

**“The truth cannot be anywhere but in the speaking of it:”  
Storytelling and the Action of Ambiguity in Cormac  
McCarthy’s *The Crossing***

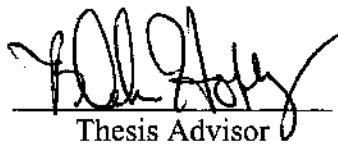
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Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* is a richly interwoven patchwork of tales. Billy Parham, the novel's protagonist, meets many storytellers upon his journey. Every time Billy turns a corner, someone offers advice they believe is profound and essential. These sub-narratives offer a potential means of accessing and synthesizing meaning from the otherwise senseless tragedy that reigns throughout Billy's journey. Strangely enough, however, these tales do not appear to offer a consistent philosophy. While all of the tales touch upon the nature of storytelling and the making of meaning, they often conflict. Where the main narrative offers little or no reason for Billy's tragedies, the sub-narratives offer more interpretations, theories, and philosophies than the reader can process easily upon a first read. Despite the inconsistencies, all the storytellers tell their tales as if their story alone holds absolute and essential truth. If we are to derive meaning from these internal tales, what ultimately are we to transport from the text?

Several of the novel's narrators claim that storytelling creates reality. For example, a former priest claims, "Acts have their being in the witness. Without him who can speak of it? In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all" (154). But if these stories create what is real, how are we to react when the novel's stories contain falsehoods, distorting what we know and turning what we hold to be true upside down? By the end of the novel, this dilemma remains unresolved; competing stories vying for what is real leave the question of meaning open-ended. While it is possible to describe this open-endedness as "postmodern," this word carries with it a

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host of negative associations, most especially the accusation levied often at McCarthy: that such ways of imagining language and the world are nihilistic. Yet, this same indeterminacy can also be viewed as a radical attempt to explore limitless possibilities. By comparing McCarthy's fiction with what Paul Ricoeur calls the "hermeneutics of faith," in which ambiguity can be cast as a positive quality, one that leads readers to questions they must themselves answer. Thus, on one level, *The Crossing* is a philosophical work deeply engaged with language in a postmodern world. If, as Wittgenstein says, "language is power," and if, as Nietzsche argues, the metaphor-maker is the arbiter of truth, then *The Crossing* can be seen as an artistic response to contemporary language debates. By interrogating *The Crossing* for what it says about language, we can see McCarthy as a philosophical novelist engaged with some of the central concerns raised in the last one hundred years and hypothesize that McCarthy's seeming nihilism is actually a powerful commentary on the nature of story, which, for McCarthy, is vital to both sorting out what is real and creating a better world.

Not surprisingly, the contradictions found within *The Crossing* are reflected in the critical landscape of McCarthy criticism. Over the last thirty years, Cormac McCarthy has established himself as a writer of both popular interest and critical acclaim. His dynamic prose has been compared to Melville, Faulkner and O'Connor, and his most recent novel, *The Road*, won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for literature. Despite these noteworthy accomplishments, his works have received mixed reviews, with many

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critics deterred by his verbosity and liberal use of violence. Academic examination of his works began in earnest in the mid 1980s, but then the critical conversations were limited to a few popular topics. Many early critics saw McCarthy as a nihilist; his prose might be impeccable, but the essential message of his works was thought to be an assertion of meaninglessness. While arguing for McCarthy's nihilism is no longer a popular critical approach, it seems that these later arguments cannot easily divorce themselves from their early influences. With a few exceptions, the McCarthy critics fall into one of two camps: those who believe that McCarthy is a nihilist, and those who defend McCarthy's novels as having definitive and specific meanings.

Any examination of Cormac McCarthy criticism must begin with an understanding of Vereen Bell and his infamous assertion of McCarthy's nihilism in his 1982 article, "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy." Bell's article can be credited as one of the first significant contributions to McCarthy criticism. At the time, before the publication of the critical favorite *Blood Meridian* and the bestselling *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy was still a relatively unknown author. With only the earliest four of McCarthy's novels in publication, the task of providing a cohesive interpretation of these difficult works presented a daunting challenge. Bell's solution was to argue that McCarthy's novels, though they may imply the pressures of some moral significance, never realize this significance in any communicable fashion. The structure of a moral society is there, Bell claims, but morality itself is gone, and nihilism has essentially filled

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the void. Bell begins with a reference to what he calls McCarthy's "paradigms without reference" (31) in *Outer Dark*. In this scene, the road that Culla Holme follows leads him abruptly to a grotesquely described swamp and absurdly ends there. The framework for a paradigm is there: the road and the traveler, the journey and the destination. But instead of leading the reader to some meaningful end point, the road leads its traveler to an absurd setting.

