

Some Mysterious Resonance Between Thing and Language: On Contradiction and the Materialist

Theologies of Cormac McCarthy and Marilynne Robinson

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

At first glance, the works of the contemporary American authors Marilynne Robinson and Cormac McCarthy look so distinctly unlike that they seem to represent opposing poles on a hypothetical literary spectrum. The fundamental inclinations of the two figures appear, at least initially, to be irreconcilable: Robinson is a committed Calvinist, writing essays and works of fiction that express some version of that faith, while McCarthy writes novels, plays, and a recent essay that are rigorously materialist, and in some instances apparently nihilistic. Scholarly efforts to consider these two authors together have been few and far between, though occasional attempts have noted the importance of a shared attention to language and narrative form. The poet Christian Wiman is one such scholar, who suggests, in his essay collection *My Bright Abyss*, that McCarthy and Robinson are bound by what he calls “genuine visionary feeling,” or the ability to express “some mysterious resonance between thing and language, mind and matter” (51).

Taking this impulse as my starting point, I aim to articulate not only what such resonance—between human experience, materiality, and literary form—might mean generally, but what it might mean with respect to McCarthy and Robinson in particular, two authors whose differences come to look superficial in light of a shared manner of expression that is perhaps as much ontological as it is literary. To read these authors together in such a way, I claim, is to see their similar engagements with matters of scientific inquiry and theological speculation transformed from oppositional to mutually reinforcing; and it is to see their shared attentions to the simultaneously material and immaterial nature of reality as invitations to rethink other apparently stable oppositional categories in their works—categories like science and religion, finitude and infinitude, and even time itself, along with our experience of it.

Proceeding with these matters in mind, my dissertation is essentially a twofold study. On the one hand it is a comparison of apparent opposites in the form of an extended reading of the novels and essays of Robinson and McCarthy that illuminates moments of shared purpose where scholarship has assumed there is almost none. Each chapter takes up a single text from Robinson and a single text from McCarthy and sets them side-by-side so as to examine and develop some of the different ways in which the formal features of these works establish similar ontological commitments. On the other hand, the dissertation is also an extended critique of contradiction itself—one which locates in the thematic and ideological tensions between and shared by these two authors an interpretive mode that continually presses against the boundaries of their finite works, and suggests the possibility of a perceptual orientation that is always both “merely” and “greater than.” In each chapter, I find and elaborate upon this interpretive mode, which I draw out of supposed conflicts between the Christian Logos and the evolution of language, the time of Biblical typology and the time of quantum entanglement, and the human experience of loss and the law of the conservation of energy—and use these generative tensions to show how Robinson and McCarthy are ultimately at work on strikingly similar projects.

Acknowledgements

A project of this scale and duration must eventually come to contain its own strange contradictions. Not, to be sure, contradictions in argumentation or construction (though as I hope to show, these might be unavoidable and even fruitful), but rather the kinds of contradictions that will inevitably come to populate a work that has evolved over a significant period of time. Reading and re-reading the novels of Marilynne Robinson and Cormac McCarthy, I have come to new and tentative conclusions that have altered or even annihilated those conclusions I had previously held close. New novels have rewritten or reconfigured older ones, and sometimes older novels have rewritten or reconfigured newer ones. There is one contradiction, though, that seems to me unaccountable, and perhaps even a kind of confirmation of what this project is about—namely, that the process of writing the dissertation has involved the simultaneous compression and expansion of time. To think that as many as five years have passed since its inception is to think the impossible, but so too is it impossible to think that *a mere* five years have passed. One imagines *Gilead*, for instance, or *Housekeeping* or *Blood Meridian*, containing similar dilations, if only because their respective authors might well have experienced similar kinds of conflicting temporal engagements. Of course, this is not to say I can imagine what it must have been like to write these books, or to write like their authors (one can only dream!), but it *is* to say that the time of writing has a tendency to bend and flex in impossible ways.

For their guidance through this impossible time, I am grateful to the members of my examining committee: Chad Wriglesworth, Norm Klassen, and Kevin McGuirk. Dr. Wriglesworth, Dr. Klassen, and Dr. McGuirk were enormously helpful in directing my early comparative efforts, pointing my research in unexpected and fascinating directions, and they were careful and generous with suggested revisions when the project entered its final draft forms. Dr. Wriglesworth, in

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List of Abbreviations

In what follows, I occasionally provide citations from more than one source by a single author. When that happens, I include, along with the author's name, an abbreviated version of the work's title as a part of the in-text citation. These should be obvious enough, but where they are not, I invite the reader to refer to my bibliography to sort out any confusion.

There are, however, two authors whose works I cite with considerably greater frequency and variety throughout, and so I offer here a list of those works along with the abbreviations which I have appended to them in the dissertation itself. (Please note that single-word titles are simply written out, and thus are not included in this list.)

Cormac McCarthy

<i>All the Pretty Horses</i>	<i>ATPH</i>
<i>Blood Meridian</i>	<i>BM</i>
<i>Cities of the Plain</i>	<i>COTP</i>
<i>The Crossing</i>	<i>TC</i>
“The Kekulé Problem”	“TKP”
<i>The Road</i>	<i>TR</i>

Marilynne Robinson

<i>Absence of Mind</i>	<i>AOM</i>
<i>The Death of Adam</i>	<i>TDOA</i>
<i>The Givenness of Things</i>	<i>TGOT</i>
<i>What Are We Doing Here?</i>	<i>WAWDH</i>

Introduction—On Contradiction, Form, and Method

I

The following is an attempt to map some of the similarities that bind the works of the American authors Marilynne Robinson and Cormac McCarthy, a pair of writers whose literary catalogues, at least superficially, would seem to stand almost directly opposed to one other. In this attempt, it is my hope to find some small success, and perhaps to reveal some new lines of inquiry for the future study of these two figures set side-by-side. I must admit, though, that the impulse behind this comparative work is driven less by a need to find likeness where there is a limited supply of it than it is by a suspicion that these opposites have a tremendous amount in common precisely *because* they stand opposed—in the same way that up and down constitute divergent directions and yet still, together, describe a unified plane of possible motion. In the case of Robinson and McCarthy, our superficial reading of difference is, I think, finally and unsurprisingly spot-on: novels like Robinson's *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Housekeeping* really do communicate a sense of holiness—the feeling that, as one reviewer has recently put it, “the world is self-evidently miraculous, but only rarely do we pay it the attention it deserves” (Cep); while novels like McCarthy's *The Road*, *Cities of the Plain*, and *Blood Meridian* communicate (each in their own way) the dreadful simplicity of a violence which constitutes the very bedrock of existence. So it is that in the following I undertake a comparison not for its own sake, nor for the sake of revealing unlike terms to be engaged in some similar process after all, but in order to draw out some of the less conspicuous meanings and points of resonance inherent in the fact of what we take to be a fairly straightforward case of opposition.

The challenge in undertaking such a task should be apparent right away: that in order to speak meaningfully about two works or people or things in any kind of comparative sense, there must first be something which is worth comparing. Which is to say, there must be some element that Robinson and McCarthy share after all, and that element must be significant enough to warrant comparison in the first place. The problem with admitting that such an element exists, though, is that as soon as it is located it must already begin to erode the conditions which have made the idea of comparing “opposites” attractive at all, and so what arises finally is a deadlock, some kind of impasse, or at least a kind of impossible situation. This is perhaps because to range two things which appear to be diametrically opposed alongside one another is to admit, in the performance of this very act, that there is really no opposition, and that because I have undertaken to discuss the things in the same breath there must be some sort of binding agent holding them together. It is this logically bizarre relationship, at once tending toward resolution and resisting it, which makes the comparative reading of these two particular authors—who truly do have so little, and thus so much, in common—into such a fascinating experience. What it offers is a point of view that is troubled by a consistent doubling, one which asks that we shift our gaze just as it begins to alight upon some stable version of an image. The comparison is one which must thus remain ever in motion, continually revising its terms as new similarities and new differences come into focus.

The study, of course, would be a poor one—and, indeed, an impossible one—if the foundation for its comparison and its argument were constructed only upon difference. There are a handful of sources that mention Robinson and McCarthy at the same time, with a few going so far as to show how they are engaged in similar aesthetic and cultural projects, and these have been a source of some encouragement where it seemed as if the two authors would have been better left apart. Lee Clark Mitchell, for instance, includes in his book *Mere Reading: The Poetics of Wonder in Modern American Novels*, chapters on Robinson’s *Housekeeping* and McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and *The*

Road. His aim in these chapters, each of which looks closely and carefully at a single novel, is by his own report to lay bare the ways in which “literature occurs in a verbal woof of words, sounds, rhythms, patterns of syntax, figures of speech, even marginal asides and casual interruptions” (Mitchell 52). The similarity is, for Mitchell, a formal one: these novels are bound at last by their quirks and by “the fragile play of irreconcilables that emerges from the verbal tensions we find ourselves first wondering at, then delighting in” (53). Amy Hungerford, not dissimilarly, sees the works of McCarthy and Robinson as bound by certain peculiarities which indicate a kind of refashioning of faith—or, more accurately, a means of expressing some statement of belief in an environment which purports to be wholly secular. These statements of belief are by no means orthodox or doctrinal, and they tend to find their elaborations—as with Mitchell’s “irreconcilables”—at the level of form. More recently, Spencer Morrison has set Robinson and McCarthy directly alongside one another, claiming that *Gilead* and *The Road* constitute examples of texts that make up a part of a literary “religious turn” while simultaneously offering useful insights for the study of human rights. But when Morrison arrives at one of the questions which must ground his investigation into the texts and their relationships with the discourses of human rights and religiosity—namely, “why read such seemingly mismatched novels together in the first place?” (461)—he is led to conclude, like Mitchell and Hungerford, that “a shared narrative form binds them” (461).

