

## The West as Symbol of the Eschaton in Cormac McCarthy

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The overriding sense of imminent decline and end in the western novels of Cormac McCarthy is palpable. The primary means by which this sense is communicated to the reader is through the strategic use of the “West” as a multivalent metaphor covering everything from western geographic settings to the visual image of the setting western sun as symbol of cosmological terminus. Complicating McCarthy’s eschatological imagery, however, is his correlative use of symbols which summon thoughts of eternity. This polarity at play in McCarthy’s western novels may on the surface seem contradictory and confusing but at deeper level the two can be seen to complement each other in such a way that the emergence of one logically entails the other.

An extremely apt example of McCarthy’s use of both eschatological and eternal temporal concepts is found in the famous coldforger passage of *Blood Meridian* (McCarthy 309-310). I will give a fairly detailed analysis of this passage in an attempt to offer an interpretation of McCarthy’s metaphysical conception of time as it is manifested in human history. In delineating McCarthy’s strategic employment of eschatological symbolism, I make connections to the presence of a philosophic framework drawn from German Idealism, specifically Schopenhauer. I then link McCarthy’s well known concern with the provenance of evil (theodicy) to a major influence on the young Schopenhauer, namely Schelling’s *Freedom Essay* (Schelling). In making this connection my intention is not to argue that McCarthy was directly influenced by Schelling but rather to situate McCarthy’s work in relation to others with similar concerns in the Western intellectual tradition. After having located McCarthy in something like the monistic tradition of post-Kantian German idealism, I attempt to elucidate the presence of Eastern non-dualism<sup>1</sup> in McCarthy’s philosophic narrative. In fine, my argument is that McCarthy goes so far west that he reaches the East, demarcating the end (eschaton) of the West in its modern manifestation as a subject centered culture. Foremost here seems to something like the Eastern philosophy of enumeration found in the Hindu darsana of Sāmkhya, the system on which the metaphysical structure of the *Bhagavadgita* is based. References to Eastern eschatology<sup>2</sup> must remain somewhat elliptical, but I hope to successfully argue that the post-Kantian monism<sup>3</sup> of Schopenhauer’s thought as it manifests itself as an influence on McCarthy’s western novels fits conceptually with McCarthy’s textual allusions to Eastern non-dualism. This eschatologically driven metaphysical system logically correlates with the influence of Eastern thought on Schopenhauer, resulting in agreement among Schopenhauer, McCarthy and Eastern non-dualism that the highest soteriological condition consists in complete nullification (cessation) of subject/object duality and finite existence as such, i.e. the eschaton.

Before taking up the coldforger passage, a word on theodicy and how I am here using the term is perhaps advisable. The possibility of confusion arises because of the natural presuppositions that attend theodicy within the religions of revelation (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Thus the purported absolute goodness of the God of Abraham stands in stark contrast with the manifest presence of evil in the world. This positively

theistic branch of theodicy is not what I am attempting to conceptually delineate in relation to McCarthy. Rather, theodicy here is a metaphysical problem literally because of the absence of a personal, caring God. Therefore theodicy as discussed herein is more of a philosophic concept stemming from the tradition of Platonic negative theology, which tradition includes Gnosticism and the theodicy of Schelling and Schopenhauer, both of whom acknowledge their debt to Plato. I take it as more than plausible that this theodicy of negative theology has strong conceptual connections to the theistically negative Eastern systems alluded to as well.

I now turn to the coldforger passage.

In that sleep and in the sleeps to follow the judge did visit. Who would come other? A great shambling mutant, silent and serene. Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of an ultimately atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. In the white and empty room he stood with his bespoken suit with his hat in his hand and he peered down with his small and lashless pig's eyes wherein this child just sixteen years on earth could read whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the courts of men and he saw his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps.