Bell believes this episode is a microcosm of McCarthy's metaphysics. The framework of McCarthy's novels, he claims, is masterfully constructed. McCarthy draws upon traditional narrative structures but replaces traditional endings and meanings with the moral equivalent of Culla Holmes' swamp. Bell asserts this theme is played out, if more subtly, in McCarthy's other three novels as well. In *Suttree*, for example, Cornelius Suttree, like Bell, searches for God or morality within his world of moral depravity. What he finds, however, is that God "is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving" (*Suttree* 461). From Bell's perspective, "this is McCarthy's metaphysic: none, in effect; no first principals, no foundational truth; Heraclitus without logos" (32).

Nihilism tends to occlude further interpretations of meaning. Thus, Bell's argument has governed the way many subsequent critics have approached McCarthy's novels. For example, in her article "Detailing the Wor(l)d in *Suttree*," Beatrice Trotignon examines McCarthy's diction and explores how McCarthy's language can elicit a feeling of nihilistic estrangement for many readers. Trotignon argues that McCarthy's descriptions

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of detail “create at one and the same time a feeling of intensely transparent concreteness and extremely opaque unreality exploring the metamorphosis of language” (89).

Trotignon believes that the sheer amount of detail that McCarthy uses has the tendency both to draw the reader into the minutia of his description and add to the reader’s perception of a character’s estrangement: “Abject details, and details in general, become the redundant signs of a divided world, the signs of a crisis or a tension between accountable details and unaccountable ones” (89). Characters wander in worlds of violence and never connect to any significant source of comfort or meaning.

Steven Shaviro’s oft-cited article “‘The Very Life of Darkness:’ A Reading of *Blood Meridian*,” which compares *Blood Meridian* with Melville’s *Moby Dick*, is one of the first critical works to discuss the power of violence in McCarthy’s fiction. Although not working expressly from Bell’s assertion of McCarthy’s nihilism, Shaviro writes at a time when this critical interpretation of McCarthy was popular. According to Shaviro, McCarthy’s violence is akin to the sacred. In keeping with Bell’s assertions, however, this sacred violence is not redemptive. Within the book, Shaviro says, “death is a festival, a ceremony, a ritual; but it is not a mystery. *Blood Meridian* sings hymns of violence, its gorgeous language commemorating slaughter in all its sumptuousness and splendor” (143). Shaviro does not deny the possibility for transcendence in McCarthy’s violent work, Shaviro argues that McCarthy’s characters have nowhere to transcend to: “The oedipal myth of paradise lost and regained, of patrimonial inheritance and

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promised land, has been abolished once and for all" (144). According to Shaviro, the acts of sacrifice and ritual violence within the book are enacted "not to propitiate alien gods and not to ward off distant calamities, but to confirm our own complicity with the forces that crush and annihilate us" (154). Shaviro believes that while McCarthy's violence serves the role of sacred ritual; this ritual results in annihilation and nihilism.

A few critics have attempted to both agree with Bell's argument for nihilism and make a further argument for the interpretation of McCarthy's novels. Charles Bailey's article "'Doomed Enterprises' and Faith: The Structure of Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*," begins with Bell's article, but argues that storytelling itself saves McCarthy's works from meaninglessness. Looking specifically at *The Crossing*, Bailey agrees with Bell's assertion that McCarthy's worlds initially have no inherent meaning. He examines the structure of *The Crossing* and identifies three basic sections of Billy Parham's journey, one for each literal crossing into Mexico. Each crossing treats a different temporal experience. The first section, according to Bailey, is concerned with Billy's present. This section of the story represents both Billy's initiation into "the wilderness of his own psyche" (58), and Billy's discovery of who he is in the present. The second section follows Billy as he crosses back into Mexico to capture the horses that were stolen by his father's murderers, attempting, according to Bailey, to recapture the past. The third section, in which Billy returns again to Mexico to try to bring back his missing brother, shows Billy as he attempts to realize his hopes for the future. Bailey argues, however,