My own interest in the comparison arises out of a specific moment which I take to have been at least somewhat experimental, as many of the best and most compelling investigations frequently are. This moment was a graduate seminar on the topic, i.e., the possible similarities that bound the works of Cormac McCarthy and Marilynne Robinson, and the dialogue that would perhaps emerge when these two figures were considered to be engaged in some of the same things. If I am not entirely mistaken, the impulse behind this course (the impulse, that is, which was not

merely excellent intuition) came from something that the poet Christian Wiman had said in his essay collection *My Bright Abyss*. There, Wiman suggests a connection between the two authors (as well as a third, actually: Fanny Howe) based on the fact of their having “not only the linguistic and metaphorical capacities of great poets ... but also genuine visionary feeling” (*MBA* 50–51). He goes on to explain more or less what he means by “visionary feeling.” Suffice it to say that it is not a lot to go on if one intends to build a case for a sustained comparative argument, though it is worth including a few of his remarks here for context:

Some poets—surprisingly few—have a very particular gift for making a thing at once shine forth in its “thingness” and ramify beyond its own dimensions.... What happens here is not the “extraordinary discovered within the ordinary,” a cliché of poetic perception. What happens is some mysterious resonance between thing and language, mind and matter, that reveals—and it does feel like revelation—a reality beyond the one we ordinarily see.

Contemporary physicists talk about something called “quantum weirdness,” which refers to the fact that an observed particle behaves very differently from one that is unobserved. An observed particle passed through a screen will always go through one hole. A particle that is unobserved but mechanically monitored will pass through multiple holes at the same time.

What this suggests is that what we call reality is conditioned by the limitations of our senses, and there is some other reality much larger and more complex than we are able to perceive.

(Wiman, *MBA* 51–52)

The effect of visionary poetry—or in the case of McCarthy and Robinson, visionary prose—is that it produces a kind of abundance of sensory possibility in a single instant and elaborates upon our senses by surpassing (however impossible this may seem) their limitations. These visionary writers, Wiman says, are “not discovering the extraordinary within the ordinary,” but rather are, “for the briefest of instants, perceiving something of reality as it truly is” (52). Discovery gives way to

perception, where the former connotes a revelation of something concealed and the latter connotes a grasping of some thing as it is. What is unmasked here is, in other words, not thing but observer.

Wiman's points about "visionary feeling" are interesting for a couple of additional reasons. First, and perhaps coincidentally, they rely for their elaboration upon a brief foray into quantum theory, a discipline in which both Robinson and McCarthy have expressed well-documented interests. McCarthy, for instance, is reported to have been affiliated with the Santa Fe Institute, a multidisciplinary group of scientists, economists, mathematicians, and other such researchers working within the shared field of complex systems theory, for something like the last twenty years.¹ He keeps an office at SFI and maintains regular contact with experts in fields ranging from linguistics to string theory. Robinson, meanwhile, is similarly fascinated by the world of scientific enterprise,² and it is not unusual to come across throwaway lines like the following in her works of nonfiction (or, for that matter, in her fiction): "The dazzlements of the subatomic notwithstanding, nor the torrential expansion of space-time, the world of our experience feels knowable, stable, and predictable, and it usually is" (*WAWDH* 127–128). Where Robinson's interest in contemporary physics and cosmology tends to bolster a sense of wonder which might readily be called "religious," though, McCarthy's feels as if it underpins a vision of the world which is brutally naturalistic at its mildest and outright malevolent when it gets fixed upon the topic of, say, war—something which happens at great length in the novel *Blood Meridian*.

Even in their similarities, then, McCarthy and Robinson appear to be at odds. And yet there is something else which Wiman has noted about these two authors, and specifically about the

¹ There are a few different sources which point out and/or elaborate upon this connection. Richard Woodward's 2005 article in *Vanity Fair* ("Cormac Country") is a particularly good one, casting light not only on McCarthy's link to the Santa Fe Institute but also on what he might be doing there on a given day.

² Any number of Robinson's interviews or essays might be taken as confirmation of this interest, but her conversation with the physicist Marcelo Gleiser is especially illustrative of the kinds of topics and ideas in which she seems to be invested. See Tippett, Krista. "The Mystery We Are: Marilynne Robinson and Marcelo Gleiser." *On Being: with Krista Tippett*. Podcast and Transcript. (January 2, 2014).

“visionary feeling” which is evoked by their writing—namely, that it issues from an attention to some “thing” which has the effect of a strange and paradoxical sort of doubling. On the one hand, says Wiman, the “thing” is permitted to “shine forth in its ‘thingness’” as, shall we say, the mere and ordinary fact of what it is. On the other hand, though, it is made to “ramify beyond its own dimensions,” thus enlarging and, one might expect, cancelling out the mere fact of its ordinary thingness. But according to Wiman the function of “visionary” writing—that writing which McCarthy and Robinson have in common—is precisely that it does not simply reveal the extraordinary within the ordinary, but that it presents an impossibility, a contradiction, that exceeds our capacity to perceive: something like revelation in that it discloses a truth which is at once inexhaustible and inaccessible. It is, he says, a “mysterious resonance between thing and language”—or, in other words, what binds the works of McCarthy and Robinson is indeed a formal element in their writings (as Mitchell, Hungerford, and Spencer have pointed out), but it is a formal element which has its basis in contradiction. What the writing shows is how important the bare fact of its content is, but also, and simultaneously, that its content is grandly in excess of that boundary and comes to gesture toward the formal totality of the work, which in turn exists only to showcase the baseness of its content, and so on. McCarthy and Robinson, then, appear to be dedicated to the expression of a common form (whose literary-theoretical implications I will address in a moment), the primary characteristic of which is that it contains its opposite—i.e., the diminished or degraded particular. This is the curious similarity which unites these two unlike figures, and which, I hope, will make it possible to speak meaningfully about their opposition as something more than mere stalemate.

II

What Wiman calls the “mysterious resonance between thing and language” is, of course, a fairly recognizable component of the works of both McCarthy and Robinson. For each, the simple material state of things is regularly undercut by the degree of attention which is devoted to it—whether by a particular character, by the narrative itself, or by the way in which the language that presents it is entirely out of proportion to the supposedly “ordinary” thing before us. Again and again, these authors’ works provide instances of the “things themselves” that come to seem almost insufficient to what ought to be the simplicity of those things. There is an excess here which exists at the level of language, and yet to look closely at this formal excess is to be thrown back upon the simplicity which has all but just evaporated.

To read *Gilead*, for instance, is to experience the ordinary substance and interactions of life in Gilead, Iowa, as the dying and frequently awe-struck Reverend John Ames experiences them; and, thus, what for us ought to be mundane is transformed into something wondrous by the language in which it appears. At one point, Ames admits that he “can’t tell what’s beautiful anymore” and offers as an example a description of two mechanics taking a break from their work: “...just decent rascally young fellows who have to be joking all the time, and there they were, propped against the garage wall in the sunshine, lighting up their cigarettes. They’re always so black with grease and so strong with gasoline I don’t know why they don’t catch fire themselves. They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have. And it seemed beautiful to me” (Robinson, *Gilead* 5). The image of the two men potentially “catching fire themselves” is surely responsible for at least some measure of this effect, setting the Reverend at a distance from the conversation and its participants in a kind of wistful and imaginative way which belies the simplicity of the moment.

McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* does something remarkably similar, though the ends to which it aims are rather opposed to those on offer in *Gilead*. Consider, for instance, the following description of a sunrise, the backdrop against which the terrifying "Glanton Gang" rides out one morning: "The jagged mountains were pure blue in the dawn and everywhere birds twittered and the sun when it rose caught the moon in the west so that they lay opposed to each other across the earth, the sun whitehot and the moon a pale replica, as if they were ends of a common bore beyond whose terminals burned worlds past all reckoning" (McCarthy, *BM* 90). Again, there is a simultaneous expression of ordinary "thingness" (the sun as "whitehot" in the sky) and unexpected excess (the sun as a kind of opening beyond which exist innumerable possible worlds), and again there is the suggestion that some formal element of the writing has made this possible in the first place (here, the ever-so-slight Biblical cadence of the narration). Of course, McCarthy's writing provides the conditions of possibility insofar as it is an act of deliberate and carefully wrought description, but there is an excessive element at work here too, one that not only moves back and forth indefinitely between the thing described and the way in which it is described, but that also makes the descriptive act into something that becomes suspect for its apparent unidirectionality. Here we are back in the territory of Wiman's "visionary" prose, where the text hints beyond itself and its sensory limitations.³

While the revelations of these individual moments in *Gilead* and *Blood Meridian* are undoubtedly very different—one revealing wonder, the other terror—they do seem to arise out of

³ It might be helpful here to invoke a distinction that I am deliberately avoiding—namely, the distinction between narration and description. In McCarthy and Robinson, we might say, these different literary techniques amount to the same thing by virtue of their subordination to a metaphysic that includes both of their possibilities. Georg Lukács elaborates upon the distinction as follows: "Description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past. One describes what one sees, and the spatial 'present' confers a temporal 'present' on men and objects. But it is an illusory present, not the present of immediate action of the drama. . . . Static situations are described, states or attitudes of mind of human beings or conditions of things—still lives" (130). But how are we to tell what is described from whomsoever describes it? Or from the way in which it is described? These "still lives" are precisely the things that are scrutinized and overturned in McCarthy's and Robinson's works, the descriptive act itself placed on trial and probed not just for its narrative potentials but for its metaphysical implications.

something like the same “shape,” which is to say, the movement of language toward specific material concerns (things “as they are”) and the corresponding simultaneous movement of language through and beyond those specific material concerns (toward things in their infinite complexity). What unites the work of McCarthy and Robinson, we might say, is a contradiction of form—something quite similar to that more obvious contradiction which separates the two authors at a superficial level: that each attends carefully to the material so as to sweep aside the simplicity of the material and reveal the reality which is contained in it, but, in doing so, they reveal that this “new” reality is predicated entirely upon and issues from that seemingly ordinary material simplicity. The thing, in other words, is both only itself and vastly more than itself.

What is so fascinating about this overlap is that it offers a number of different ways into a discussion of these figures that had simply not been available before, except, that is to say, as instances of “mere” opposition. For example, it is reasonably well known that both McCarthy and Robinson are broadly concerned with science and religion, to greater and lesser degrees. Robinson’s fiction is sometimes labelled “religious,”⁴ which is true, though to say so is an oversimplification. Her “Gilead” series follows the lives of two intertwined families during the first half of the twentieth century, and it concerns itself at great length with the ways in which those families are bound together or set apart by their religious convictions, their revelations, or their crises of faith—in some cases, all three at once. But these books—four of them: *Gilead*, *Home*, *Lila*, and, most recently, *Jack*—also concern themselves with issues which we might call scientific, or, at least, issues which we might call constitutive of that unfamiliar borderland so seldom considered by those works that are confidently or obviously “religious”: the heat-death of a planet,⁵ say, or the relation between the

⁴ See, for instance, Mark O’Connell’s “The First Church of Marilynne Robinson,” *The New Yorker*, 30 May 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-first-church-of-marilynne-robinson>.

