

“What’s Wanted is a Clean Sweep”: Outlaws and Anarchy in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* and Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*

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In Chapter IV of Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907), the character known only as the Professor laments that the climate of England does not provide fertile ground for the sowing of anarchist seeds. In America, however, he sees real promise. “They have more character over there, and their character is essentially anarchistic,” he says; “The collective temperament is lawless” (61). The Professor might well be referring to the world of Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* (2005), a novel dominated by the outlaw figure Anton Chigurh, who seems to fully realize the apocalyptic American prophesied by Conrad’s character. McCarthy’s novel affords the opportunity to examine the Professor’s transatlantic comparison. Additionally, these novels investigate the relationship of artist to art and of writer to character, offering stirring examples of the interrelationship of outlaw ethos and aesthetic identity.

The Professor’s contention is that the other anarchists in the novel are mere sham revolutionaries. Initially, however, the people that meet in the back of Adolf Verloc’s shop seem to be characteristically Victorian villains: foreigners in London. An influx of immigration had changed, considerably, the demographic of London, prompting the Extradition Act of 1870 and the Aliens Act of 1905—acts that, in turn, occasioned more immigration (Houen 995). The city of *The Secret Agent* is a London reconstituted as a borderland, that most anarchical of environs.

At this meeting are Verloc himself—born in Britain, but with a French father; Karl Yundt, whose demeanor recalls Pyotr Kropotkin; and Comrade Ossipon, whose “almond-shaped eyes” and “high cheekbones” also seem designed to mark his foreignness (Conrad 38). These parlor theorists are unsettlingly continental—always an alarming quality in late Victorian and Edwardian literature. This preoccupation with foreigners infiltrating the homeland reached its pinnacle in 1909, when the serialization of William Le Queux’s *Spies for the Kaiser: Plotting the Downfall of England* in the *Weekly News* was published in conjunction with the headline “FOREIGN SPIES IN BRITAIN” and the offer of a reward to any citizen with information on persons suspiciously German-looking (Trotter 169).¹ At the same time, though, Conrad’s anarchists also bear the hallmarks of British domesticity. Each is fastidiously attendant to his attire, and each, in his own way, depends on the care of a woman. This group is distinctly and alarmingly foreign and non-threateningly bourgeois and British at the same time. As such, they are both foreign threat and parody of foreign threat; likewise, they are both of the British middle class and a parody of it. Thus the London of *The Secret Agent* takes on the quality of a border town, in which the markers of one’s identity are difficult to read, and where the relationship between surface appearance and actuality is ambiguous. In Le Queux’s fiction, for example, the essential foreignness of the

interloper will always rise to the surface under pressure. In Conrad's fiction, the distinction between essence and performance is potently ambiguous.

It is a critical commonplace that Conrad's anarchists are an ineffectual, impotent lot, gluttonous, in thrall to women (a negative in Conrad's fictional universe), and dandified. They "neither set the world on fire nor rise to sterile heroisms," writes Eloise Knapp Hay (219); and Norman Sherry asserts, "Laziness and vanity are, therefore, the rather unlikely vices attributed to them generally" (248-249). The context, though, for the complacency of these revolutionaries merits consideration. The Extradition and Aliens Acts were aimed at systematizing the process for admittance into the country, as well as regulating the rejection of so-called "undesirables." The Acts also offered asylum to those fleeing persecution and to political criminals. What exactly constituted a political crime was a nebulous issue (Houen 995). In practice, political crime worthy of special consideration included only crimes committed on foreign soil. This definition did not end all complications; what, for example, was to prevent an "undesirable" thief from exaggerating the extent of his activities and asking for asylum? In 1906, under-secretary Mackenzie Chalmers wrote to Gladstone:

This may seem at first sight to be shifting the onus of proof required by the Act itself, but I think the present state of Russia may be taken to be so notorious that it is a matter of common sense that if a man proves that he comes from Russia and alleges that he is a refugee there is a presumption of fact that his statement is correct. (qtd. in Pellew 377)

To Chalmers's mind, the nature of Russia radically inverts the nature of legality—only an outlaw would stay in Russia, and Russian "outlaws" are likely rational and good citizens.

