

Luce, Dianne C. *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009. 336 pages. Hardcover, \$49.95, ISBN 9781570038242.

Review by David Cremean

A strong case can be made for Dianne C. Luce as the foundational academic literary critic of Cormac McCarthy. Back when McCarthy's books were selling between 2,500-4,000 copies or so, back when a small handful of reviews constituted all that was being written about his art, back before *All the Pretty Horses* finally and deservedly changed all that, back before most of us were even aware the name "Cormac" existed—in 1980, beginning with a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essay, Luce was beginning to publish about his under-read and underappreciated writing. She has stayed the course. For several years now many of us in McCarthian (or, more informal yet, Cormackian) circles were aware that Luce was working on a major book about the author and his work. Available for over a year as I write this review, *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period* proves a major achievement. Even amid the growth industry of writing about McCarthy and his work, Luce's volume now leads the list of McCarthian criticism.

Luce's book is actually longer than its substantial 291 pages of text (counting notes). Nicely designed and featuring an appropriate photograph and gray-olive color scheme for its cover, which intermixes the stubborn life-insistence of nature via a tree displacing what appears to be a human-made, perhaps hand-hewn porch—wood reborn amid dead wood—even its small, two-pages-for-the-price-of-every-one print remains highly readable, its font friendly. The book's 30 percent recycled paper and its binding are both high quality as well. Its endnotes are highly informative, and I found myself underlining roughly as much material in them as I did in most parts of the main text.

As a whole the book is constituted primarily of what seems best identified as "classical" scholarship. This claim is intended solely as praise, not to be taken to indicate either a lack of rigor or timeliness on Luce's part. Far from either: the book, like McCarthy's own writing, has the air of timelessness rather than the trendy about it. It is primarily, even exclusively, concerned with McCarthy and his writing, neither just an instance of thesis-driven cherry picking nor postmodern pyrotechnics, both of which it is blessedly devoid. It is a work of passion, not Ego. The scholarship is nigh-unto exhaustive yet highly selective among much of the rest of the best written about McCarthy and his art, typically discerning about that which it leaves out. It is also fair-minded. And Luce's style is eminently readable, engagingly free of jargon, able to make often complex, arcane subject matter (such as Gnosticism) highly accessible. Yet her subjects and her ideas remain uncompromised, and the book poses fair challenges to the reader at the same time that it remains highly accessible.

Reading the World weaves eclectic criticism seamlessly throughout its five chapters. Its overall focus is indeed the South, but when relevant it references the Western novels and other material as well. Chapter 1, "The Landscape of Memory: *The Orchard Keeper* (1965)," second among the book's two strongest chapters, fuses historical, sociological, a dash of biographical, and ecological criticism, and it includes some strong background material on the TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority), which

employed McCarthy's father. Chapter 2, "Cosmic Estrangement: *Outer Dark* (1968)," conjoins some opening genre criticism (identifying it as "a road narrative") and a liberal dose of psychological criticism with a thorough Gnostic reading (drawn mainly from the most definitive work on Gnosticism to date, Hans Jonas's 1958 *The Gnostic Religion* and its 1963 second edition's epilogue). Chapter 3, "The Cave of Oblivion: *Child of God* (1974)," makes use of psychological, philosophical (via the Platonic, which Luce has published on previously), mythical, and further Gnostic readings, along with historical background relative to the real-life James Blevins (a name familiarly distorted by Lacey Rawlins as a "Blivet" to readers and viewers of *All the Pretty Horses*) and Edward Gein (among other things, inspiration for *Psycho*'s Norman Bates, which the author also lucidly discusses at some length). Chapter 4, "Stranger in the Garden of Industry: *The Gardener's Son* (1977)," triangulates further Gnostic, historical, and ecological examinations, throwing in a healthy dose of intertextuality discussing Camus' Meursault from *The Stranger* as a rebel prototype of sorts for McCarthy's Robert McEvoy. Last, Chapter 5, "Prison in Babylon: *Suttree* (1979)," likely the volume's single finest chapter, once more resorts to a mixture of historical, biographical, psychological, philosophical (especially existentialist), mythological, and Gnostic avenues of approach. In short, *Reading the World* mines critical veins rich in ores. In the process it forges them together, creating a strong unity, a new whole.

Unsurprisingly, given that Luce provides the ever-swelling Bibliography for the McCarthy Society on its forum, she aptly contextualizes each of her chapters with a select and judicious overview of criticism related to the specific McCarthian work under consideration. The only major piece of relevant McCarthy criticism likely available long enough before this book was published that seems to be unrepresented here appears to be Jay Ellis's Routledge volume, *No Place for Home* (2006). Another possible negative criticism of this book is its occasional (but overall exceedingly rare) instances of seeming to stretch or force an idea—a trait arguably universal in nature among critics, myself included. For example, in citing Vereen M. Bell's claim that Lester Ballard is "oblivious to beauty," she slightly qualifies Bell's claim yet still goes on to refer to "Lester's typical lack of susceptibility to the world's beauty" (165). This claim stands at odds with Ballard's dream: "Each leaf he passed he'd never pass again. They road over his face like veils... [T]he world that day was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death" (*Child of God* 171). As Luce notes repeatedly throughout the volume, dreams are extremely revealing of psychology in McCarthy's works (see, for instance, pages 62-63). Similarly, while roughly the first half of the following statement about *Outer Dark* is undeniably accurate, its second half strikes one as unlikely at best: "But the child's consumption in gross parody of the Christian rite of communion also gestures at the gnostic idea that the Savior's consumption by the cosmic powers might be a salvific act" (91). This line of thought beginning with "also" is strained in that no one else except possibly Rinthy (about whom Luce has her own doubts concerning this point) experiences any signs of grace or salvation in the novel, least of all Culla or his fellow consumers, the "Evil Trinity." Nonetheless, even in most such instances Luce's overarching and overwhelming evidence could well indicate such a conclusion is at least potentially merited.