⁵ From *Gilead*: “An old fire will make a dark husk for itself and settle in on its core, as in the case of this planet. I believe the same metaphor may describe the human individual, as well” (Robinson, *Gilead* 72).

conservation of energy and the human capacity for destruction.⁶ Robinson's fiction offers a glimpse of a world in which the material substance of a universe ordered by science is not banished by a religious conviction but accepted by it as a part of a vision which is effectively sacramental. McCarthy's work has been called "nihilistic"⁷ (I am somewhat less accepting of this label than of Robinson's broader "religious" one), though its reflections on the emptiness or meaninglessness of the world are more often bound up in an attention to the harsh materiality of that world's conditions—which is to say, an environment which places the human on equal footing with the animal, vegetable, or mineral, and which presents all as the products of violent collision, or sometimes, and more frighteningly, of some malevolent order. Such narrative worlds do not, however, preclude the religious. Quite the opposite, in fact: they contain instances of religious imagery and religious inflection with such frequency that the reader is forced to pause and consider the role of, for instance, prayer in *The Road*, or churches in *Blood Meridian*, or references to "prophecy" in *No Country for Old Men*. In these novels, and in his others, too, our sense is finally that what is happening is something like the opposite of what is happening in Robinson's work—namely, that everything is ordered according to the principles of a rigorously anti-humanist materialism, and that religion is on full display as a kind of foil or demonstration, an outgrowth of some naturalistic tendency toward violence and the futile attempts to overcome it. It is worth noting that for both

⁶ From *Jack*: "He was inclined to believe that there were (*a*): energy, and (*b*): displacement. Any gesture was, whatever else, like freeing something from your hand, some living thing that would touch or settle wherever it happened to be carried on the surge of displacement. Rattle or fracture confirmed this. So as a living creature he was ill-suited to the brittle, frangible world of things. It was as though planet Energy and planet Order had collided and merged, leaving displacement as the settling of the ruins. By extension, he thought, though he knew it was only by analogy, the small gesture of, say, recommending a book of poetry to someone became displacement that struck where it would, as it would, converting itself in midair into malice or stupidity" (Robinson, *Jack* 140).

⁷ Vereen Bell offers the most famous example of this kind of reading. In his essay "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy," Bell notes that "[i]n McCarthy's world, existence seems both to precede and preclude essence, and it paradoxically derives its importance from this fact alone" (31). He goes on: "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" (31–32). Bell is writing about McCarthy's first four novels here, and in his book-length study of the author, which shows up some five years later and includes an examination of *Blood Meridian*, his position is less resolutely bound to McCarthy's nihilism.

authors, the form or “shape” of the argument is ultimately the same, indicating the “merely” material in order to address that which the material implies and, in some sense, really contains. It is only their terms which are inversions of one another.

So, it becomes possible to say that while both McCarthy and Robinson are clearly invested in the contrasting domains of the religious and the scientific, they nonetheless each tend to gravitate toward a single pole within that somewhat artificial, and yet (thanks to recent insistence that the models for each are purely explanatory) profoundly real, conflict. For Robinson, it is religion that wins the day. “The great quarrel in modern Western life,” she writes in her essay “On Human Nature,” “is said to be between religion and science. They tend to be treated as if there were a kind of symmetry between them, presumably because of their supposed Manichean opposition. But science is a comparatively recent phenomenon, for several centuries strongly identified with the culture of the West, which it has profoundly influenced and by which it has been formed and channelled” (Robinson, *AOM* 9–10). Which is not to say that she sets little store by science or its methods: only that we ought not to consider the scientific and the religious to be equal terms equally engaged in a project that investigates root causes. At their most comparable and their most similar, rather, these two categories should lead us to stand in awe before the limitation that is our own humanity and being. McCarthy’s sense of awe on this front is perhaps diminished by the emphasis it places on limitation, refusing to grant any kind of pride-of-place to the human and thus insisting that “science” and “religion” matter less than the basic fact of a rigidly ordered and generally disinterested material reality. At the beginning of his recent essay “The Kekulé Problem,” for instance, McCarthy sets out to examine the puzzle of problem-solving in dreams first by defining what he takes the unconscious to be. “To do this,” he says, “we have to set aside the jargon of modern psychology and get back to biology. The unconscious is a biological system before it is anything else. To put it as pithily as possible—and as accurately—the unconscious is a machine for

operating an animal” (McCarthy, “TKP”). Of course, this is the language of science, which can address only that which may be reduced to its most essential and testable components.⁸

For Robinson as for McCarthy, though, these predilections are in constant flux because the forms in which they are communicated are in constant flux. For example, if we take the easily-set-at-odds categories of the religious and the scientific as poles upon which we might momentarily locate (for the sake of expediency) the works of Robinson and McCarthy, respectively, then we will be required to admit that those categorical divisions are upended at every moment by the kind of formal tendency which we have so far called (borrowing from Wiman) “visionary.” The truth that “human beings are astonishing creatures, each life so singular in its composition and so deeply akin to others that they are inexhaustibly the subject of every art” (Robinson, *WAWDH* 68) gives way to the parallel and simultaneous truth that those same human beings are composed of the sort of mundane materials that would seem to limit their capacity to astonish considerably. But this works in the other direction as well: in *The Road*, a wall which contains a horrifying assortment of severed “human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes” (McCarthy, *TR* 90) reveals not just the pointless and confronting violence of human endeavour that characterizes the narrative world, but also the fact that these had been human beings, with all of the complexities and possible astonishments that status had contained. The effect of this “visionary” quality can be tremendously disorienting, in part because there is simply no moment at which everything finally comes into focus as *either* merely material, mundane, ordinary, etc., *or* vast, excessive, suggestive of near-infinite complexity, etc. The “mysterious resonance of thing and language” ensures that what these works contain are instants which are always simultaneously, and

⁸ One might go so far as to call this the language of “scientism” rather than “science”—and, indeed, much of McCarthy’s phrasing in this essay seems to tend in that direction. But part of what makes “The Kekulé Problem” so fascinating is that if it does adopt the position of the hardline scientific rationalist, it does so in order to undermine some of the static certainties ordinarily associated with that position. The language here is undoubtedly that of scientific endeavour, but to presume its tendency toward scientism might well be to presume an absent conclusion.

impossibly, no more than what they are and enormously in excess of what they are. Or, to reframe this in the terms of our present, somewhat simpler, comparison: each instant in the works of both McCarthy and Robinson can be said to inhabit both the world of the scientific and the world of the religious—at least in the sense in which those terms are popularly supposed to be opposites—at the same time.

I would like to propose that it is possible to take this overlap one step further: that we might, instead of noting that there is a correspondence between the apparent contradiction of form in the work of McCarthy and Robinson and the apparent contradiction of influence (religious and scientific) which undergirds their work, admit that all of this may be collapsed together into a single shape and a single way of reading these texts. That is to say, I would like to propose that these formal contradictions (which, of course, are also *not* contradictions) are not merely related to a disjunct of influence by happenstance but are rather an expression of that conflict in some new guise. I would propose that while they can be read on the surface as the doubling of extraordinary language and ordinary content (or, if we prefer, [extra]ordinary language and [extra]ordinary content), they can also be taken to enact that doubling by way of deeper conflictual forms that communicate that same “visionary” quality—and that they do so, formally, in shapes that are simultaneously scientific and religious. What I mean by this I will aim to clarify now, before turning, at last, to the increasingly unavoidable question of method.

III

It should be clear enough by this point that the terms “science” and “religion” will be too large and too burdened by immense varieties of historical and cultural meanings to be of use for much longer

unless some effort is made to narrow them. At the moment, I am employing the terms (and have been employing them) as placeholders for what we may call conflicting methods of sense-making: on the one hand, a way of seeing the world as ordered according to its constituent material parts, parts which in themselves are merely “what they are,” though they may of course be connected in numerous complex ways; and on the other hand, a way of seeing the world as ordered according to its connections, possibilities, and ramifications—and the suggestion therein of divine wholeness (though this divinity is supposed, too, in the part, and not only the whole). Although they are in some sense opposites according to this schema, they are opposed in much the same way that the present study has suggested McCarthy and Robinson are: completely, and yet at every turn undermining their opposition by inadvertently gesturing at or even coming to contain the other in a kind of infinite series. While this comparison does offer a useful way into the discussion of form as contradiction in the works of the two authors, though, it is not methods of sense-making that I am interested in examining here. It is, rather, specific forms which draw on both of these methods at once and thus reveal the similarities embedded in the contradictions.

To this end, “science” will point toward the particular scientific concepts with which we could expect McCarthy and Robinson to have some familiarity or interest—things like quantum entanglement, dark energy, self-similarity, thermodynamics, genetic variation, and the like. These concepts are a part of a greater model of sense-making which involves the consideration of measurable, testable parts, to be sure, but they also suggest—each in their own way and according to their own organization and shape—an elaborate network of associations and possibilities which tend toward the infinite, and so they are right on the cusp of that other, supposedly conflicting method of sense-making which we have called “religious.” “Religion,” for its part, will function similarly: as an indicator for particular concepts with which we may expect McCarthy and Robinson to be familiar. These concepts—things like sacrament, Logos (as the Word of God), and Biblical typology—will be

drawn from Christianity and Christian theology, because this is the common reference point which the two authors share. There are, of course, denominational differences which separate them,⁹ and I will aim to address these as they come up or as they become important.