The nature of being an "outlaw" began a transformation in the 1870s not only from without, but also from within, at least in so far as the category pertains to anarchists. During that decade, theorists and leaders of the movement increasingly demanded that international anarchists redirect their energy from theory and persuasion by words to action. In 1873, Mikhail Bakunin called for an end to the era of ideas and the inauguration of the era of deeds, and thus created the concept of "propaganda by deed" (Oliver 12). These injunctions to commit *deeds* had terrible results—the Empress of Austria and President William McKinley, to name only two victims, were assassinated by self-professed anarchists. In England, however, there were no significant acts of violence attributed to anarchists. Even the incident that inspired *The Secret Agent* had no victims save for the bomber himself.² Thus, in the climate of asylum, the metamorphosis of anarchists from propagandists by words into propagandists by deeds is reversed. In a setting in which the categories of legal and illegal are so unsettled, in which "crime" itself is subject to atomization, and, finally, in which to have been an outlaw guarantees protection by the law, the temper of the anarchist movement could not be but muted. It is, of course, naive to assume that Britain's open-door policy would completely eliminate anarchist deeds. Hermia Oliver's book *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* makes it clear that some anarchists in Britain were

active abroad. However, it is also naive to assume that environment has no effect on a movement, and in England, anarchism enjoyed “something of a vogue in progressive middle-class circles” (Thomas 8). Once welcomed by Fabians and British social reformers, anarchists could not avoid alteration.

In the background of this curiously inert situation is the disarming figure of the Professor. Conrad introduces him at lunch with Ossipon, mocking the other man and his compatriots: “You revolutionists,” he says, “are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stands up in defence of that convention. Clearly you are, since you want to revolutionize it” (Conrad 58-59). It is tempting to label the Professor—who is obsessed with explosives—a propagandist by deed. However, the Professor is unconcerned with the effects of his actions, unconcerned with anything other than himself and his own power, which is always a power of potential energy. The Professor carries on his person at all times a detonator, which safeguards him against capture, granting him a freedom exterior to the law, and a degree of power. It also renders him impotent, however; his potential explosiveness remains forever inert and unrealized, and his deadliness is forever theoretical. In spite of this, the Professor offers a distinct challenge to the definition of the anarchist outlaw. For the Professor, anarchy as currently practiced is simply more system-building, a method of perfecting government; and government remains antithetical to the Professor’s definition of anarchy. For the Professor, true anarchy exists only in apocalyptic intent.

In Conrad’s moral universe, the Professor is quite clearly a monster, voiding, as he does, the emphasis on solidarity so common in Conrad’s novels of the sea. Thus, socially, he is vile. In terms of narrative method, however, the Professor is clearly attractive to Conrad, and he bears some similarities, in values, to the author whose pen gives him life. He shares his creator’s interest in and attention to individual perception. The Professor says of the police, “I am not impressed by them. Therefore they are inferior. They cannot be otherwise” (Conrad 58). The Professor is a radical relativist, concerned with modes of seeing and with the importance of individual perception. His philosophy, essentially, is that that which the eye refuses does not exist, for the eye makes the world. Fredric Jameson has argued that, in Conrad’s novels, “the exercise of perception and the perceptual recombination of sense data [is] an end in itself” (229-230). Somewhere lurking beneath the paranoia of the Professor’s views is a Conradian impressionist.

The Professor’s contention is that Britain will not produce true anarchist fruit, but America may well do so. America had indeed been affected by propagandists-by-deed, and McKinley’s September 1901 assassination prompted Jose Brunetti, the Duke of Arcos—a Spanish ambassador who had been welcomed by McKinley (“Duke of Arcos Received”)—to write an article entitled “International Control of Anarchists” for the December 1901 volume of *The North American Review*. The premise of the Duke’s argument is that education will not, as some had argued, alleviate anarchist activity, because education, unfortunately, is at the root of the problem. Brunetti writes, “In the eighteenth century, when the working people were like animals, perfectly content to be fed and to lie in the sun, there were no assassins in their ranks worth mentioning.” Brunetti’s allusion to a halcyon age of mindless workers is

interesting, as is his use of the passive voice—“be fed” conjures up images of an underclass somehow receiving sustenance by special delivery. His biased nostalgia notwithstanding, the Duke’s plea is for an international coalition of police, sharing information in an effort to wipe out the anarchist threat. The details of how this Benthamite Panopticon will be enacted do not enter the discussion. His insistence is simply on international interaction, and he is understandably upset that Britain chose to ignore a recent conference on the matter held in Rome. What is most interesting in his proposal is the way he characterizes the United States: “Here you have a country where anything may be achieved at the ballot box, *where all institutions may be torn down and set up in a new form by the expressed will of the majority*” (Brunetti 761, emphasis mine). Anarchy, in Brunetti’s estimation, seems built into the American system.