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that this structure does not lead to any revelation of meaning from the capricious world Billy inhabits. All of these journeys fail and Bailey asserts that McCarthy's characters "occupy a cruel, meaningless, unknowable universe" (62). Bailey goes on to argue, however, that while McCarthy's worlds themselves may have no inherent meaning, order is created from this moral void by the storyteller. "The order of literature," maintains Bailey, "lies in the order of the one story, the story literature brings the reader to the verge of understanding, the order a reader can almost, but never fully, know" (66). Solely by existing, Bailey maintains, the story creates order from chaos.

Though argument for McCarthy's nihilism is prominent, especially in early criticisms, not all critics agree with Bell's interpretation. Many critics argue that, far from nihilistic, McCarthy's novels assert definitive meaning and moral structure. Edwin T. Arnold's article "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables" attempts to argue directly against Bell's interpretation. While granting that Bell's general analysis of McCarthy's work was insightful, Arnold believes labeling McCarthy a nihilist is effectively a "thread of anti-interpretation" which Arnold finds to be "a reduction of McCarthy's exceedingly rich fiction" (44). Arnold points to both the biblical references in *Outer Dark*, and to Culla Holme's guilt, claiming that the novel is not a nihilistic and amoral wasteland as Bell suggests, but instead depicts characters who are punished on a biblical scale for their sinful actions. Far from being nihilistic, Arnold argues that McCarthy's worlds are instead "highly moralistic" and require that "sins

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must be named and owned before they can be forgiven; and those characters who most insist on the 'nothingness' of existence, who attempt to remain 'neutral,' are those most in need of grace" (52). The violence in McCarthy's novels responds purposefully to this moral code: "these creatures are malevolent destroyers, but they are also agents of retribution and thus figures of judgment" (47). McCarthy's violence, according to Arnold, serves a structured moral purpose and should not be so easily dismissed by nihilism.

Other critics have similarly argued that literary violence is more than just a sign of nihilism. Examining the work of McCarthy, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, Gary M. Ciuba's book *Desire Violence and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction* offers a fascinating introduction to the role of violence in the Southern novel. Ciuba argues violence in Southern fiction, while prevalent, is far from gratuitous. Instead he argues it serves as a witness to the violent reality of Southern history, which might be suppressed in factual accounts. He notes, for example, that many lynchings in the South at the turn of the century were willfully mislabeled as 'accidental' to give the illusion that racial tensions were easing. Looking only at the South Carolina criminal record shows that lynchings came to an abrupt end in 1930. Racially motivated murders still occurred after this date, but increasing societal pressure caused many Southern newspapers to omit details identifying these murders as lynchings. Ciuba argues only the fictional accounts of such violence will continue to bear witness. More than just a

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record keeper, however, Cuiba believes “literature can reveal how desire may lead to violence, how violence may climax in scapegoating, and how scapegoating may generate culture that disguises and defies the origins of its desire” (5). This progression of motives is further complicated by the connection between violence and the sacred. Cuiba argues it was religion which initially “established that there was legitimate violence—that of gods, priests, and later, the sacred state—and illegitimate violence, the appropriation of this sacrosanct fury for private goals” (12). The border between the legitimate and illegitimate is never static, however, and therefore violence is ever intrinsically entangled with the sacred.

Where Trotignon argued that McCarthy’s language is evidence of his nihilism, other critics have examined McCarthy’s diction and treatment of language in a much different light. Linda Townley Woodson in her article “*De Los Herejes y Huerfanos: The Sound and Sense of Cormac McCarthy’s Border Fiction,*” and Scott Gilbert in “*Discourse Theory in The Crossing,*” each glean a particular meaning and purpose from McCarthy’s language. Woodson’s article addresses the centrality of storytelling in McCarthy’s Western novels from Nietzschean and Freudian critical perspectives. Woodson argues that Nietzsche’s philosophies on the nature of language are a prominent feature of McCarthy’s border fiction, particularly “the Nietzschean concept that humans have created language as a stay against the brevity of human existence” (204), and that this endeavor has created a self referential reality where “language *is* the human activity”

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(207). He posits that the reality created by language, while necessary, removes the characters from the true nature of their world. In the Freudian sense, Woodson argues that this creation of a language-reality and subsequent distancing from the true world mirrors "the child's separation from the Mother and its loss of connectedness with all things through identification with and the mastery of language, symbolized by the Father" (205). This separation is a thing McCarthy's characters might wish to escape, but are necessarily drawn ever closer to.