In what follows, then, it will be my aim to undertake something like a threefold comparison of opposites. First and foremost, I will set side-by-side the work of McCarthy and Robinson for no more than the purpose of revealing what, if anything, it might mean to compare such unlike figures—and what it might mean for them to be “opposites” at all. Second, I will look to compare that contradiction which inheres in the overlapping forms of their individual works. In each chapter, I will examine a specific work from McCarthy and one from Robinson and inquire as to the extent of the similarities and differences which bind them together as examples of what Wiman calls “visionary” prose, the kind of writing whose abundance suggests a corresponding abundance in our own perceptual capabilities. And third, I will offer a reading of each work’s “visionary” form—or of the combined form that links them—which shows that form to be an expression of something that is always in motion between the poles of the scientific and the religious. It is my hope that these three “levels” of contradiction will verify a suspicion about the meaning of the content of these works that seem so concerned with the simultaneity of the merely material and that material’s capacity for infinite connection and ramification: that they are working to communicate a vision of the world which is founded on the principle of a kind of infinite contradiction, where the mundane objects of ordinary perception are always both only what they seem and unfathomably greater than themselves (and yet only what they seem, and so on). Far from simply establishing a meaningless

⁹ Robinson is a Congregationalist—what is sometimes called a “Calvinist.” Her specific denominational interest is arguably more pronounced than is McCarthy’s, the latter, for one thing, being less obviously “religious” in the content of his works, even where religious forms are everywhere present in them. For Robinson, a great deal of her fiction comes down to issues which are denominational (predestination and salvation figure prominently in the “Gilead” books), but finally just deeply philosophical. It is significant, though, that the central patriarchs in *Gilead*, John Ames and Robert Boughton, are a Presbyterian minister and a Congregationalist minister, respectively. McCarthy was raised Catholic, though if his Catholicism is lapsed it is undoubtedly still a matter of concern in his fiction.

regress, it is my claim that this founding principle, which confounds the very possibility of conclusion, does in fact establish its own lack of closure as a form of closure—or, rather, this constantly shifting simultaneity is revealed to be the central feature of our world and of the way in which we are required to relate to it.

IV

Insofar as the following study is concerned not just with contradiction but with a series of nested contradictions, it is inevitable that it should seem methodologically peculiar, if not occasionally even opaque. This is certainly not my intention, and so I want to offer a few clarifying remarks here before finally moving on to the chapters themselves. For one thing, what likely *is* clear in all of this is the extent to which I am making use of the term “form.” There is a certain amount of literary-theoretical baggage that goes along with such a move, not the least of which is bound to be the appearance of organizing a study that is, at bottom, either a work of formalism or one of structuralism. Couple that with the fact that the point I am trying to make about the connection between McCarthy and Robinson is basically that they share (knowingly or not) an ontology, and you do have a fair number of indicators that what I am up to involves dividing these texts from their social, historical, and political contexts. I should say a little more about how it is that I am using “form,” then, in the hopes of clearing this up.

First of all, what I do *not* mean by “form” is that there is something which is either contained within or which itself contains the text and which is at once crucial and limiting. This is to say that, while the readings that will be offered in the following chapters can undoubtedly be called “close,” it is not my intention that they should exclude things like authorial intention, historical circumstance,

and the like—and, indeed, in a number of cases I will make such connections in order to further elaborate upon (and sometimes even ground) what I take to be the individual works' crucial formal features. The formalist, insofar as it is possible to speak of this kind of critic in a general way, would have the reader's attention fixed on a stable literary object with as much care and rigour as possible. "One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention," write Wimsatt and Beardsley in their influential essay on that subject¹⁰—"How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem" (469).

In other words, as far as the formalist is concerned, we can know only the object which is before us, and that object must finally be sufficient answer to any and all questions about it.¹¹ The impulse here is essentially scientific, dividing the text from the world of its production in order to better understand the operation and interactions of its constituent parts. Victor Shklovsky does something similar, though the specific end toward which his own work is directed is that of the art-object's capacity to "defamiliarize." "In studying poetic speech," he says, "in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words, we find everywhere the artistic trademark—that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception" (Shklovsky 783). Of primary importance here is the "created material" which is "structured" and "distributed" in such a way as to give the impression of a wholly unfamiliar perceptual experience of something that the reader would normally take to be mundane and familiar. This experience is, for Shklovsky, the aim of art, and it is

¹⁰ Wimsatt, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review* 54.3 (Jul.–Sep. 1946): 468–488.

¹¹ For a general clarification of the formalist project insofar as it has been or might be taken to constitute a single and uniform method, see Cleanth Brooks' "The New Criticism," *The Sewanee Review* 87.4 (Fall 1979): 592–607.

accessible to the critic only at the level of the art-object's technical expression—that is, its formal organization as an object in the first place. What is examined and even experienced is stable and parsable, even when its outcome is not, and so attention is again fixed solely upon that “object” from which defamiliarization issues.

The problems with this kind of thinking are multiple, though the most obvious is likely to be that from the perspective of any critic working after the so-called “linguistic turn” the isolated text has become an outright impossibility. No text, we know well enough now, can ever stand stably on its own, nor can it be considered apart from the conditions of its social, cultural, and historical construction. It is the poststructuralist critic who eventually acknowledges this fact, exposing the limitations of a structuralism which would strip the text (whatsoever that text might be) back to its most essential formal elements and pronounce upon the importance of their relationally constructed meanings. The structuralist in some sense treats the text like a scientific object too, not unlike the formalist, but the former is less interested in the isolation of the particular object as a means of divorcing it from waffling statements about “what the author might have meant” than in exposing a grander network of meaning upon which the particular object depends. That is, for the formalist, form is welded to content within a single item wherein speculation about factors external to the work are written off as pointless; whereas for the structuralist, form effectively overrides content in a particular work because its operation is coextensive with that broader “form” which functions just beneath language itself—namely, the arbitrary constitution of the sign. Roland Barthes describes the process as follows: “The goal of all structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic, is to reconstruct an ‘object’ in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the “functions”) of this object. Structure is therefore actually a *simulacrum* of the object, but a directed, *interested* simulacrum...” (214–215). This simulacrum, though, is finally attributable to the structuralist, who can be reasonably confident that she has located and revealed some underlying code that is crucial to

the successful operation of the work. Or, in other words, there is a kind of closure here which is performed by the critic, and which must limit our sense of that critic's complicity in the very system of signs that she claims to have uncovered in the text.

All of which is to say that while my own use of the term "form" must necessarily draw from both of these remarkably scientific schools of criticism, it will depart in significant ways from each of them: from formalism by refusing to adhere only and entirely to the text-as-discrete-object, and from structuralism by refusing the possibility of that closure which comes from recognizing and accepting the final, functional semiotic boundary line that circumscribes a given text. The kind of methodological operation that I am proposing does, like formalism, recognize a crucial relation between form and content in a given work, even going so far as to treat those elements as components of a whole in a scientific sense, but where it differs considerably is in its refusal to acknowledge the individual work as the boundary of inquiry—in large part because of its insistence upon the importance of a blurry distinction between part and whole.

In Robinson's *Gilead*, for example, we might say that the content of the work principally concerns the miracle of ordinariness: the endless ramifications of the supposedly mundane object. The novel's form, meanwhile, communicates almost exactly this same concern by framing its narrative doubly: first as the quotidian reflections of a dying man in his lived present as he experiences it, and second as the artifact of that man's life, left for and presumably read by his son after the man has passed away. There is a strange, endless deferral at work here. The mundane object of daily perception (the "part") is in fact bound up in a vast and unthinkable network of human and cosmic connection (the "whole"), but of course it is made no less simple for its inclusion in this network. It is both things at the same time, contradictorily and non-contradictorily. And this shifting content is only expressed at all by virtue of its temporally complex narrative form, which contains it, and which is itself a baffling movement between the mundane material and the vastness

of totality—again a contradiction that is also not a contradiction. Thus, it becomes possible to say of *Gilead* that it constitutes a series which ramifies “outward,” its combined form and content demonstrating that same infinity of suggestion which they had each demonstrated separately. The work in its entirety becomes not *just* a whole or unity, but also at the same time a part which points beyond itself to, for instance, Robinson’s other works, to Robinson herself, or to the entire historical moment and cultural context in which she finds herself writing and to which she finds herself responding. Eventually this becomes somewhat speculative, but the point is that this movement between part and whole is without limit, and, as a result, that “form” as I am using it here is not bound to the text as some final key to understanding it. It is rather more like an ontological claim than a literary one.

Hence the possibility of a reading that combines McCarthy and Robinson in the first place, as well as one that sees them as similarly engaged in projects that are dedicated to both science and religion in one form or another. What is so interesting here is the possibility of a contradiction which resolves itself endlessly into new contradictions, but which nonetheless, impossibly, bears a literary-theoretical fruit. That is, the method acts as an extension of that text upon which it sets its sights, reading it as simultaneously part and whole and maneuvering between those seemingly contradictory forms in order to draw attention to its own involvement in the process. It is not only *Gilead*, for example, that expresses the simultaneity of the mundane and the transcendent at the levels of both its content and its form: it is also that novel’s “opposite,” McCarthy’s *The Road*. The latter, which would seem to be coldly material, gives us in the figure of “the boy” a kind of redeemer, who, like *Gilead*’s John Ames, exists within the story world as both “later” observer (by virtue of both his analogical Christlikeness and a narrative insistence upon his watching) and present participant. And this new “total” comparison of the two novels paints them as reliant upon one another in complex ways: both whole and part, suddenly taken as a single piece in a whole chain of

textual equivalents whose forms reveal something fundamental about the nature of opposition—the scientific and the religious, the material and the transcendent, and so on.

To say that the method itself, along with the whole process, arises out of a form that is effectively religious is perhaps an oversimplification, but it does begin to get at one of the major problems with the McCarthy/Robinson comparison—namely, where it is that we should begin. I have already said that I am not interested in undertaking a structuralist reading of these texts, which means more or less that I am not interested in locating the semiotic limit which inheres in their deeper structures. But nor am I interested in a strictly poststructuralist reading, the latter containing, in many ways, precisely the kind of inflection with respect to “deferral” that I *would* like to emphasize, but leaving little room for the metaphysics which is so much a part of McCarthy’s and Robinson’s works (and which, I suspect, is even to some extent unwittingly suggested by deferral itself—a connection I will clarify in just a moment).