The Professor’s belief, implicitly sanctioned by the words of the Duke of Arcos, is that America is where the real anarchist outlaw can thrive, a hypothesis that Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* examines.³ The novel is relentlessly violent, and one scene in particular captures the distinctive tone of McCarthy’s vision. Llewelyn Moss, who has found a suitcase full of drug money, is on the run from drug dealers and purchasers alike; he is additionally pursued by the relentless Anton Chigurh, a figure, like Conrad’s Professor, uncowed by death and given over to violence. In the Hotel Eagle at Eagle Pass, Chigurh catches up to Moss, but Moss is able to elude him, albeit briefly. Fleeing in the street, Moss suddenly finds himself beset on all sides. McCarthy writes:

When he turned again a car coming down Main Street picked him up in the lights and slowed down and then speeded up again. He turned up Adams Street and the car skidded sideways through the intersection in a cloud of rubbersmoke and stopped. The engine had died and the driver was trying to start it. Moss turned with his back to the brick wall of the building. Two men had come from the car and were crossing the street on foot at a run. One of them opened fire with a small caliber machinegun. (*No Country* 114)

The scene recalls the O. K. Corral in John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine*, or John Wayne outnumbered in the street in Ford’s *Stagecoach*. McCarthy’s street fight, however, reads like an absurdist retelling of such iconic (and stock) Western scenes, with the conflict between good and evil interrupted by inconvenient machinegun fire.

The absurd bedlam of the Eagle Pass gunfight suggests a contemporary America immersed in the anarchy foreseen by the Professor, an America wallowing in the “lawless temperament” and “anarchistic character” diagnosed by Conrad’s “perfect anarchist” (Conrad 61). In McCarthy’s violent scene, the reader witnesses an America in which the shootouts of the “Old West,” of a bygone era, incarnate an anarchy that is at once both apocalyptic and—in its wanton excess, crisscrossing and multiplying sightlines, and shrapnel-like syntax—disarmingly funny. However, it is a mistake to conclude, as a result of the over-the-top carnage, or due to McCarthy’s near-deadpan tone, that humor

is the primary intended effect, or that the unsettlingly funny violence is mere farce or comic invention. McCarthy's presentation of life on the border is, perhaps, not all that exaggerated, especially considering that in recent years, Piedras Negras, where Moss mends after his encounter with Chigurh, has been the site of scenes as violent as anything in McCarthy's novel.⁴

The allusion to Piedras Negras and contemporary violence suggests that the novel is grounded in a particular historical moment, but it is worth unsettling or troubling the notion that the novel *has* a specific context, a specific temporal setting. While some of McCarthy's novels—*Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*, to name two—occur in a specific moment and detail plots marked by birthdates and time-specific events, not all of his fiction operates in this way. Edwin T. Arnold writes in "The Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction" that "*Outer Dark* takes place, one would guess, in the twentieth century, but the year is unclear and the world described comes more from folktale or myth than an identifiable locale" (20). It would appear that the era of *No Country for Old Men*, and its context, are not ambiguous at all. In what is perhaps the novel's most famous scene (due in no small part to its memorable presentation in the Coen brothers' film), Anton Chigurh lets the reader know the precise time frame. Referring to the date stamped on a quarter, he says, "It's nineteen fifty-eight. It's been traveling twenty-two years to get here. And now it's here. And I'm here. And I've got my hand over it. And it's either heads or tails. And you have to say. Call it" (56). Taking place in 1980, the events of the novel are under the long shadow of the Vietnam War's legacy. While some elements of the novel seem, like those of *Outer Dark*, to emerge out of myth, or out of film noir, or out of a John Ford film, the Vietnam context never recedes very far into the background. At the same time, the novel, published in 2005,⁵ invokes other, specific, post-September 11th millennial fears, some of which are fundamentally tied to the Mexican border. A further complication in the effort to historicize *No Country* derives from its original incarnation as a screenplay. The novel is a palimpsest, beginning its life not as a novel but becoming one (only, of course, to be translated back into a screenplay—an Academy-Award-winning screenplay, at that—and then realized as a film). This circuitous route from the scaffolding for a film (or a film idea) to a novel and then finally to film further complicates (and enriches) *No Country's* historical moment. Nonetheless, while these multiple contexts enrich the novel, it is the specter of Vietnam most pertinent to a discussion of American anarchy.