In his delirium he ransacked the linens of his pallet for arms but there were none. The judge smiled. The fool was no longer there but another man and this other man he could never see in his entirety but he seemed to be an artisan and a worker in metal. The judge enshadowed him where he crouched at his trade but he was a coldforger who worked with hammer and die, perhaps under some indictment and an exile from men's fires, hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be. It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end.  
(McCarthy 1985: 309-310)

It seems clear that the judge is here described as an eternal force that makes his appearance in time as a "moving image of eternity," to quote the famous passage from Plato's *Timaeus* (Plato 37d), through which the productions of the craftsman are imaged. With this tie to the Platonic demiurge in mind, it is not difficult to see a connection between the judge and the evil creator of the world in Gnostic cosmogony, Yaldabaoth<sup>4</sup>

(cf. *The Secret Book of John* in Meyer). The description of the judge as emanating from “the shore of a void without terminus or origin” is surely meant to place him in the realm of eternity.

If we think of this passage in terms of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, we can see the judge as a finite and temporal manifestation of eternal war-like will (Schopenhauer 406-407). This image of the judge as the personification of the eternal nature of thing-in-itself as war connects with McCarthy’s eschatological preoccupation through his fascination with images of violence, death and destruction. One could here cite innumerable passages, but it perhaps suffices to recall the judge’s statement: “War is god” (McCarthy 249).

In the same conversation just cited, the judge’s theological comment is preceded by a short disquisition on fate, freedom and agency in which the judge indicates that it is precisely because humans are free to participate in the “game” of war that their actions have any claim to significance in the first place.

Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have meaning at all. Games of sport involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all. (McCarthy 1985: 249)

In order for the “wager” to exist, the cognitive capacity of freedom to affirm or deny participation in war must be present. The fact that war and death are here connected to the establishment of value in consequence of the freedom to wager is in turn linked to eschatology as both purposive and final end. Thus there is an indirect but nonetheless necessary connection to freedom posited as the *conditio sine qua non* of human value, i.e. good and evil.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that human freedom is the source of evil is a common theme in the tradition of German Idealism in which Schopenhauer operated. The linkage of freedom to theodicy is most explicitly made and explicated by Schelling in his *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (Schelling). Published in 1809, many scholars have noted that this essay influenced the young Schopenhauer (Janaway 204). Directly or indirectly, this theme of the correlation of freedom and evil seems to have found its way into McCarthy’s thoughts, and from there into the mouth of the judge. Given the now generally accepted influence of Schopenhauer on McCarthy, the safest guess would probably be that McCarthy absorbed it through his reading of Schopenhauer.

Returning to the image of the judge quoted above, and with the connection of freedom and theodicy in mind, we can say that the eschaton (in all of its senses) is necessitated by human freedom. In McCarthy’s metaphysical world, human freedom would appear to be linked to the ever present eruption of chance opening out to localized episodes of chaos, phenomenally revealed in the judge’s world as war and death. Thus

the judge as the moving image of eternity is the agent of death who operates by means of the necessity of evil following as a corollary of human freedom. If many find it vulgar to join freedom with the capacity for evil, then they have, in my view, hit upon the reason McCarthy highlights that malevolency is prevalent among people who valorize freedom.

We are now in a position to see the “West” as a symbol bearing a great deal of eschatological significance in McCarthy’s work, and nowhere more strikingly than *Blood Meridian*. Western modernity can aptly be described as a cultural phenomenon whose greatest reason for being is the pursuit of freedom; and this view of freedom is perhaps best described as *antinomian*. Kant summarizes this sentiment when he says that a modern Westerner cannot accept any law that he has not given to himself, for doing so would abrogate personal freedom. “If the will seeks the law that is to determine it anywhere but in the fitness of its maxims for its own legislation of universal laws, and if it thus goes outside of itself and seeks this law in the character of any of its objects, then heteronomy always results” (Kant 45). It bears mentioning here that this statement is in doctrinal accord with the judge’s declaration of man’s need for “autonomy” if he is to be “suzerain” of the earth (McCarthy 1985: 198-199). I don’t think it is simply a coincidence that McCarthy’s narrative explicitly places the gang in an antinomian western landscape, thereby giving to the geographic setting a symbolic connotation among whose meanings is the western United States as nomological and temporal end point of Western civilization as such.

