

McGilchrist, Megan Riley. *The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner: Myths of the Frontier*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 251 pages. Hardcover, \$103, ISBN 978-0-415-80611-4.

Review by Nell Sullivan

In 2004, Georg Guillemín quipped that including “an ecocritical angle has become established procedure in McCarthy criticism” (17), and a number of major works in the last decade have borne out his claim. Guillemín’s own *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* examines what he calls McCarthy’s “ecopastoral vision” (13) through the lens of Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory of melancholia and Leo Marx’s reading of the pastoral in American literature, and Dianne Luce’s 2009 *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period* examines McCarthy’s environmental concerns using Gnostic philosophy and careful examination of the unique history and culture of East Tennessee that shaped McCarthy’s “ecocentric vision” (Luce 18). Adding to the body of McCarthy ecocriticism is Megan Riley McGilchrist’s 2010 *The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner: Myths of the Frontier*, which uses a cultural-studies approach to look at the relationship between environmental concerns and the treatment of gender in McCarthy’s Western novels and Stegner’s fiction and nonfiction. McGilchrist contributes to McCarthy studies by examining McCarthy’s western fiction as a political critique of American post-War foreign and environmental policy, as well as by bringing his work into direct dialogue with that of another canonical writer of the American West, but in spite of its strengths, her study ultimately lacks the analytical depth and graceful prose of Luce’s and Guillemín’s respective works.

McGilchrist divides the study into three lengthy numbered chapters flanked by a brief introduction and conclusion. She begins by recognizing the “catalytic effect” of the Vietnam War on American culture and literature (23). Throughout the study, she refers to the “hinge” in the literary continuum that Stegner and McCarthy provide, a sort of generational shift in attitudes about and representations of the landscape attributable to the Vietnam War as a cultural watershed, with Stegner presenting the “best of liberal western American thought” before the war and McCarthy representing a more postmodern view (3).

Chapter One provides an appraisal of the history of the frontier myth as well as a thorough grounding in western studies scholarship. McGilchrist is clearly well versed in the scholarship of the American west, and her first chapter serves as a valuable primer on this field.

In Chapter Two, “Stegner’s West,” McGilchrist looks systematically at Stegner’s major fiction, such *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*, as well as his nonfiction and the fiction known collectively as the Joe Alston stories. She argues that Stegner’s representation of the landscape and his sympathetic portrayal of women result from his own familial experience, with pioneering characters like Bo Mason in *Big Rock Candy Mountain* representing Stegner’s father and women like Susan Burling Ward in *Angle of Repose* based on his long-suffering mother. Stegner’s fiction advocates human stewardship of the land in order to check the exploitative mentality that often characterized the pioneering ethos. Throughout his canon, Stegner “iterates a female

perspective and an understanding of the landscape as not simply an object of male power, but rather in its 'feminine' manifestation, a source of its own power which ultimately defeats the traditional concept of Manifest Destiny as settlement and control," an attitude that places Stegner "in the vanguard of ecocriticism," as McGilchrist notes (56). McGilchrist also connects Stegner's environmentalism to his pivotal role in legitimating Western regional literature, not only as a novelist but also as a critic and professor of creative writing at Stanford; in his essay "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," he notably decries the classification of "all works with western settings in the category of dime-novel descendents" (96). Stegner's role as a legitimator of Western fiction and a proto-ecocritic makes all the more fascinating McGilchrist's analysis of Stegner's anomalous and often ignored *Discovery!*—a nonfiction account of oil exploration in the Saudi peninsula originally commissioned by Aramco as a series of articles in their company magazine from 1968 to 1971. While some would be tempted to view *Discovery!* as Stegner's cynical exploitation of his own talents for financial gain, McGilchrist finds a continuity with his other writing in his use of metaphors taken from the pioneering West to describe oil exploration, noting that with his paean to the petroleum industry, he "momentarily slips back into the unchallenged terrain of Manifest Destiny and the myth of the frontier" (111).

McGilchrist finds no such slip apparent in McCarthy's works, which were written on the other side of the "ideological turning point of the Vietnam War era" (116). As she argues in Chapter Three, "McCarthy's Western Fictions," *Blood Meridian*, *The Border Trilogy*, and *No Country for Old Men* reveal McCarthy's political consciousness, his awareness of the lasting implications of American Manifest Destiny, and the environmental fallout of its Cold War iterations. According to her reading of *The Border Trilogy*, John Grady Cole is "the man on the make looking for Big Rock Candy Mountain" (167), a young man who regards "Mexican women, and the Mexican landscape, as obtainable" and himself "above the law" (174). Arguing that McCarthy's apparent misogyny in his obviation of women is actually a means to critique the acquisitive nature of the American western male, McGilchrist reads the *Border Trilogy* as an allegory in which "the absence of developed female characters suggests a skewed understanding of the landscape on the part of the characters; as females are commodified, so is the land" (186). The land and the women are depicted as faithless in *The Border Trilogy* because they ultimately disappoint male desires, desires which, according to McGilchrist, McCarthy presents as anachronistic, infantile, or irresponsible.