The novel begins sketching its Vietnam context early on, when Moss is fleeing from unnamed pursuers, after he has returned to the scene of the shootout with water for a dying man.⁶ McCarthy writes: "He studied the blue floodplain out there in the silence. A vast and breathless amphitheatre. Waiting. He'd had this feeling before. In another country. He never thought he'd have it again" (*No Country* 30). Here McCarthy alludes to Ernest Hemingway's "In Another Country," a story that, with its staccato rhythms, imagistic details, and famous conjunction-driven opening paragraph, provides a model for the prose of *No Country for Old Men*. In referencing Hemingway's short tale, McCarthy also recalls that story's profound presentation of the trauma of war, and perhaps foreshadows Moss's time as a convalescent in a Mexican hospital. Later, Moss's resolutely loyal wife Carla Jean⁷ tells Sheriff Bell, "He was in

Vietnam,” a statement, which, in its brevity, indicates that Moss has seen horrors before and is unlikely to be frightened by the threats of drug-dealers (130). The reader later learns that the boar’s tooth Moss keeps with him is a token from a fallen comrade. Near the novel’s close, Moss’s father tells Sheriff Bell about his deceased son’s war experience: “*He was the best rifleshot I ever saw. Bar none,*” he says, and he continues, “*He was a sniper in Vietnam you know*” (293).⁸ These details insist that the situation into which Moss inserts himself is a repetition and recapitulation of his Vietnam experiences. In other words, for Moss, the novel reenacts the war.

While his Uncle Ellis insists that this country has always been “hard on people” (*No Country* 271), Sheriff Bell nonetheless holds the position that the violence and depravity on display in the novel are something new. He sees signs of a downward spiral everywhere, in a woman’s desire for legalized abortion and in the aggressive fashion of youth culture. “*These old people I talk to,*” he recites, in one of his interstitial monologues, “*if you could of told em that there would be people on the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses speakin a language they couldn’t even understand, well, they just flat out wouldnt of believed you*” (295). In such instances, Bell comes off as a bit of a codger, and these remarks have led some critics to label him, and the novel in which he appears, reactionary and conservative. “The sheriff is clearly McCarthy’s mouthpiece,” writes William Deresiewicz; he later adds, “McCarthy the conservative has conscripted McCarthy the artist for service in the culture wars” (3-4). This dismissal, though, makes too much of Bell’s lament over “nose bones,”⁹ which is in no way the only evidence Bell can marshal to support his viewpoint. Deresiewicz is not wrong, though, to assert the centrality of Bell, who recalls Verloc in *The Secret Agent*: both are primary characters who command less attention than supporting characters (the Professor and Chigurh), and neither is quite up to the challenge of their assigned tasks. Nevertheless, the assertion that Bell is McCarthy’s mouthpiece neglects the extent to which McCarthy shows Bell to be in error, to be a poor interpreter. Furthermore, when taken in the context of the tumult of the Vietnam years and the upheaval on American soil, the anarchical violence of Anton Chigurh (motivated neither by greed nor by political agenda) becomes less the sign of one man’s fear of a boogeyman and more the expression of an entire culture’s anxiety about anarchy and a metaphorical foreign invasion.

Just as Verloc and his enclave of ne’er-do-wells and theorists play on Edwardian fears of the insidious “foreign threat,” so too does the “new” (to borrow Bell’s terminology) violence of *No Country* reference invasion fears. However, in this case, the fear is not of literal invaders, of the emissaries of enemies overseas unleashed on American soil; rather, there was considerable concern that the experience of Vietnam had infected, or invaded, the American spirit. According to Richard Slotkin, while the goal of the Vietnam War had been to insert the American way into Vietnam, the actual result was the opposite. Slotkin writes: “The hope of counterinsurgency had always been that some day Vietnamese politics would begin to mirror [the] American political model. Instead, our engagement in Vietnam had carried us to the other side of the looking-glass and had made our politics seem a mirror-image of Saigon’s coups, conspiracies, riots, and assassinations” (*Gunfighter Nation* 579). The

arch-paranoiac Richard Nixon was not loath to invoke the term “anarchy.” In 1973, he addressed the nation as follows: “My fellow Americans, we live in an age of anarchy, both abroad and at home. We see mindless attacks on all the great institutions which have been created by free civilizations in the last 500 years. Even here in the United States, great universities are being systematically destroyed.” While Nixon’s viewpoint must be taken as eccentric, it is perhaps not as atypical as might be expected. Richard Slotkin writes:

With the rise of more militant and violence-oriented organizations . . . and the antiwar movement, and the corresponding increase in repressive government measures, it began to seem credible that America itself might fall into that cycle of revolution and repression which the New Frontiersman had seen as the besetting evil of Third World societies and from which the American model was supposed to deliver them. (*Gunfighter Nation* 580)

In 1901, Jose Brunetti had praised the American proclivity for destruction and our cultural capacity to tear down our institutions. In his estimation, such destructive tendencies can be the signs of creative impulses, and an exuberant expression of freedom. Perhaps that freedom was tainted by a foreign threat; perhaps it always carried the potential for chaotic and virulent anarchy.

In *The Secret Agent*, the most alarming quality of Verloc and his cohorts is their peculiar mix of the foreign, the insidious, and the dangerously anarchistic with the expected, the domestic, and the *British*. It is appropriate, therefore, that when the police find the body of Carson Wells, he is identifiable only as “a ex-army colonel” (*No Country* 193). His exploded remains (which, in their own way, recall those of Stevie in *The Secret Agent*) carry only the marks of his apparently virtuous past; his crimes are concealed. (The Coen brothers intensify the destabilizing and unthreatening elements of Wells through casting—the character is played by the familiar, affable, and frequently comic Woody Harrelson—and by adorning him with a white cowboy hat.) Wells has returned from Vietnam with no moral scruples, and while it is greed that motivates him, it is his experience in the war that is more important. He is an amoral creature, and thus, knowingly or not, an agent of the anarchy that Bell sees spreading. The services that he provides, likewise, help to redefine the nature of the outlaw, and to unsettle the distinction between “outlaw” and “entrepreneur.” Chigurh only intensifies the anarchistic strains of Wells. He is a hit man, in the employ of corporate interests, and well compensated for his activities. His motivations, however, transcend greed. In *The Secret Agent*, the Professor sells his wares to whoever will have them; “My absolute rule,” he says, “is never to refuse anybody—as long as I have a pinch by me” (Conrad 55). Chigurh, likewise, seems motivated by the desire to test his wares—his skills—in the most possible ways; he is, in his own way, as disruptive as the Professor. He, too, sells his services, but, as I will discuss later, his motives are much more ambiguous than those of Wells, and, ultimately, genuinely anarchistic.

As mentioned earlier, the violence in the novel is characteristic of McCarthy’s fiction in general, but also of brutal occurrences along the Mexican border. While this contemporary violence occurs mostly in Mexico, for

McCarthy, the Texas/Mexico border is an American creation, and its dark nature is in some ways the result of American attitudes towards legality and violence; ample evidence that this is so is on display in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. In *No Country for Old Men*, this "Mexican" violence is creeping into Sheriff Bell's backyard and onto American soil. As such, the novel again recalls the invasion fears reflected in *The Secret Agent*. These particular phobias are rather complex, as suggested by the Sheriff of Eagle Pass, who tells Bell, "There's days I'm in favor of givin the whole damn place back to em" (*No Country* 134). The residents of southern Texas are being invaded, in other words, by the people whose territory they once invaded themselves. In the years surrounding the novel's publication, these concerns were front and center, and the Mexican border thus participated in the more general anxieties that originated with the September 11th attacks. The long debate resulted in the absurdly titled "Secure Fence Act," signed into law by President Bush on October 26, 2006. Such an act is, partially, a tacit admission of the allure of illegal immigrants as a labor force, and what is being reckoned with is the disregard for legality on the part of many Americans. Whatever such laws as the Secure Fence Act may appear to be, they are as much as anything else an attempt to refine our own slippery sense of the border between the categories of legal and illegal. Likewise, these public acts use the criminal other to assert the purity of the national self. Cracks are clearly visible in the strategy, which cannot completely obfuscate the American tendency to anarchistic (and convenient) disavowal of order.