Where Woodson uses Nietzsche and Freud, Gilbert uses discourse theory to discuss the role of storytelling in McCarthy. According to Gilbert the "trinity of subject, speaker, and listener acts as the most basic unit in discourse" (38). Moreover, such discourses range from egocentric to abstract depending upon the distance in space and time between a speaker and his subject: "The closer a speaker is to his subject, the less abstract the resulting discourse" (38). Gilbert asserts that the storytelling within *The Crossing* progresses through four levels of abstraction, beginning with the most egocentric and ending with the most abstract. This progression, he believes, is McCarthy's way of "teaching the listener to listen, the reader to read" (42). As the stories progress from egocentric to abstract, so too must the reader: "He must listen correctly and willingly in order for the tales to intertwine. The listener/reader must be active" (42). This active role, necessitated by the structure of the text, "is ideally suited to molding an ideal reader" (43).

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Jason Ambrosiano's "Blood in the Tracks: Catholic Postmodernism in *The Crossing*," argues that, far from nihilistic, McCarthy's *The Crossing* has strongly Catholic elements. Ambrosiano notes that *The Crossing* is a postmodern text as it addresses "complications of history and meaning," and deliberately makes use of a Modernist "rhythmic, denotative narrative style," while at the same time manipulating and subverting it to postmodern purposes (83). Although this suggests postmodernism, Ambrosiano asserts that it is a particular form of postmodernism that begets a paradox: Catholic postmodernism. While some critics may believe that religion and postmodernism are at odds with one another, Ambrosiano notes that if one of the central themes of postmodernism is contradiction and paradox, *The Crossing's* Catholicism is perfectly postmodern. Ambrosiano examines Derrida's writings and Catholic *Catechisms*, noting that both Derrida and Catholic doctrine share a "limited confidence in the stability of the sign" (83). In the Catholic Church this is seen in the notion that, "as with Derrida's 'totalization,' God's incommensurability cannot be fully represented by signifiers. Only God can represent Himself" (83). Ambrosiano argues that Derrida's definition of logocentrism "denies God this autonomy by presuming language's ability to grasp and retain full meaning exterior to itself" (84). Ambrosiano believes that *The Crossing* works against logocentrism as it "continually questions language's capacity as a vessel for 'truth' or 'meaning'" (84). Unlike Derrida's theories of signs and signifiers, however, Ambrosiano believes that the Catholic Church "asserts a

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semiotic hierarchy ordering those signs and symbols" (83). Language, for example, is subordinate to the signs of the covenant, the signs taken up by Christ, and sacramental signs such as the Eucharist. Ambrosiano argues this hierarchy is found throughout *The Crossing* as it attempts to question language.

Some critics avoid the nihilism debate altogether by utilizing an unrelated critical perspective. Leading the field in feminist interpretations, for example, are scholars such as Nell Sullivan in her article "Boys Will Be Boys and Girls Will Be Gone: The Circuit of Male Desire in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy," and Ann Fisher-Wirth in her "Abjection and 'the Feminine' in *Outer Dark*." Before these critics, representations of the feminine in McCarthy were dismissed as absent or misogynistic and were paid little critical attention. Sullivan's article, in fact, begins by affirming this argument for the women of the Border Trilogy. But instead of ending with this assertion, Sullivan argues that the absence of women has resulted in "the destabilization of gender roles in the context of the western narrative, in which gender roles are usually very clearly defined" (67). Though women may be essentially absent "the feminine itself remains and is ultimately 'performed' by biologically male characters" (67). Fisher-Wirth similarly does not attempt to refute that McCarthy's women tend to be abject or absent. Fisher-Wirth argues, however, that, "paradoxically, McCarthy's female characters become more interesting the less he attempts to develop them, for their power is poetic, gestural" (127). Fisher-Wirth asserts what in other novels might be pornographic or misogynistic,

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in McCarthy's works "is apprehended so powerfully at the level of the unconscious that it becomes the stuff of nightmare and beauty" (127).