Yet another symbol of eschatological significance associated with the West is the multitude of references to the image of the declining sun, most prominently in the title’s announcement of “the evening redness in the West.” Inasmuch as the sun is also a symbol of knowledge, there is a connection to the judge as man of the Enlightenment and the dangers resulting from the ideology of progressivism. The sun as image of eternity which follows a cyclic pattern of rise, zenith, decline and death is thus tied to the aforementioned historical moment of the end of the Enlightenment, all of which is personified in the judge.<sup>6</sup>

This leads directly to the rest of the passage with the appearance of the coldforger in the judge’s shadow. This “moneyer,” “this other man,” is not man as such but rather modern Western man and is necessarily “false” because he tries to reduce the reality of the judge to an equivalency mechanism—in this case a coin (cf. *The Reality of the Archons* in Meyer).<sup>7</sup> The judge can always stand in judgment over this economist and pronounce his attempts to forge a likeness of the truth false because in the material world of *Blood Meridian* the judge himself is god or the ultimate *arche*, which is not a thing but is death and cannot be exchanged because the judge as archon is the principle from which all other things derive their meaning. Differently stated, the moneyer remains in darkness and is thereby presented as a manifestation of the decline and end of the West because he tries to exchange an unreal symbol (money as the equivalency mechanism) for the real in believing he can play games with coins and thereby avoid facing the meaning of his mortality. This is the essence of Western modernity: the comfortable self-preservation of economically driven existence has obscured the true nature of the human condition, which has in turn resulted in “the evening redness in the West.”

A corollary of this interpretation is that the judge is not a real person (attested to by the fact that he “seemed little changed or none” [325] in almost thirty years) but rather is (like Melville’s white whale) death, god, the devil, the unknown, light and darkness,

i.e. the Whole which contains within itself all contradictions and opposites. He is like the Hindu deity Śiva, who, in one of his many avatars, Rudra, is a white dancing god of death and destruction, nature and the hunt. He is that which inspires fear in the hearts of the many and wonder in the hearts of the few. He is human nature both light and dark, with the dark side of Enlightenment liberalism unmasked in order to direct our attention to the base desires which clothe themselves in the rhetoric of humanitarianism.

Another way of thinking of the judge in relation to the decline of the West giving way to Eastern fatalism is in terms of McCarthy's obvious penchant for number symbolism, which I think can be interpreted as something like Plato's definition of time as the moving image of eternity. In essence, this is another way of saying that the whole is always present in the part. In *Blood Meridian* time as the moving image of eternity often manifests itself as one of the judge's discussions of fate and destiny, but also appears in the kid's repeated dreams, as quoted above. Therein the kid "saw his own name," indeed he saw "whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the courts of men"... "logged into the records as a thing already accomplished..." (McCarthy 1985: 310). This is clearly another reference to time as the moving image of eternity, as a thing already "accomplished." The judge is a kind of prime number (a number divisible by only itself and one). He cannot be "divided" back into his origins because he does not have an origin but is an aspect of eternity which is always present; he cannot be reduced into something smaller, more manageable.

This problem of the one and many, eternity and time, is also related to cause and effect. In fact, placing eternity in time, the whole in each of the parts, is a way to discursively describe the reality of material cause and effect while solving the paradox of infinite regress, thereby explaining the nonexistence of first and last causes and effects, which must be accounted for in a metaphysical system like McCarthy's which takes the whole to be present in the parts and denies the even greater paradox of creation from nothing. I hasten to add that solving this paradox discursively does not do away with the *aporia* of the existence of the metaphysical system as such, for why it is this way is still a mystery which can only be answered by supradiscursive means. In the case of *Blood Meridian*, I am arguing that McCarthy indirectly points to a way of answering the question why humans experience the world as they do with images taken from Eastern religious soteriology and Platonic metaphysics.