Borders are as fundamental to the Western as they are in the spy fiction of Conrad (spy fiction itself being, arguably, transplanted frontier fiction), and thus it is appropriate that the fearsome Anton Chigurh's appearance is as unsettling as the distinction-blurring dandies that populate Conrad's novel. The particular nature of Chigurh's appearance in the novel has been obscured, due in part to the fact that he is only described with any specificity twice—in the first coin toss scene at the gas station and in the confrontation with Moss in the Hotel Eagle. However, these scant and enigmatic descriptions have been overwritten by the memorable and in some ways ridiculous appearance of the cinematic incarnation of the character. Javier Bardem's Chigurh in the Coen brothers' adaptation wears severe black denim and sports a comic haircut inspired by a 1979 photograph of a man at a border brothel (Topolnisky 115).¹⁰ In the novel, Chigurh bears none of the distinctive marks that he does in the film. The gas station attendant, pressed to call the coin toss, looks at Chigurh and sees eyes as "blue as lapis. At once glistening and totally opaque. Like wet stones" (*No Country* 56). When Moss narrowly gets the drop on Chigurh at the Hotel Eagle, there is "an odd smell in the air. Like some foreign cologne" (111). As Moss looks at Chigurh, the narrative notes his physical appearance: "Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly exotic. Beyond Moss's experience" (112). Thus, an important element of Chigurh's outlaw appearance is that he is *hard to place*. He is a ruthless hit man who apparently cares about fragrance. "Faintly exotic," he is not specifically foreign. In other words, something about him is familiar, native, and domestic, but he is at the same time vaguely foreign-looking. He is a product of the border whose appearance unsettles the binary categories on which borders depend. His eerie

eyes underline this aspect of his character, communicating both the depth and penetrability of a pool and the resolute surface of a rock, and confounding in the process the distinction between interior and exterior. These collapsed opposites illuminate the nature of McCarthy's outlaw, who is not all that dissimilar from a spy.

Despite the physical and performative similarities to Conrad's dandified anarchists, Chigurh is, like the Professor, an outsider among outsiders. That he is a ruthless killer is evident from the first scenes in which he appears. He murders a police officer, then uses a police cruiser to pull over a motorist, whom he then kills and whose car he steals. This is familiar behavior for the thriller villain, on the run from the law, but there is an anarchical element to Chigurh's violence—he kills indiscriminately. For example, when he is brought to the scene of a shoot-out by two men, ostensibly representatives of the owner of the suitcase full of money currently in Moss's possession, Chigurh kills both men, with little regard for the consequences. There is something of the Professor's anarchy in Chigurh, an anarchy that seeks to burn all in its path. In *The Secret Agent*, Comrade Ossipon scoffs at the Professor's lack of concern regarding the detonation of one of his bombs near the Greenwich Observatory. "Under the present circumstances," he says, "it's nothing short of criminal." To which the Professor replies, "Criminal! What is that? What *is* crime? What can be the meaning of such an assertion?" (Conrad 60). Ossipon finds his counterpart in *No Country for Old Men* in the unnamed representative of the Matacumbe Petroleum Group who contracts Carson Wells to pursue Chigurh. "We got a loose cannon here," he tells Wells (*No Country* 140). Chigurh has killed some of his employees (who are, as their kind always are, replaceable) but even more troublesome is that he has broken the rules by which such illicit transactions operate. Even in the context of a broken drug deal, "that colossal goatfuck," there are expected codes of behavior, which Chigurh violates (141). His capacity to confound and transgress knows no bounds, to the extent that he still has the capacity to surprise the reader in the novel's closing pages. In a scene that, unfortunately, is not in the film, Chigurh returns the money to another unnamed character. Neither greed nor the interests of purchasing power drive McCarthy's outlaw. He eludes the reader's understanding, imparting a sense of anarchy and chaos even to the conventions of characterization.