I do, however—and I hope this is clear by now—consider there to be a single “structure” (which I am calling a “form”) which makes possible a reading of these unlike works in the first place, a structure that happens to have its clearest expression in theological terms in, for instance, the being of the corporeal divine, Jesus Christ. This unique ontological position, that of a man who is at once fully human and fully divine and who is thus in some sense both “part” and “whole,” prefigures exactly the sort of unstable formal contradiction that I locate in the works of both Robinson and McCarthy. And, perhaps more importantly, it offers a way of beginning to examine the works of those writers without finally enclosing them according to the structural rules of the particular texts—instead, it begins without beginning, because the part always suggests a whole which in turn suggests its parts, and so on without end. The theologian Rowan Williams, in one of his more recent works, offers a description of Christology (i.e., the study of Christ, His meaning and being) which should be of some help in clarifying what it is that I mean here. Christology, he says,

is not just one example of a theological theme or topic that is illuminated by a general metaphysical axiom about finite and infinite; it is... the major theological enterprise that itself shapes and clarifies that axiom. If it is doing its job carefully and consistently, Christology has a metaphysical implication, and what we shall see... in the discussion of assorted historical understandings of Christ's person is that the particular constraints that moulded doctrinal dispute in their context are bound in with these broader questions about the ontology of finite and infinite. To do justice to what Christology seeks to articulate presses us to work at the logic, or grammar, or however you want to put it, of speaking about God at all, speaking of infinite agency that is in some way characterized by what we would call intelligence and love.... (Williams, *CTHOC* 6–7)

The method by which I propose to examine the works of McCarthy and Robinson proceeds along similar lines, examining the particular not as some illustrative case for the furtherance of an argument about a *kind* of reading, but examining it rather for what it has, in a certain sense, always contained, and for what it must thereby gesture toward. Williams is here discussing a highly specific theological discipline, but his points about Christology might as well be applied to those literary texts (like McCarthy's and Robinson's) which concern themselves with contradictory and yet sometimes overlapping expressions of the finite and the infinite. In fact, I would go so far as to say that his claims here require it. By implicating Christological work (of the "careful" and "consistent" sort) in the reality of Christ, Williams makes the text into a document that must always be pointing outside of itself (and then, always, back in), and which thus must have even its most basic causal relations upended.

Curiously, this endless movement of deferral and contradiction is not unlike the kind of thing one might expect to find in the work of poststructuralism—insofar, at least, as it posits a shifting horizon of meaning which can never be made stable or final. This is the "differance" of

which Jacques Derrida has famously written: that crucial notion which he uses to express the simultaneity of difference and deferral that operates at the level of signification. Of course, it should go without saying that any effort to bring together this kind of poststructuralist deferral and a considerably more “rooted” Christological one is bound to encounter problems, not the least of which will be the fact that these two models stand in conflict and might well be antithetical to one another.¹²

Indeed, in his essay “Differance” Derrida describes the problem with what looks to be precisely this conflation. “[W]hat is... denoted as differance,” he says, “is not theological, not even in the most negative order of negative theology. The latter, as we know, is always occupied with letting a supraessential reality go beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastens to remind us that, if we deny the predicate of existence to God, it is in order to recognize him as a superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being” (Derrida 935). Differance, rather than being finally reducible to something ontological or theological, “opens up the very space in which onto-theology—philosophy—produces its system and its history” (935). If this is true, though, it is nevertheless interesting to note the extent to which the *form* of differance—which Derrida is so careful to note is not even really a concept—proceeds along lines that are remarkably similar to those of the form and work of Christology as Williams describes it. The meaning of the divine in human form is, anyway, no more fixed or singular than is the meaning of the sign, and it is, I think—rather than presuming their incommensurability—worth considering what we may call the “shape” of these two things side-by-side.

¹² And this, given the aim and tendency of the present study should be suggestive in its own right. Perhaps if these two terms (Christology and poststructuralism) are taken to be not only incompatible but in some sense *opposed* to one another, then there is something in this relation, despite the division that it claims, which demands a closer look.

V

It is somewhere within the confluence of these apparently incompatible forms that I locate my own method for comparing the works of McCarthy and Robinson: in the movement from that particular which was never exactly stable to begin with, outward toward yet other particulars, suggesting but never arriving at the whole, and finally tending back inward again—the “initial” particular becoming no more than what it was, but also in that very ordinariness (meaninglessness, in poststructuralist terms¹³) confirming its enormous new importance.

The deferral of meaning and the simultaneity of divine finitude/infinity in this respect end up looking quite a lot alike, as I say, at the level of form. Of course, there is no shortage of the kind of reading which would select and apply *one* of these frames to either McCarthy or Robinson, and these selections tend to divide along the line which separates the pair: McCarthy’s works are “rhizomatic” or “biopolitical” or “self-reflexively critical of late capitalism,” while Robinson’s are “re-enchanting” or “sacramental.”¹⁴ This is not exactly a rule, though the works themselves do seem to sustain particular kinds of readings more readily than others. The apparent degradation of meaning and moral culpability in books like *The Sunset Limited* and *Child of God* provide ample opportunity for critics to read them as dislocating or unmoored or simply postmodern, while serious attention to the practical consequences of Calvinist doctrine in books like *Jack* and *Lila* invite us to see them as instances of a return to religiosity. Where there is an overlap in these two kinds of

¹³ This is not, of course, to say that poststructuralism dissolves the particular into meaninglessness, but rather that in poststructuralist terms to speak of the meaning of an isolated particular—be that some single object or sign—is an impossible act because that item must be bound up in a network of deferred signification. Thus, the ordinary “single” item is in this sense without its own meaning.

¹⁴ See, for example, Marie-Agnès Gay’s “Cormac McCarthy’s Aesthe(h)tics of the ‘Canal-Rhizome’ in *Suttree*,” Alexandra Blair’s “‘The Wanted Stared Back’: Biopolitics, Genre, and Sympathy in Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*,” Jacob Agner’s “Salvaging *The Counselor*: Watching Cormac McCarthy and Ridley Scott’s Really Trashy Movie,” Sára Tóth’s “We Are Not Aliens in the Universe: Marilynne Robinson’s Imaginative Re-enchantment of Protestantism,” and Andrew Stout’s “‘A Little Willingness to See’: Sacramental Vision in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*.”

readings (and there is no reason why there should not be—McCarthy, after all, is as interested in religion as Robinson is in what it means to come uncoupled from it), it is often expressed in the terms of postsecularism—which is to say, an engagement with religion that frames it as something made fragmentary and basically ludicrous following the modern secular world’s enlightenment concerning the Death of God, the Death of the Author, etc., but which nonetheless sees the necessity of returning to these fragmentary religious forms in search of something crucial that the modern secular world has lost.

Characteristically, these kinds of texts (i.e., texts which can be called “postsecular”) share certain recognizable elements. According to John McClure, “[t]he partial conversions of postsecular fiction do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief. Instead, they tend to strand those who experience them in the ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative” (4). While these representations of conversion are not necessarily required, this unstable “middle zone” is: “Gods appear,” says McClure, “but not God. Other realms become visible but either partially and fleetingly or in bizarre superabundance” (4). His argument extends to works by Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon, but it is not difficult to see how those of McCarthy and Robinson might be just around the corner.

A number of studies, in fact, have framed McCarthy’s and Robinson’s works as postsecular, and have done so convincingly. Amy Hungerford I have mentioned already: her book *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* sets the two authors down within the same reading, arguing that they are each at work on a project which affirms the religious value of a material sign that has been stripped of its meaning. Lori Branch, in an article on the “postcritical” and the work of Rita Felski, enlists Marilynne Robinson in order to make a point about the supposed taboo of

serious engagement (especially within the academy) with religion. Her point is a tremendously valuable one:

The wager of this humbler though no less athletic form of reason [roughly, postsecularism] is that there are other ways of thinking than materialist determinism or religious fundamentalism, ways of thinking for which better arguments can be made and which answer better to the full range of inner, spiritual experience, especially the experiences of questioning and believing, of coming to trust or hope. Such experiences, we should say, are the stuff of literature from *The Divine Comedy* to *Gilead*, the experience of some sizable portion of the 85% of human beings who engage in religious practice. (Branch, “Postcritical and Postsecular” 162–163)

L. Lamar Nisly sees some of the work of Cormac McCarthy—and in particular *The Road*—as performing a similar sort of “other way,” neither dogmatically materialist nor fundamentalist but yet tinted with religiosity all the same. “[T]he narrative,” he says, “may include hints of the divine without setting out a clear spiritual truth” (Nisly 314). And Christina Bieber Lake, in a recent book on the “limits of materialism,” actually seems to come up against the limits of the postsecular, arguing that although “McCarthy himself professes no belief, engagement with metaphysics and theology is foundational to his fiction” (106). The beauty of *The Road*, says Lake, “is not best explained by an effort on McCarthy’s part to replace God’s authority with beautiful prose. Instead, like the Book of Job itself, the novel must be beautiful to the extent that it is answerable to the goodness of human persons as made in the image of God” (107).¹⁵ These readings are considerably diverse in their approaches, though they do share in common a trajectory which would have the

¹⁵ Lake’s reading of McCarthy is considerably more in line with theology than it is with postsecularism, and to that end I am greatly sympathetic to it. I have included it here, though, because although it pushes back against the postmodern forms of religion that might claim to frame religiosity anew in light of enormous literary and philosophical developments in the twentieth century, it remains firmly a part of that postsecular conversation—even though there is a clear tension there.

interpretations of both McCarthy and Robinson move *back from* the kinds of readings which would frame those authors' works as distinctly postmodern or poststructuralist—or even, in the case of all but Lake, as distinctly religious or theological.

It is my aim in what follows to steer clear of this middle road. Being that this is a study concerning, first and foremost, the nature of contradiction—and especially formal contradiction—in the works of McCarthy and Robinson, it would not be in keeping with its aims to resolve even that materialist determinism/religious fundamentalism contest which Branch points out. Of course, it is not my aim to leave either or both of these hugely problematic world-pictures intact, but rather to show the various ways in which they are each unsupportable without the other, and, hopefully, to describe some “other way” that is really no more than a re-engagement with these existing terms. This re-engagement—or, certainly, my attempt at it—will take the following form in this work's individual chapters.

I begin in chapter one by addressing the contradictory form in McCarthy's and Robinson's works of nonfiction. In the case of the former, my object of study is limited to a single text on the origin of language which seems bent on undermining any claims to certainty within that field (though “field” implies that there is a single, stable source of consensus here). Comparing this essay—McCarthy's “The Kekulé Problem”—with three of Robinson's (“Grace and Beauty,” “The Beautiful Changes,” and “Realism”) which touch on the same subject from an unsurprisingly different standpoint, I work to show how it is that the two authors are engaged in the same project: speculating about where it is that language comes from, either materially or theologically, by employing forms that are strikingly similar to both the Christian Logos and the human genome. In chapter two I turn to the authors' works of fiction, examining *Gilead* and *The Road*, two books which at the level of summary could not be less alike, for some of their remarkable similarities—a few of which (the pointed relationship between dying father and son, for instance, or the frequent

references to the Christian sacrament) feel almost as if they have been arranged to reveal some secret affinity between the texts. Here, I argue that the two novels function similarly at the level of their narrative structures, with each book situating a narrative voice simultaneously within and beyond the borders of its story-world. It is a structural similarity which reveals itself primarily in moments of astonishment, and which, I claim, takes the same “shape” as both Christian sacrament and mathematical self-similarity.