In the Hindu darsana of Sāṃkhya there is a theory of causality in which the effect pre-exists in the cause known as *satkaryavada*. The theory is stated as follows in the *Sāṃkhyakarika* 9:

The formally existent (manifest object) is an effect that exists within the cause (*satkarya*) of the unmanifest because of: the non-productive nature of non-being [*ex nihilo nihil fit*]; the need for and apprehension of a material cause; the non-production of everything; something can only generate what is in its capacity to generate, the nature of the effect being contained within the cause. (Larson 258 [translation modified, CD])

In essence this serves as a rational explanation for the existence of the whole in the part. In Sāṃkhya (which literally means enumeration) this is esoterically tied to the

nature of numbers as both wholes and parts, i.e. the problem of the one and the many. In Platonism and Pythagoreanism the same concern exists for explaining the whole and part, one and many, expressed in number symbolism as well. Obviously McCarthy has picked up on how this all manifests itself in the spatiotemporal continuum, as his affinity for the repetition of certain numbers indicates; and by the fact the he esoterically describes the judge as a prime number, namely, as a quality of the uncreated and indivisible presence of the whole in the part—indeed, as a moving image of eternity.

In closing I offer an explanation of McCarthy's eschatological symbolism in relation to the end of the West by way of a structural interpretation of history and eternity as presented in the order of the Border Trilogy.<sup>8</sup> I propose to do this in light of the Platonic concept of time as the moving image of eternity. From the perspective of eternity, we are always in the middle. The trilogy begins in the middle with *All the Pretty Horses*. Within that beginning, Duena's speech on history prepares us for the eschatological movement of history within the Trilogy as a whole and for the movement to the eternal in *The Crossing*, as indicated by the title. If we think in terms of history, we are probably closer to the beginning or end of a particular cycle, and so ATPH (although the beginning of the Trilogy) is closer to the end of the historical cycle than TC. The inversion of ATPH and TC either way presents different synoptic perspectives for the reader, from the passage from time to eternity and then from eternity back to time. Of course, *Cities of the Plain* is at the end regardless, and therefore seems to point toward something important eschatologically. If the eternal is symbolized as a circle which returns constantly to itself by means of the manifestation of finite particulars, then this gives us the image of divine immanence common in Eastern thought through which the finite identifies itself with the infinite, as discussed above in relation to the coldforger passage in BM. The eschatological reconciliation of history and eternity lies in the recognition of the underlying identity of that which appears to be different. Important to note here is the hierarchical relationship of order between time and eternity, part and whole, difference and identity, with the latter of each pair depending on the former yet standing on a higher metaphysical plane. Time and eternity cannot be thought as two separate and opposed actualities as is commonly assumed in discursive systems of secular modernity, for doing so would limit eternity in relation to its supposed opposite as time, thereby contradicting the very notion of eternity, which is precisely the conclusion at which secularized modernity arrives. When time is seen as the condition for the movement to and within eternity, however, the proper cognitive order reveals itself as a fully immanent and realized eschatology. "It vanishes at its own appearance" (McCarthy 1998: 273).

Thus the significance of the order of the Border Trilogy reveals itself as follows: ATPH, although historically posterior to TC, comes first as the beginning which through knowledge of itself (Duena's speech) opens to the eternal in TC, but then falls back to the historical in COTP before coming to a final end in the epilogue of COTP in the absolute cessation of cognition in death.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a good philosophical summary of non-dualism from the perspective of Hinduism see Deutsch. Briefly, Eastern non-dualism is distinguished from ontological monism in the West by virtue of the fact that non-dualism does not predicate an overarching substance or essence as an existing absolute but rather denies that the absolute as such has positive existence which would qualify as being and over against which something could stand in dual ontological relation. The Platonic tradition of negative theology most commonly associated with the Plotinian One/Good without being is the closest doctrine to this in the West of which I am aware. “It [the Good] is not therefore something or qualified or quantitative or intellect or soul; it is not movement or at rest, not in place, not in time, but ‘itself by itself of single form,’ or rather formless, being before all form, before movement and before rest; for these pertain to being and are what make it many” (*Ennead* VI.9.40-45).