While much commentary on McCarthy's novel, and on its 2007 film adaptation, has emphasized the novelty of Chigurh, he is a distinctly literary (as well as cinematic) character with clear antecedents, one example in a long line of Western characters. He is, at the root, the man in the black hat. Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation*, analyzes this type, specifying such a villain is "a professional of violence, for whom formalized killing was a calling and even an art" (384). The demands of genre require this, as it is necessary for the villain to be worthy of the hero. Chigurh conforms to type, but only so far. Moreover, McCarthy's novel consistently draws parallels between Moss, the ostensible hero, and Chigurh. Moss tells Chigurh he is going to make him "a special project of mine," a threat that, while it does not come to pass, suggests that Moss's sense of self is contingent on Chigurh, and that the distinctions between hero and villain are illusory. The novel even creates twin paths for the characters; where we see Moss, we later see Chigurh.¹¹ Chigurh emphasizes the

proximity of the Western villain to the Western hero, and he makes it clear that the Western villain is in fact the Western hero taken to his logical conclusion. McCarthy's vision of the Western emphasizes that the story of the West is a myth designed to impose order on anarchy. Thus, his villain refuses to accept the totality of the role assigned to him, imparting a sense of anarchy even to the practice of genre.

Herein lies the connection, once again, between creator and creation. McCarthy's fiction investigates the myths of the West, the tales of what Slotkin calls "regeneration through violence," and lays waste to them. As such, Chigurh is a figure for McCarthy. What McCarthy does with his pen, Chigurh does with his silenced shotgun; and while what the character does is impermissible ethically and socially, it is nevertheless appealing aesthetically. Chigurh is also a latter-day Professor, a relativist convinced of the potency of his ego and its ability to dictate reality. Carson Wells says to Chigurh, "You think you're outside of everything," right before Chigurh kills him. But Wells is only partially right; Chigurh thinks he is outside of everything only insofar as he is above everything. In that his will makes his world, Chigurh is, according to his worldview, *inside* everything. This aspect of Chigurh is on display most forcefully when he discusses God with Carla Jean Moss, Llewlyn's widow, right before he kills her. He says, "Even a nonbeliever might find it useful to model himself after God. Very useful, in fact" (*No Country* 256). His point is that God serves His own interests; His designs are single-minded and engaged in the relentless pursuit of His own joy. God can serve no other gods, spiritual or metaphorical, and thus he too becomes a figure for anarchy. Judge Holden puts it another way in *Blood Meridian*: "War is God" (*Blood Meridian* 249).

There is a religious dimension to Chigurh's speeches, a belief in an ultimate plan and an ideal order of which he is just a tool. "I got here the same way the coin did," he tells Carla Jean (*No Country* 258). In other words, he serves larger ends. Conrad's Professor likewise indulges in prophetic rhetoric, which is perhaps the legacy of his father, "an itinerant and rousing preacher of some obscure but rigid Christian sect" (Conrad 68). Chigurh's insistence that he is a tool of fate is underscored by the novel's frequent identification of him with his obscure weaponry, in particular, the pneumatic cattle-gun he uses. The gun is connected to an air tank via a tube, which recalls the detonator the Professor always wears on his body. "I walk always with my left hand closed round the india-rubber ball which I have in my trouser pocket," he tells Ossipon. "The pressing of this ball activates a detonator inside the flask I carry in my pocket. It's the principle of the pneumatic instantaneous shutter for a camera lens" (56). Of course, Chigurh is just as likely to proclaim that he is a tool as he is to insist that the world shapes itself to his will. "I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will," he tells Wells of his decision to allow himself to be arrested (*No Country* 174-175). While he claims that this was vanity, it does not negate his success, nor does it undermine his belief that he can impose his will on Moss. Chigurh has absolute confidence in his ego, just as the Professor believes there is no man who can challenge him.¹² The confidence that each man exudes—the insistence of the sovereignty of their wills—is the hallmark of their anarchistic impulses. Each character is pledged to his own individual freedom, which is, ultimately, no freedom at all. Fealty to

the whims of the self is likewise a net. In the inability to sublimate desire to anything but their own wills, each character loses his humanity, and thus the identification with tools, with weapons, with *objects* is apt. This does not make them any less frightening, and it casts the anarchistic tendencies of contemporary culture in an even harsher light.

In "Postmodern Villainy Rides the Range," Scott Covell writes, "We are drawn to such killers" as Chigurh; he adds that it is not heroes but "the Anton Chigurhs who mesmerize us," but Covell is cautious about explaining *why* Chigurh is so attractive (107). Arguably, however, Chigurh is so compelling because outlaw ethos is such an integral component of American identity, and the anarchy of individual aspiration is a fundamental element of American character. Chigurh is genuinely American, an embodiment of the principle of American anarchy implied in "International Control of Anarchists," and a commentary on the Professor's prophecy.