Although McGilchrist recognizes ambivalences and incongruities in Stegner's writing, she does not seem to allow for such a possibility in McCarthy's novels. And yet ambivalence is everywhere in McCarthy's fiction. As doomed or misguided as John Grady Cole and Billy Parham may be, they are still portrayed with almost irresistible sentimentality, and novelists do not typically invest with sentimentality that which they find morally bankrupt. Since McGilchrist focuses on the issue of gender in relationship to the landscape, her analysis could have profited by engaging Jay Ellis's 2006 *No Place for Home* and perhaps Terri Witek's foundational 1994 essay "Reeds and Hides: McCarthy's Domestic Spaces," which both provide rich readings of gender relations in McCarthy's canon.

I recognize the challenges inherent in organizing an extended comparative analysis of complex texts by writers as profound as McCarthy and Stegner. However,

McGilchrist's choice of omnibus chapters subdivided into asymmetrical sections is an ineffective way to present her case. For the chapter on Stegner, she uses a primarily text-by-text approach, but for McCarthy's chapter, she switches to a thematic organization, with the exception of one section devoted solely to *All the Pretty Horses*. The result is that she scants the rest of McCarthy's Western works, sometimes repeats observations about *All the Pretty Horses*, uses too little truly close reading, and leaves some significant lines of inquiry unfinished, particularly her intriguing claim that McCarthy's western works paradoxically reveal "an acceptance of the strength of women and the feminine," which she suggests is demonstrated by the characterization of women in *No Country for Old Men* (182). If developed convincingly, this claim could have buttressed McGilchrist's overarching argument that McCarthy's depiction of women as "faithless, damaged, hopelessly desired, ultimately degraded" (6) is not ultimately misogynistic because he only does so for allegorical purposes to demonstrate the destructive masculine attitudes toward the natural world. Perhaps not all readers are as skeptical about McCarthy's depiction of women as I am, but certainly most readers need more than a passing reference to Sheriff Bell's wife to be convinced that her depiction serves as an *effective* redemption of the vexed nature of McCarthy's characterization of the feminine. Ironically, McGilchrist never identifies by name either Loretta Bell or Carla Jean Moss, *No Country's* two major female characters.

In fact, a fuller examination of *No Country* in general would have been illuminating for McGilchrist's entire study, since that novel may be McCarthy's last explicit word on the western landscape and the frontier myth. (Set in post-apocalyptic Appalachia and the southern coastal region, *The Road* takes us outside of the west proper, although it arguably provides a bleak rumination on the *reducto ad absurdum* of Manifest Destiny.) McCarthy invites us to make that connection by juxtaposing the West Texas border lives lived by Llewellyn Moss and Sheriff Bell with the invisible workings of corporations represented by the iconographic Houston high-rise, where the unnamed corporate honcho hires Carson Wells to follow the drug money that Chigurh ultimately delivers there. Given the late 1970s' setting of *No Country*, one can imagine men like the Aramco executives who commissioned Stegner to pen *Discovery!* rubbing elbows with Chigurh's new business partner at the Houston Club. To justify his impromptu personnel restructuring plan, Chigurh tells the Houston executive, "The prospect of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities. In their minds" (McCarthy 253). These words could also stand as a pithy indictment of so many of the boys in McCarthy's border fiction, including the kid, John Grady, Blevins, Billy, and Moss. But by 1980, when *No Country* is set, and certainly by 2005, when it was published, the drug trade had already replaced cattle ranching and oil exploration as the West's new Big Rock Candy Mountain, as *No Country* clearly demonstrates.

McGilchrist's ambitious study probably had its provenance in a very good dissertation; unfortunately, it often still reads like an unrevised one. As a scholarly book, *The Western Landscape in Cormac McCarthy and Wallace Stegner* is hampered by a number of stylistic and organizational issues that impair its readability, such as excessive block quotations from other scholars, problems with word choice and awkward prose, and cumbersome chapter organization. Particularly disappointing are issues with the book's argument, namely its unfulfilled promises with respect to the analysis of McCarthy's texts.

Works Cited

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