Chapter three is perhaps my most ambitious comparison, and not only because it deals with several different texts from each author—the complete “Border Trilogy” in the case of McCarthy, and the “Gilead” novels as a coherent series in the case of Robinson. Its scope is considerably broader than that of the first two chapters because it views these series as single “objects” which might speak meaningfully to one another if their formal features are examined not in isolation but across individual novels and thus across time. My argument in this chapter is that these works, whose diegetic chronological orders are out of alignment with the chronology of their compositions, might well contain bizarre temporal distortions which allow for precisely the sort of contradictory worlds I have noted are central to the work of both authors. The shared form which makes such a reading possible, I argue, is that of both Biblical typology and retro-causality, the latter a theory which is associated with quantum entanglement.

The fourth and final chapter offers an extended comparison of Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping* and McCarthy’s novel *Blood Meridian*. Its subject is loss, but by extension it is also destruction and the problem of evil. My claim here is that both novels, surprisingly (for *Blood Meridian* might on its surface be about as far from Robinson’s work as one can get), function on a similar formal register wherein the narration undercuts itself to reveal its opposite. In *Housekeeping*, the narrator Ruth tells us of the many losses which sit just beneath the surface of her own life and of the fictional town of Fingerbone generally, but she regularly interjects with hypothetical scenarios in

which these losses are imagined to be overcome—instances of belief so powerful that they seem to affect the very fabric of her world. In *Blood Meridian*, the frighteningly vivid depictions of violence which propel the text forward are mitigated by archaic words and biblical language which slow the reader down, forcing a reflection on what exactly has been lost in a world where such sympathetic consideration would seem to be prohibited. My argument in this chapter is that in both *Housekeeping* and *Blood Meridian*, this contradictory form can be framed simultaneously as a question of theodicy and as one which concerns the conservation of energy, the first law of thermodynamics.

The only method capable of sustaining this project, it would seem, involves in itself a crucial contradiction—i.e., the recognition of an unlikely affinity between poststructuralism and Christology which locates in the deferral and “differance” of the former precisely that ungraspable thing, that infinitely-renewing thing, which is the object of the latter. But again: this is not a contradiction which leaves us at a standstill. Quite the opposite. Just like those terms which are so familiar to both McCarthy and Robinson and which show up again and again in their works—the ordinariness of the mean material world and that world’s simultaneously extraordinary capacity to branch and billow and overwhelm—just like those terms, the method by which the following study will proceed involves an impossible relation of opposites which, I hope, will be fruitful for precisely that reason. At the risk, then, of circling back on myself, or of descending further into theoretical and methodological abstraction, I will leave my introductory remarks here and turn now to the more practical task at hand.

Chapter One—How It Is That We Manage to Talk: Origins of Language in the Nonfiction of Cormac McCarthy and Marilynne Robinson

It might fairly be said that, where possible, Cormac McCarthy avoids talking much about his own work. Over the course of the author's long career there have been no more than a handful of interviews, and these have tended to yield more information about his life and intellectual pursuits than about, say, how it is that he has managed to come up with his stories. It seems that each time an interview winds its way around to the subject of McCarthy's writing process, that subject gets deflated rather quickly. Or worse: it gets addressed in the vague terms of the inexpressible, something that may as well indicate a source of inspiration which has its basis in magic. "[Y]ou can't plot things out," says McCarthy on one such occasion: "You just have to trust in wherever it comes from" (Winfrey). The problem with saying something like this—the problem for everyone but the author—is that it suggests a "somewhere" without describing anything like what such a "somewhere" might mean. It absolutely refuses to close the gap between a piece of fiction that is astonishing in its completeness and an author who is almost disappointingly human, and, for all intents and purposes, just like us.

Marilynne Robinson, who differs from McCarthy in most respects, is especially unlike him when it comes to public visibility and a willingness to discuss the writing process. She is known to have given a number of interviews, sometimes on her own fiction and sometimes on matters emerging from her nonfictional concerns. She writes and publishes essays that give her reader some sense of, if not exactly *where* her ideas come from, then at least the kinds of ideas with which she is most frequently engaged. Perhaps most interestingly, she teaches creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. For all this, her observations about "where" fiction comes from are not that far removed from McCarthy's, which is to say that they are equally without any kind of pronouncement

on a sense of underlying causality. In one interview just prior to the release of *Gilead*, Robinson notes that even though that novel was “written over a period of about two years,” still “[t]he narrator and the situation came to me quite abruptly” (Besser). What this must really mean can only be guessed at, but the parallel with McCarthy is obvious: the narrator has simply “come” to the author, arriving unexpectedly from “somewhere.” Their comments on the origins of fiction turn out to be strikingly similar.

What follows in this chapter is an attempt to trace the meaning of this similarity in the nonfictional works of McCarthy and Robinson: first, in McCarthy’s recent and in some ways unprecedented essay, “The Kekulé Problem”; and second, in three of Robinson’s essays on language and beauty—“Grace and Beauty,” “The Beautiful Changes,” and “Realism.” My claim is that for all of their obvious superficial differences, these essays are working through the same problem, and what is more, they are working through it in the same way.

McCarthy’s essay is an inquiry into the origin of language as it is typically presented in the terms of longstanding scientific and linguistic discussion, but because he approaches the question as a writer of fiction, with his own concerns, intuitions, and experiences, he is able to vastly enlarge the scope of what constitutes an “acceptable” demand upon the subject matter. He does this by writing like a novelist, in such a way that the essay’s content comes to seem at once radically unequipped to fulfill the requirements of a rigorous scientific publication, and, upon closer consideration, overburdened with information and with meaning—at the same time painfully simple and enormously complex. The result is a piece of writing that offers itself as an example of where language comes from, which, it seems, is exactly where fiction comes from.

Robinson’s essays concern themselves with these same problems: the origin of language and the origin of fiction. But where McCarthy’s inquiry is explicitly scientific, from the outset drawing on a story about the chemist August Kekulé and his apparent discovery of the configuration of a

benzene molecule in a dream, Robinson's inquiry tends toward the theological. While her essays ask similar questions about how it is that characters and stories simply "arrive," they do this by invoking what she calls, in "Realism," a "second-order of reality," an underlying intelligibility in being that is only intuitively knowable but that yet might account for some need to respond. She expresses this variously as beauty, as elegance, as grace, and as alleviation, but it is my contention that she is doing at the level of concepts just what McCarthy is doing at the level of sentences—namely, pointing at something that is both lacking in and tremendously charged with meaning so as to frame the kind of thing that happens when language/fiction "arrives." Robinson's essays, like McCarthy's essay, both use and emphasize this form, which, I will claim in the following chapter, is the same form as the Christian Logos, or the Word of God.

I

In April of 2017, Cormac McCarthy published a short essay in the science magazine *Nautilus*. The essay was a peculiar one, not just for its content, which one might characterize as a series of scattered questions and digressions on the topic of language and the unconscious, but for the very fact of its existence. McCarthy, after all, is mostly known as a writer of *fiction*, specifically of works that are stylistically mesmerizing, intriguingly metaphysical, and almost always violent. "The Kekulé Problem" seems to turn away from all this. It is the author's first known work of nonfiction, its prose is spare and conversational, and it marks an apparently unprecedented foray into the world of science. This last point more than the others is likely to surprise those whose acquaintance is with, say, *The Road* or *No Country for Old Men*, but anyone who knows a little biographical information about McCarthy knows that the new interest is no new interest at all.

A *New York Times* article in 1992, for instance, already notes the general inclination of his curiosity, a preference for keeping company “with scientists, like the physicist Murray Gell-Mann and the whale biologist Roger Payne, rather than other writers” (Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction”). A few readers will recall this odd detail while reading through the *Nautilus* piece, but others will be more likely to know the later interviews. A conversation with Richard Woodward in 2005 finds McCarthy filling the role of unofficial writer-in-residence at the Santa Fe Institute, a research centre for the study of complex systems, a place for dialogue between researchers of different disciplinary backgrounds and for workshops on topics as diverse as “the evolution of prion proteins or mammalian muscle adaptations or lying and deception or bounded inferences for decision-making in games” (“Cormac Country”). McCarthy, it seems, is a regular attendee at such talks. A conversation with Oprah Winfrey in 2006—a now-famous conversation concerned mostly with the process of fiction writing—reveals the author’s continued association with the Santa Fe Institute, but, incredibly, it also reveals the germ of the idea that will develop into “The Kekulé Problem.” For most, it will be this detail, this germ, that springs to mind during the reading of the later essay, seemingly resurgent after eleven years of dormancy. Fitting enough then that the essay’s subject matter should be something like this very phenomenon: the bizarre capability and communicative power of the unconscious, its ability to “know” what “we” do not. “The unconscious is always with us,” says McCarthy in the Winfrey interview, “even as I’m talking to you. I’m very busy talking and I’m watching you to see what your reactions are and I’m saying these words, but somewhere in my head someone’s making up the next thing I’m going to say” (Winfrey). What “someone” means here is anybody’s guess.

The essay that this idea turns into aims to address the problem of who “someone” is, but it also asks a question that fiction is (arguably) poorly equipped to handle, namely, where does what is “made up”—our ideas, our stories, our very works of fiction—come from? What are the

mechanisms by which we are inspired to write, to respond, to speak? The kind of inquiry that McCarthy wants to make in “The Kekulé Problem,” in other words, accounts for the venue in which it appears. Its inquiries are scientific inquiries; its entanglements are scientific entanglements. Nevertheless, it becomes clear rather quickly that the essay exists in strange relation to other ones in the same issue (an issue whose topic is simply “consciousness”). Consider, for instance, that affixed between the title and body text of each essay is an editorial tagline, the purpose of which is to give the reader a distilled sense of what is coming up. These taglines are, for the most part, fairly specific. They are also no great departure from what could reasonably be expected of consciousness-related research. Here are a few examples: “how introspection and imagination make robots better,” “why the central problem in neuroscience is mirrored in physics,” “a controversial test for self-awareness is dividing the animal kingdom” (nautilus).¹⁶ It is not clear if the authors provide these snippets or if they are provided by editorial staff after the fact. Either way, there seems to have been something fundamentally irreducible about McCarthy’s essay, the tagline for which is “where did language come from?” This question is by no means a digression from the subject of consciousness, but it is a question so big that it stretches the very parameters of what must be available for discussion. And this, perhaps, is because its aim is to enlarge rather than to explain—to use the tools and the platform of scientific inquiry to undermine a brand of too-familiar certainty that is sometimes wrongly made synonymous with science itself.