In avoiding discussion of nihilism or moral meaning, however, Fisher-Wirth and Sullivan are exceptions in the McCarthy critical conversation. The overall perspective of the McCarthy critical landscape remains roughly divided. While one camp of critics argues that McCarthy's novels are essentially nihilistic, another camp interprets these same elements in a starkly different light. For the first group, diction, violence, estranged characters all point to a void of morality and meaning. According to the second group, violence is sacred and redemptive, the most visible element of a moral structure that parallels the Bible and other sacred texts. For Gilbert, McCarthy's language, which was interpreted by Trotignon as the origin of McCarthy's nihilism, is a tool for molding the ideal reader. Unfortunately, neither of these camps emerges as a clear winner. It is certainly possible, as Bell did, to examine McCarthy's novels and find evidence that "ethical categories do not rule in this environment, or even pertain: Moral considerations seem not to affect outcomes; action and event seem determined wholly by capricious and incomprehensible fates" (Bell 31). Counter-currents of meaning, however, can be found in the very same novels that engender this argument. The unfortunate difficulty with both of these trends of interpretation is that both attempt to translate McCarthy's novels into some supposedly more essential language and exclude the possibility of opposing meanings. Looking at McCarthy's novels, however, shows

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that they are rife with unresolved paradoxes, which are the basis for this critical divide. Ultimately essentialist interpretations, nihilist or otherwise, convince only as they exclude these paradoxical elements of McCarthy's fiction.

Stepping outside of this essentialist debate, however, there are ways of interpreting McCarthy that allow these paradoxes to remain in place. Dana Phillips' attempts such an analysis in her article "History and the Ugly Facts of *Blood Meridian*." Phillips' article is refreshing in that it focuses upon neither the nihilism of *Blood Meridian* nor for its ultimate moral significance. Instead, Phillips argues for an interpretation outside of these distinctions. Phillips asserts that while there is meaning in McCarthy's novels, it is meaning on a geologic scale; "a scale of time and space which we can only dimly perceive, marked by the scraping of rock upon rock....The meaning of these scrapings is not connected to human value" (39). Rather than searching within these scrapings for moral parables or religious epiphanies, or conversely asserting McCarthy is a nihilistic writer, Phillips hints that we should look to other means of interpretation and leave essentialist assertions behind.

But where does this amoral ambiguity leave the reader and the critic? McCarthy has always been reticent in regard to his intentions but has admitted this: "the ugly fact is books are made out of books. The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written" (Woodward 30). This statement may not at first appear particularly revelatory. It does, however, suggest the discussion of storytelling and language itself

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are central to McCarthy's writing and offer a way to understand McCarthy's ambiguity. In the Border Trilogy, particularly in *The Crossing*, McCarthy himself brings this topic to central focus.

The main narrative of *The Crossing* combines a western genre and a classic picaresque. Billy Parham, living at the beginning of the novel with his family in 1930s New Mexico, captures a she-wolf that has been preying on his father's cattle. Instead of killing the wolf and collecting the reward money, however, he decides to return the wolf to the Mexican wilderness. With this decision, he embarks upon a journey that seems to bring only one tragedy after another. The hardships come for Billy without mercy and he trudges through them with the characteristic reticence of the western hero, speaking only when spoken to or when necessity demands it, and never once commenting on his troubles. Neither does the narrator offer any moral explanation or interpretation for Billy's hardships, instead relating them with neutrality, allowing the reader to make meaning of the novel's events.

The first lengthy tale that we encounter in the novel clearly addresses the idea of the creation of meaning through storytelling. This sub-narrative is told by a former priest who has been living in the remains of a ruined adobe church in an abandoned town. With only the presence of a reticent visitor to prompt him, the ex-priest launches into a twenty-two-page tale of how he came to live so far from society in a ruined church. Far from being a simple relation of events, however, the story is riddled with

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the man's philosophical speculations. Central to these musings, is the act of storytelling itself. "Things separate from their stories have no meaning," the man asserts early in his tale. "When their meaning becomes lost to us they no longer even have a name" (142). Storytelling and storytellers, then, are of paramount importance. Without them we are unable to find meaning in the acts that are carried out in the world. Only the tale holds meaning; only the tale imbues acts with importance.