Notes

¹ According to Trotter, the spurious intelligence gathered in response to the novel and headline was nonetheless instrumental in the solidification and intensification of Britain's spy service.

² For a full account of Joseph Conrad's familiarity with the bomber Martial Bourdin's activities, and the newspaper coverage of the Greenwich Park explosion, see Norman Sherry's *Conrad's Western World*, pp. 228-247.

³ Freed from the constraints of the violent dimensions of anarchy enforced by the juxtaposition of Chigurh to Conrad's Professor, a full treatment of anarchy and McCarthy might take into account McCarthy's relationship with the "desert anarchist" Edward Abbey, which is alluded to in Richard Woodward's interview with McCarthy, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction." According to Woodward, Abbey and McCarthy considered a "covert operation to reintroduce the wolf to southern Arizona."

⁴ In a particularly grotesque example, the *Huffpost World* reported that in May 2010, four men were decapitated and their heads were left on the hood of a car, a grisly and disgusting scene akin to atrocities in *Blood Meridian* and, for that matter, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

⁵ The book jacket of the hardcover edition suggests that the novel is "set in our own time," a phrase which only appears to be specific.

⁶ Cliché and Hollywood maintain that the killer always returns to the scene of the crime, but what brings Moss back to the disaster on the Texas plains? A tremendous conscience is apparently enough to overwhelm all sense (and keep the plot moving along).

⁷ In "It's a Man's, Man's World," William Deresiewicz suggests that *The Border Trilogy* is McCarthy's "sentimentalization of youth," and that in those novels the newly sentimental McCarthy indulges in "romance, heroism, nostalgia [and] the glamour of youth" (2). Similar labels might be applied to McCarthy's presentation of the marriage between Llewelyn and Carla Jean Moss, which appears to function largely as the result of Carla Jean's amazing and unswerving devotion to her husband. When Sheriff Bell meets with Carla Jean over coffee, she tells him that before going to work at Wal-Mart, she had a dream that she would meet the love of her life at her new place of employment:

“And on the ninety-ninth day he walked in and he asked where sportin goods was at and it was him . . . and he looked at me and he said: What time do you get off? And that was all she wrote. There was not no question in my mind. Not then, not now, not ever” (132). While the relative strengths and weaknesses of McCarthy’s depiction of marital bliss may be debated, it is worth noting that the Moss marriage (which does not predate Moss’s tours of duty) seems deliberately and pointedly atypical, particularly given Moss’s status as a veteran and the sexual climate of the era. In *Strange Days Indeed: The 1970s, the Golden Age of Paranoia*, Francis Wheen writes: “The POWs, many of whom had been held captive on the other side of the world since the 1960s, returned to a country—and to families—that they could scarcely recognise. A GI might come home to a wife whom he remembered as a baker of cookies and presser of shirts to find Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* or Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* on the bedside table” (136).

⁸ Moss’s father, it must be noted, is skeptical about the centrality of the Vietnam War context: “*People will tell you it was Vietnam brought this country to its knees. But I never believed that. It was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just the icin on the cake*” (294-295).

⁹ In its apocalyptic import, certainly Bell’s reference to “bones in their noses” makes too much of an unusual, perhaps disturbing, way to adorn one’s flesh. A too-close identification of McCarthy and Bell is fallacious, and McCarthy does not provide much evidence that he shares Bell’s pruderies. The unusual relation of the living to dead flesh and bones has long been a subject for McCarthy’s investigation, from Ather Ownby’s vigil over the corpse of Kenneth Ratner, to Lester Ballard’s necrophilia, to the actions of *Blood Meridian*’s scalp-hunters.

¹⁰ One of the pleasures of teaching the novel and the film is reading students’ unique and creative descriptions and interpretations of Bardem’s hair. “Prince Valiant” and “page boy” are popular. Recently a student wrote, “He’s a Fogerty.”

¹¹ The Coen Brothers’ film adaptation not only mimics this technique, but also, in some ways, enhances it, via crosscutting.

¹² He maintains the following about the London police: “They know me, but I know also every one of them. They won’t come near me—not they” (Conrad 55).

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