That the essay will be more or less one long question is apparent right away, but the kind of question being formulated does not take shape until after the first few paragraphs, when McCarthy returns to an idea that should be familiar:

¹⁶ These sorts of taglines are fairly common in editorials or works of journalistic nonfiction. I provide these examples, however, not to draw attention to a phenomenon that is especially unique, but rather to give the reader some sense of the specificity required by this kind of scientific publication. Note how these taglines are almost comically truncated while still hinting at projects of enormous depth and complexity. McCarthy’s tagline, as we will see, defies even this convention.

...we dont know how it is that we manage to talk. If I am talking to you then I can hardly be crafting at the same time the sentences that are to follow what I am now saying. I am totally occupied in talking to you. Nor can some part of my mind be assembling these sentences and then saying them to me so that I can repeat them. Aside from the fact that I am busy this would be to evoke an endless regress. The truth is that there is a process here to which we have no access. It is a mystery opaque to total blackness. (“TKP”)

In this reworked version of what he expresses in the Winfrey interview, McCarthy manages to make a string of assertions that twist together into an unasked but unavoidable question: where does language come from? The above passage, in other words, contains the source of the essay’s tagline—and this despite the fact that it never once asks *any* question outright, let alone that most fundamental one. Of course, when McCarthy gives voice to this same idea a decade earlier it appears to have more or less the same form: the individual speaker is engaged in the dual acts of speech and observation, but she does not, at the same time, have access to the origin (the “making up”) of what will be said. Yet there is something about the earlier form that does not seem to require the same response as its update in the essay passage here.

This is because regardless of his intent McCarthy describes the problem of speech to Winfrey and her viewers as a thing that rests in the hands of a specific “agent”—namely, the unconscious, or, as he says, the “someone” who “mak[es] up the next thing I’m going to say.” While he implies something almost exactly like this in “The Kekulé Problem,” there is a notable shift in the way that it is presented. The speaking subject remains completely occupied with the act of speech, but now the explanatory stopping point is dissolved. Even if he wants to say that the unconscious is behind the movement and process of speaking, he can no longer say that the process unfolds as a kind of puppetry whereby the unconscious dictates what the subject will say. This, he says, would pose a twofold problem: first, it would interrupt the total absorption of the conscious subject; and

second, it would demand that we ask the question again in a different way (i.e., how, then, does the unconscious assemble the speech that is to be parroted by the subject?). What this means is that the reader of the essay is unmoored in a way that the interview audience is not, and the former is thus led not to any tentative answer but to the only question that this “mystery opaque to total blackness” can point to.

The question “where does language come from?” is in this sense embedded in the text as a thing waiting to be chiseled out. It is the mystery to which McCarthy leads his reader, using a set of claims that are disarming in their initial simplicity and then utterly overwhelming upon any kind of reflection. The sentence “[j]ust as we dont know how it is that we manage to talk” reads like the kind of gross oversimplification that should have no place in a scientific publication, but a careful look reveals not wild assertion but the distillation of an authoritative body of research. At its edges are things like theories about the incremental evolution of language (something that McCarthy arrives at, and takes issue with, in the very next paragraph) and descriptions of the role of Broca’s area, that part of the brain involved in the production of speech.¹⁷ McCarthy is able to avoid tangling with such mainstays because what he is doing is, at its core, vastly different: his is a comment on the origins of specific locutions and the mechanisms by which they arrive, fully formed, and apparently without any kind of conscious manipulation; it is not about the role of some part of the brain in speech production generally. The distinction is never explicitly set out, but this is only because it would interfere with the simple and incredible fact of unknowing that McCarthy *does* want to relay. He leaves it up to the reader to work outward from his assertion, to fill in the gaps and decide if the baffling statement is consistent with neuroscience or linguistics or biology. In other words, he is proceeding in this scientific article as any good writer of fiction would: by omitting certain details

¹⁷ It is difficult to read McCarthy’s assertion that “[t]here are influential persons among us . . . who claim to believe that language is a totally evolutionary process,” for instance, without thinking of Steven Pinker, the well-known psychologist and proponent of the view that language has evolved by way of natural selection.

that are understood to be of immeasurable importance to the central point, because to include them would be to risk undermining the unnameable something which keeps the reader invested in and attentive to the text. The result, in the case of the fictional work as in the case of the article, is a phrase or statement or passage that is stripped to simplicity and that is totally arresting.¹⁸

In *The Road*, for example, the reader gets a fairly limited picture of what transpires between the moment of the novel's cataclysm and the moment in which its protagonist wakes, cold and frightened, in the dark woods of some unthinkably desolate world. Partly this limited knowing is a requirement of the story: the past no longer has any bearing on the present because everything in the present is on a course of slow decline not imaginable in the terms of anything that would have come before. But this hazy picture of the in-between, wherever it is offered and in whatever form, is also a point at which the reader is asked to pause over the text, to think it through, to measure its detail against experience, and to decide if the proposed world is one that holds up to scrutiny. Consider the following fragment, which appears to describe one of "the man's" memories: "People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road" (McCarthy, *TR* 32–33). Because this terrible little vignette is so unlikely, and because it appears to be saying what it is saying in a spare and simple way, it invites focus and even response. There is a kind of request in it: to enter the text and look around, and to realize that "fires on the ridges and deranged chanting" is not an answer to the question "what was going on before?" so much as it is a platform from which to ask yet other questions.

¹⁸ Here I am thinking of something like Ernest Hemingway's so-called "iceberg theory" of prose, which the author relates in *Death in the Afternoon*. "If a writer of prose," says Hemingway, "knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing" (192).

This is the same technique that appears in “The Kekulé Problem,” and in both that essay and in the above passage from *The Road* it has the same form: a demand upon the reader to enlarge an apparently simple statement with a new line of questioning. It is a demand which expresses itself as contradiction and impossibility. On the one hand, to read that “we don’t know how it is that we manage to talk” is to encounter a startling *lack* of information in an article whose purpose (in the context of a scientific publication) would seem to be to provide precisely the opposite experience. That is, one is unlikely to relish the prospect of an essay on the human brain and the origin of language that so quickly and readily admits defeat, or that neglects to mention, let alone cite, its sources. The reader’s early impulse, as a result, is to be critical: “Can this really be true? What is he talking about?” and so forth. Such questions may fairly be asked of writing that is poorly supported or unscientific or flat-out bad, but it quickly becomes clear that McCarthy’s essay is none of these things. And here is where the contradiction arises.

As soon as the reader recognizes that what is being said holds together reasonably well, and thus that it can in fact be true, she is forced to admit that both the sentence “we don’t know how it is that we manage to talk” and the brief passage that contains it are *abundant* in ways that are not immediately obvious. They hold the kind of information that does not readily present itself for examination, and that must instead be sought “between the lines,” which is to say, through careful consideration. Just as the above passage from *The Road* invites questions about whether the spreading fires might be connected to the “deranged chanting” and so indicate the formative acts of a destructive cult (a group the novel never explicitly describes, but that is arguably an important feature of its world), so “The Kekulé Problem” prods the reader to ask what sustains a model of speech that must be both an activity of total occupation and that must come from “somewhere” by using the phrase “endless regress” to mark a larger discursive world. This kind of writing creates a

situation in which a single expression is experienced as simultaneously more and less than what it is, and in both the lack and the abundance the reader finds reason to converse with what is written.

Strikingly, the structure of this curious address, where one finds the appearance of both too much and too little, seems to be in alignment with the form of language itself. Take the following disarmingly simple section, which McCarthy provides in his essay shortly after the passage on the mysterious origin of speech:

There are a number of examples of signaling in the animal world that might be taken for a proto-language. Chipmunks, among other species, have one alarm-call for aerial predators and another for those on the ground. Hawks as distinct from foxes or cats. Very useful. But what is missing here is the central idea of language—that one thing can be another thing. It is the idea that Helen Keller suddenly understood at the well. That the sign for water was not simply what you did to get a glass of water. It was the glass of water. It was in fact the water in the glass. (“TKP”)

The word “water” here is the one thing that transforms into the other thing—that is, into the substance, water. It becomes rather than points. But even in its becoming, the word “water” must remain less than the substance (for it cannot be equivalent to it in any literal sense) *and* more than the substance (for though it acknowledges it, the word also constitutes part of a shared reality). What follows from this simultaneous falling-short and surpassing in language is the bizarre feeling that the water itself, as substance, has something about it that could have been surpassed or come up short of in the first place. Or, to put it another way: where language is both too much and not enough for what it is “really” getting at, it is perhaps not merely an example of an asymmetrical relation trying and failing to be a symmetrical one; rather, it might instead be a response to something that is itself both more and less than what it is. In the case of Helen Keller, the process of instruction indicates connection up to a critical and revelatory point, but prior to the moment of “sudden understanding”

one imagines that there must be one of fascination, where the water reveals a sweetness or a bitterness, an earthy smell, or even a tactile, satisfying gush. Perhaps in this instant what is truly revealed is the embryo of a question: something missing, or the hint of an origin.

That language should inhere in some formal sense in the material of the world is at least loosely consistent with McCarthy's suggestion that it operates, or seems to operate, much like a "parasitic invasion." In this model of its earliest phase, language just "shows up": "...when it arrived it had no place to go. The brain was not expecting it and had made no plans for its arrival. It simply invaded those areas of the brain that were the least dedicated" (McCarthy, "TKP"). "Dedicated" here presumably indicates a busyness with other tasks, which means that some parts of the brain must have been either totally without a known function or must have had some remaining capacity for work. In either case, these areas would have been "available" for invasion and could be set to work on the brand-new idea that one thing might be another thing.

Where all of this gets tricky is in the fact that language is *like* a virus but that it is not a biological system. McCarthy is very clear to make the distinction. "The difference," he says, "between the history of a virus and that of language is that the virus has arrived by way of Darwinian selection and language has not" (McCarthy, "TKP"). This is because language apparently stands apart from the biological world that is the purview of Darwinian selection,¹⁹ having "appeared only once and in one species only. Among whom it then spread with considerable speed" ("TKP"). While McCarthy's claims here might seem to put pressure on any notion of a language that would spring forth from the material world, his position falls back into alignment with it when we consider that the material under scrutiny—that is, the formal source of language—is both more than and less than itself. To this end, it is also in alignment with the technical structure of "The Kekulé Problem."