Not only is meaning granted to events through storytelling, but also stories themselves create reality. As it is told in the sub-narratives of the novel, without the tales that people continue to tell, the items and events contained within these tales essentially cease to exist. Earlier in the novel, for example, a different stranger tells Billy "that the world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts. For while it seemed a place that contained men it was in reality a place contained within them" (134). According to these storytellers then, reality is a thing found only in the human mind. People may think that real things exist outside of their mind in an objective and visceral reality, but many of the sub-narratives in the novel claim that this is false. Only the world that is found in the heart and mind is real. As the ex-priest explains, "Acts have their being in the witness. Without him who can speak of it? In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all" (154). Notice that, for the ex-priest, the witness is only important because of his ability to speak the tale to others. Acts without witnesses, without storytellers, do not exist.

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These theories of storytelling are strongly reminiscent of the views of language and reality presented by Frederick Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida. In his essay "On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense," Nietzsche outlines a theory of language that finds strong parallel in *The Crossing*. Truth, according to Nietzsche, is nothing but the shifting overlap of metaphor. A word may be used in an individual context, but this word can hardly relate to the particular, as "it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth" (46). Rather, a word must be applicable to all instances of its use, which are, as Nietzsche notes, "a lot of unequal cases" (46). Because of this need to apply to the general, words become less related to reality than they are to "arbitrary abstractions" (46), which we then identify as truth no matter how removed from the original particular they may be. Like Nietzsche, Derrida argues in *Positions* that language can only relate back to itself because "every signified is also in the position of signifier" (20). Looking up a word in the dictionary, for example, leads only to an endless string of other words. Derrida asserts we cannot escape this self-perpetuating cycle of language. Language commands our thoughts, interactions and interpretation of the world around us at such a fundamental level that we may never know where the world ends and our language begins. This description of language leaves us with a perception of reality much like the one professed at times in *The Crossing*. As an old man tells Billy early in the novel, men do not see the true world, instead "they see that which they name and

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call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them" (46). Thus, language mediates our notions of reality; the movement between teller and listener dictates our experience in the world. For, as the ex-priest asks, "if the world was a tale, who but the witness could give it life? Where else could it have its being?" (154).

The immediate difficulty occurs when we consider the storyteller's version of reality is subjective. If the tale is the only reality and that reality is created in the mind of the storyteller, then reality is subject to the storyteller's whim. The ex-priest at the adobe church touches upon this problem in his story and takes pains to assert that only one story unites things, there is only one story to be told. While the narrative does not clarify what the priest means, the priest's remarks lead us to speculate about the nature of truth. We may think, he says, "the task of the narrator is not an easy one .... He appears to be required to choose his tale from the many that are possible" (155). But the ex-priest assures Billy that this is not the case, "for what is deeply true is also true in men's hearts and it can therefore never be mistold through all and any tellings" (154). The storyteller, he claims, cannot and will not mislead. In fact, he states again and again that "rightly heard all tales are one" (143). And not only are all tales the same, but also "there are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell" (157). This same sentiment is echoed in different way throughout the book. An opera singer they meet on the side of the road, for example, tells them " The shape of the road is the road. There is not some other road

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that wears the same shape but only the one" (230). Later, a gypsy speaks in the same vein to Billy on the nature of the world, saying "that the world cannot be quit for it is eternal in whatever form as all things are within it" (413). The manner in which these strangers tell their tale may change, but they each assert the world and reality have only one true incarnation.

Despite the insistence of the characters that Billy meets upon the road, storytelling appears as both unchanging and constant (objective) and also contingent upon the precarious relationship between teller and receiver. McCarthy does not give the reader an easy answer to this dilemma. If anything he pushes the tension between these two ideas, deliberately frustrating any plans the reader might have had for a straightforward resolution. At the end of the novel, for example, Billy meets a group of gypsies with an ancient airplane in tow. They claim that they are bringing the airplane to a wealthy client whose son crashed in the mountains and died in the plane some years ago. It is known that there are two such planes that crashed in that mountain range, and of course it is of great importance to the client that the correct plane be retrieved. But both planes have been in the mountains so long that their individual markings have faded. They are indistinguishable from one another. Characteristic to the other storytellers in the novel, the gypsy explains this dilemma by saying again reality and the tales we tell of reality are the same: "One could even say that what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated. Yet wherein