Finally, the only other strong puzzlement the book creates is by dint of the complete absence of *The Stonemason*, which in fact, with the exception of a brief

mention in the acknowledgments is the only work thus far published by McCarthy not mentioned in Luce's volume (even *Whales and Men*, his two University of Tennessee *Phoenix*-published short stories, and some other unpublished material merit multiple or lengthy references). Granted, the play was not published until 1994, the same year as *The Crossing*, but it almost certainly originated from his southern period and certainly is set in the south (Louisville, Kentucky) and intertwines well with his other writings. So its utter lack of reference here creates a single glaring curiosity.

Though I still find myself reluctant to agree with certain of Luce's specific positions, even at these points Luce's readings nevertheless almost always remain formidable and the disagreements can likely be attributable at least in large part to McCarthy's essentially relentless penchant for ambiguity. Luce's conclusion that Lester Ballard "refuses" the epiphany offered by the lone boy peering out from the church bus near novel's end is merely stated, not supported (167). Furthermore, the lengthy endnote to this statement dismisses the significance of that scene and of Ballard's words upon returning to the hospital that "I'm supposed to be here" (*Child of God* 192) as "his submission...to the power structure of the community and of cosmos [sic]" (Luce 283-84) rather than as evidence of a change within him.

On the other hand, impressively, Luce offers no hint of pretension that this book will prove the last word about the "Southerners." She never claims to be writing "*the definitive*" approach to McCarthy's earliest work, but in the process of writing humbly manages *a definitive* examination of certain critical themes in McCarthy's initial four published novels and first published script. Beginning with the Preface, she takes great care to point out that what she is about to delineate constitute "influences" rather than serve as an effort "to identify McCarthy the thinker as a gnostic, a Platonist, or an existentialist" (viii). She repeats this, mantra-like, though in different words, at intervals throughout the book. "But McCarthy's moral and spiritual parables seem to me to be highly syncretic," she sagely notes, "blending and transcending his reading in a variety of theological and philosophical works, especially their mythical [here I would add "and mystical"] elements" (65). A bit later she adds the following concerning *Outer Dark*: "But its gnostic vision does not establish that McCarthy himself is either a nihilist or a neo-gnostic" (112-13). Later still Luce admits that "we cannot equate McCarthy's philosophy with Plato's any more than we can label him a gnostic" (160). She is a judicious, careful critic.

As Luce notes in the Preface, McCarthy's "Tennessee period" remains "still relatively neglected" (vii). But it must be said that this book takes immense strides toward correcting that neglect. Furthermore, *Reading the World's* subject matter continues to point toward other relatively recent and forthcoming work concerned with McCarthy's writings. Merely citing a few examples from a religio-spiritual emphasis so integral to Luce's examination here of Gnosticism in McCarthy underscores the care she takes with her writing, as well as the importance and the expansiveness of what she has accomplished in this book. Petra Mundik, for instance, is publishing some extremely fine articles about Gnosticism in McCarthy's Western novels, including what will ultimately be a trilogy of related essays in the journal *Southwestern American Literature*. Manuel Broncano has published a pair of articles and is hoping to write a book concerned with McCarthy's multiple and varied uses of Catholicism (among other things), particularly as elements of what he terms "subverted allegory." In the still-burgeoning field of

ecocriticism, Luce's own approaches to it in this volume, particularly in the chapter on *The Orchard Keeper*, serve as reminders that there are miles to go before the ecocritics sleep. Finally, in an email, Luce informed me that she is working on a new book of her own, one that will, if it is again concerned with McCarthy, be another volume for McCarthy's minions to look forward to.

Above all, Luce's book proves to be a testimony to the following claim she writes as tribute to McCarthy: that his reading(s) of the world demonstrate "an ear that is open to the unspoken mystery of the world" (vii), a trait of his that causes so many of us to postulate that he deserves not only the status as perhaps the greatest American author of his and our own times, but also a status among the greatest American authors, period. In *Reading the World*, then, we find both Luce and McCarthy themselves embodying each of the following quotations as they together exemplify the best of what critic and artist can accomplish:

Hands from which all those blessings had flowed. Hands 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. (*Stonemason* 132-33)

And:

She patted his hand. Gnarled, ropescarred, speckled from the sun and the years of it. The ropey veins that bound them to his heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God's plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world. (*Cities of the Plain* 291)

Consequently, no self-respecting Cormackian's library would be complete without this volume, nor would that library be complete without Luce's book being well-marked. The same, sans the "well-marked," holds true for any library terming itself "academic." *Reading the World* is an important, vital work about an important, vital author and artist, written by an important, vital scholar.