먼저 이 논문에서 맥카시 소설의 소위 ‘허무주의적 성격’과 악의 현존에 대한 거의 형이상학적 묘사를 검토하려고 한다. 이어서 필자는 맥카시의 소설에 끈질기게 나타나는 윤리의 실재를 다루려고 한다. 사실 그의 소설에는 윤리의 부재나 불가능성보다, 윤리적인 판단과 태도가 가득하다. 그의 소설을 읽을 때 당황스러운 것은 윤리 문제가 그 부재 가운데 나타나기 때문이다. 악이 전능하게 보이는 때에 ‘남은 자의 윤리’(remnantal ethics)가 있다. 필자는 하나님의 부재가 인식되는 세상에서 악의 지속적 현존이 느껴지는 것은 하나님께서 인간을 창조하실 때 우리 속에 ‘(하나님의) 흔적’을 만들어 주셨기 때문이다. 따라서 맥카시의 등장인물들이 아무리 깊이 죄의 영향을 받았다 하더라도 ‘신성에 대한 감성’(sensus divinitatis, 혹은 ‘종교의 씨앗’)이 그들의 행위를 통하여 밝히 드러난다.

(tran. Prof. JWK)