<sup>2</sup> By Eastern eschatology I mean the general view of the “end” in a metaphysical sense found in Eastern thought. Admittedly, generalization of non-Western cultural norms is often frowned upon by contemporary scholarship. With that in mind, but not wanting to deny that such a generalization is in some sense edifying in the case of McCarthy, I will say that for the most part the view of Eastern eschatology found herein is taken specifically from the Sāṃkhya darsana, which is generally recognized as the metaphysical “backbone” of the *Bhagavadgita*. Given the connection of the judge to the dancing Śiva I elucidate later, this seems appropriate for the purposes of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Post-Kantian monism refers to the “monistic” reaction of German idealist philosophers who followed Kant’s dualism of phenomenon/noumenon. Most important for our purposes here would be Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer. There are many works one could consult for an overview of this period. Beiser’s *German Idealism* (Beiser) is generally recognized as the best historical study in English of the period following Kant and leading to Hegel. Since Beiser’s study stops historically short of Schopenhauer, I would also recommend Janaway as a general introduction to Schopenhauer and his place in the world of post-Kantian thought.

<sup>4</sup> The Platonic demiurge is conceptually related to the Gnostic demiurge Yaldabaoth insofar as both are presented as mythical creators of the material cosmos, a trait both share with the God of *Genesis*. “Yaldabaoth is at once the God of *Genesis* and Plato’s demiurge” (King 187).

<sup>5</sup> The freedom I am talking about here is basically that associated with so-called existentialist philosophy as it grew out of German idealism via Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and to a lesser extent Nietzsche, most prominently as found in the early Heidegger and Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. In the latter, a phenomenology of freedom is explicated in which freedom is tied to the “nothingness” of consciousness (Sartre). Negativity is thus the source of evil as privation or finitude but is also the source of freedom as the engine or motor of consciousness as humans experience it. This has its origins in Hegel, Schelling, and is taken up by Schopenhauer too, and is also related to the negative theology and Eastern non-dualism discussed herein. Doubtless much more could be said. As it stands, I think the logical presupposition of freedom has been established and is strong enough to warrant the line of interpretation followed.

<sup>6</sup> The sun has a long tradition as a symbol of consciousness and knowledge in both East and West. Often the light of the sun symbolizes absolute knowledge and is contrasted with the relative and less brilliant light of the moon, which of course receives its illumination from the sun. If one considers this in light of the reference to the judge’s “lunar dome” (McCarthy 335) as he is dancing at the end, we can interpret this as an example of the immanent eschatology for which this essay as a whole argues, which is summarized in the conclusion.

<sup>7</sup> In the Gnostic theodicy of *The Reality of the Archons* the problem of evil is personified by the “reality” of the rulers who help Yaldabaoth maintain control over his creation of the material world. There are twelve rulers in addition to Yaldabaoth, making a total of thirteen archons in this

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Gnostic tract. When the expriest Tobin recounts for the kid how the judge “joined” Glanton’s gang, he states, “Two men had deserted in the night and that made us down to twelve and the judge thirteen” (McCarthy 127). Given the other Gnostic allusions present in BM, this seems to be a clear reference to this Gnostic text.

<sup>8</sup> The initial inspiration for the importance of the structural order of the Border Trilogy came from David Cremean of Black Hills State University during an online exchange at the McCarthy Forum in which I initially argued that perhaps *TC* should be read before *ATPH*. This is not to say that he would agree with the ends to which I have put the inspiration.

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