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does that history lie?" the gypsy asks. When Billy asks him finally if the plane they carry is the true airplane he replies that "*es que ultimadamente la verdad no puede quedar en ningun otro lugar sino en el habla*"—"ultimately the truth cannot be anywhere but in the speaking of it" (411). As the gypsies leave with their plane, the reader may think that they have come to an understanding. Like Billy, they may have decided that the plane is indeed the authentic one as long as the gypsies and the client believe this to be true. But not two pages after the story the gypsies tell, another man comes down the road and negates their entire story. This traveler, an American, claims that the airplane is actually his. When Billy asks about the history the gypsies gave for the plane the man scoffs: "Is that what they said? ... That airplane come out of a barn on the Taliafero Ranch out of Flores Magon. It couldn't even fly where you're talkin about. The ceiling on that plane aint but six thousand feet" (418). Apparently, not even the basic facts of the story the gypsy told were true. The plane is not the one that the client's son died in; according to the single American traveler, there is no client, and the plane could never have been in the mountains where the gypsies claimed they found it. Only a few pages ago the reader was listening in earnest to the philosophies espoused by the gypsy, the same philosophies that are carried out in the sub-narratives throughout the entire book. Now, nine pages from the end of the novel, that philosophy is disassembled in a mere two lines.

Such a contradiction is frustrating to the reader, to say the least. The idea that

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truth is created by the storyteller, professed so adamantly again and again in the sub-narratives, which the reader has been trying understand and reconcile, has been shown quite clearly to have a serious weakness, leaving the reader frustrated. The last few pages of the novel follow Billy as he brings his brother's bones home to bury them. There are no more professions of metaphysical truths from passing storytellers. The reader may even be left feeling that much of the effort they have put into understanding and attempting to assimilate these sub-narratives has been unnecessary. But the contradictions in *The Crossing* are not without possibilities.

In order to contemplate the full potential of this ambiguity, however, it is helpful to consider Paul Ricoeur's philosophical discussion of interpretation and symbol in his book *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Having considered the various elements at play within the text, we could, as many critics have done, extract a single meaning from the novel and impose it upon the entire text. But, as Ricoeur wonders, "does not this discipline of the real, this ascesis of the necessary, lack the grace of imagination, the upsurge of the possible?" (36). To impose interpretation upon a text so that we can eliminate the unsettling presence of ambiguity is to do away with the text itself in favor of some reduced and separate idol. This is not to say that we should not interpret. The ambiguity of the novel begs interpretation and even requires it. For as Ricoeur states, we cannot read the signs of this ambiguity "except through the merciless exercise of reductive hermeneutics; such is our helplessness and perhaps our good

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fortune and joy" (530). Instead of interpreting as a means of reducing ambiguity, then, we should consider interpretation as an illustration of possibility. We must be able to both interpret a text, and also allow ourselves to return to the original ambiguity inherent in the thing itself. The hermeneutics of faith Ricoeur describes only requires that we continually engage this "area of combat" (531) between the ambiguity of the text itself and the reduction of possible interpretations.

Thinking of McCarthy with this in mind, the philosophies presented within *The Crossing* actually offer possibilities. All novels bear some measure of ambiguity for the critic to interpret, no matter how slight. Appropriate to the second book in a trilogy, however, *The Crossing* appears to hold its contradictions in exquisite crisis. McCarthy does not provide a sense of closure, but he does an excellent job of playing the contradictory elements against one another. Instead of arguing neatly that reality is created by narrative, he preserves the question in its complexity for the reader to puzzle. This is especially important because the question of created realities through storytelling is not applicable merely within the world of the novel. At the end of the book, readers are invited to think about the self-reflexive aspects of the theories espoused in the novel. They have, after all, just completed a long narrative. What does this mean for the reader's perception of the novel? How real or fictional is the story of Billy Parham and where does that reality reside? The unresolved ambiguity in the novel engenders these questions in the minds of its readers and invites them to take an active

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role as they construct their own answers. After the reader responds, however, the novel will continue to pose its questions, enabling the reader to return to the ambiguity of the text itself. Whether one views McCarthy as a postmodern trickster or philosophical novelist descended from the likes of Melville, he places ultimate authority in the hands of the reader, leaving us with a testimony to the power of the word.

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