¹⁹ It should be noted that this is a contentious point, but it is the position that McCarthy defends in his essay.

This remarkably difficult idea (i.e., that language both does and does not have its source in “mere” materiality) is developed at great length by the theologian Rowan Williams, whose fascinating book *The Edge of Words*, an unlikely companion for McCarthy’s essay, is especially illuminating on the subject. In its introduction, Williams proposes in simple terms what will be his foundational assumption: that the fact of language is more complex than it is so often taken to be. “If, for example, it is true that language is not *just* like other physical processes,” he says, “it can’t be thought about *just* in terms of stimulus and response, material causes and material results” (Williams, *TEOW* ix). There might be something in it, in other words, that exceeds the way in which physical processes—physical processes like, say, Darwinian selection—tend to operate. But he is careful to temper this with an insistence upon what is unavoidable: that “language *is* unmistakably a material process, something that bodies do...” (Williams, *TEOW* ix–x). So, how to reconcile the clear materiality of the linguistic enterprise with the fact of its not being quite like the physical operations that we know and purport to understand? This is more or less McCarthy’s question, and it is one that he forms and re-forms so as to show the many unexpected ways in which we are without answers to it. Arguably, though, it is by this very process of continual questioning—in what is asked of the reader outright *and* in what is quietly invited by passages lacking or overburdened with information—that he moves the essay toward a tentative answer, if not a conclusion: that there is always a kind of shifting frontier of the knowable, which, when approached, reveals and opens onto new questions not previously imagined. This should be taken as perhaps especially true of “mere” material: that stuff of the world which demands continual response and engagement can never be captured or isolated in any sense that might be deemed final.

For Williams, the idea that there is some level of simplicity at which matter might yield its secrets, at which it might be comprehensively described at last, is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of matter and our own involvement with it. Far from being “dead” or “mindless,” it is

essentially “symbolic,” wrapped up in a dense and complex web of negotiations that is only thinkable in relation to our own acts of sense-making. This is to say that the material object cannot coherently *be* without an observing, knowing, and decoding human consciousness, and so even the least-complicated unit of matter is approached as something intelligible, something with a “message.” “It is not an accident,” says Williams, “that the vocabulary of the natural sciences, not least biology, is littered with linguistic metaphors...” (*TEOW* 102). The gene, for example:

[T]he notion of a genetic code and the immensely sophisticated concept of the genome take it for granted that there are in our genetic material regularities that can be identified as significant by other material receptors. A gene is not a small item, not even in the rather refined sense in which we could still just say this of an atom, but a shorthand symbol for a pattern of recurring elements within the ensemble of genetic material activating cell tissues; but it *becomes* a pattern only when there is a receiving and decoding “partner.” The immense tracts of genetic material identified in the Human Genome Project whose significance is as yet wholly unknown simply remind us that to identify a significant pattern confidently we need to see how this or that particular cluster of elements is “recognized” and acted on.

(Williams, *TEOW* 102–103)

The only way to make sense of a gene, in other words, is to recognize it as a sense-making thing, a marker of certain patterns that might be decoded by “other material receptors.” To speak of it on its own, as though causally it were not linked to a web of exchanges but could be labelled a single and final “source,” would be to lose sight of what it is and what it means. This is the insight that Williams extends to all matter. It is why it is possible to talk about a material object, which might be a node in any number of negotiations, as “more than” or “less than” itself, and it is why that same material object can never be a closed case.

Perhaps it is not surprising that this kind of conception of matter should arrive at religion and religious language. Williams is, after all, a theologian. What *is* surprising is that it should remain consistent with the essential aim of McCarthy's essay: a demand for a greater degree of scientific rigour and a resistance to the strain of complacent certainty (sometimes masquerading as scientific certainty) that regards what is unknown as merely accidentally unknown, and, thus, eventually soluble. The sheer number of questions in "The Kekulé Problem"—along with, as I have said, the suggestive and inviting way in which the essay is written—should be enough to unsettle any inkling that we are somehow close to solving the puzzle of language and/or consciousness. Indeed, if we take seriously Williams' model of matter as symbolic, then it becomes clear that this issue is not one that can be finally and definitively resolved. Here is the linguist William Downes, in his book *Language and Religion*, on the problem for science generally:

A final theory, if there were such a thing, would have to interpret itself; in some sense be necessary. At that point, it would be impossible to propose any more general hypotheses from which the final theory could be deduced and the empirically accountable series, science, would be complete. There could be no further scientific questions; inquiry would end. If there is no such point, then we have another infinite series, and will remain baffled, unless the compulsion to terminate the series is satisfied, our bafflement named, by the concept of God. (104)

The concept "God" here represents that unity which escapes representation, a totality which must include anything that could meaningfully be said about it. In practical—which is to say material—terms, this means that a given object is always involved in exchanges and interactions that go unconsidered. And when those exchanges and interactions *are* considered, yet others elude consideration. There is a totality at which the object hints, but, of course, by hinting it can only emphasize its own inadequacy to the task of representation. For Williams, this sense of something

else, something as yet unthought, is the sense of a sanctity. “Arguably one of the basic implications,” he says, “of seeing the world as in some way ‘sacred’ is to see it as always hiding something from us, as well as always presenting fresh aspects for understanding and representation” (Williams, *TEOW* 119). What is “hidden from us” is the sum of everything that we cannot know or will not know or have not yet imagined about a particular thing: namely, unrepresentable unity, transcendence—God. To even think of these gaps in knowledge as somehow fillable is to do so *within* a series whose outside is necessarily unthinkable. But, at the same time, it is only by recognizing that something is hidden from us that it becomes possible to see how the obscuring thing is “more than itself.”

If this is beginning to sound familiar it is because Williams’ description of the sacred is remarkably like my earlier characterization of the structure of McCarthy’s essay, which proceeds, as carefully written fiction often does, by employing sentences and passages that are demanding precisely because they express both a lack and an abundance of information. This structure is consistent with what I have called the “form” of language, which McCarthy describes in simple terms as the idea “that one thing can be another thing,” and which I have suggested inheres in the material of the world. Before returning to a more direct discussion of “The Kekulé Problem,” though, I would like to follow Williams’ line of thought through to its theological endpoint, an idea that I hope will cast more light on the decidedly non-theological way McCarthy is asking questions about language.

Not only does the sacred, as Williams conceives of it above, approximate the strange simultaneity (of what is “hidden” and what is “apparent”) embedded in the McCarthy essay and thus *obliquely* imply a connection to language; it turns out that the sacred also dovetails with language in its own way, and in a considerably more straightforward fashion. Here, for instance, is how Williams frames the kind of world that one might perceive as sacred, the kind of world that could both “hide” something and present “fresh aspects for understanding and representation”: “...every finite

phenomenon is at some level a carrier of divine significance; it is a symbol not only in the sense that it contributes to an immanent pattern of intelligible exchange and interaction, but as something indicating God or carrying meanings fully or adequately intelligible only when unconditioned intelligence is assumed" (*TEOW* 120). In this model, the symbolic character of matter is taken to indicate not merely a vast network of negotiations implying unrepresentable unity, but a vast network of negotiations implying God. Which means that any lack or abundance that I apprehend in a thing, any suggestion that there is somehow more to say about it or more numerous and interesting connections to be made, is the beginning (in that moment, anyway) of a conversation. It is the outpouring of divinity at the level of the finite, and to that end it is also a kind of word that seeks response. "[E]ach situation is a 'word' from God" (*TEOW* 121), as Williams puts it—a unique moment of address in an infinite series of intelligible communications.

Theologically speaking, this is the relation that orders the world. Each "word" is but a specific instance in a larger set of meanings that is a part of an even larger set of meanings, and so on, and so on, until the relation reaches its close in the very thing that provides it with a shape: the meaning that must encompass every conceivable meaning and toward which each situational "word" must turn. Not, that is, a singular word *from* God, but the final and original Word *of* God. In Christian theology: Jesus Christ, the Logos. For Williams, it is this endpoint, a possibility hinted at in each new encounter and interaction, that accounts for the inexhaustible human urge to respond. "If we recognize," he says, "that every specific act of existing, or currently actual confluence of agencies, is one way in which an eternal act of existing is shared, this reinforces the idea that our linguistic response is a search for transparency to the full range of the active situation in which we are set—and so, ultimately, transparency to the eternal act" (Williams, *TEOW* 121). Language, then, is a method of participation in being, which is itself and in the first place also an expression of language. This much should be familiar to anyone who has read the first few verses of the Book of Genesis,

where it is an act of speech that calls the world into being and separates light from darkness.²⁰ Here the material and the linguistic reveal themselves to be inseparably bound in both what is and in what might yet be, different expressions of a single thing that is characterized later, in the New Testament, as the living embodiment of God's Word.

Well and good—but how is it that the Christian doctrine of the Logos has any bearing on the kind of thing McCarthy is up to in “The Kekulé Problem”? Does this whole discussion not simply run the rather serious risk of dissolving his speculative scientific essay into religious abstraction and losing real linguistic headway in the process? If the aim here is no more than to claim that “mystery” is, in some sense, a solution to or final word on McCarthy's investigation, then yes—this objection might fairly be levelled at the present discussion. But to invoke the idea of impenetrable mystery as a conclusion to that great question of where language comes from is still to offer a stopping point within a series which, as we have seen, really has no end. That is, to conclude that the matter is simply unknowable is nonetheless to conclude. This is something that Williams is careful to point out in *The Edge of Words*: “[t]o speak as some do of a need for the ‘re-enchantment’ of a world shrunk and bleached by science is not all that helpful; it does less than justice to the scientific enterprise and can all too easily be read as an appeal for less precision—as if it would be better to stop scientific enquiry at a certain stage of complexity or depth” (120). To give the question of language wholly over to a kind of thinking that would freeze it in place, enshrining it as mysterious and untouchable, would be to kill the impulse that language *is*: that process of continual questioning which always seeks new connections and which engages with what, in a given situation or thing, is in some way lacking or abundant. That this process is part and parcel with scientific

²⁰ Specifically, and significantly: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters” (*KJV Bible*, Gen. 1.3–6). The acts of speech here are both descriptive and creative.

enquiry should be one of the more important takeaways from McCarthy's essay. That it is expressed technically in that essay in the same form as the Word, as the Logos, is a thing worth considering in greater detail.

For the most part, "The Kekulé Problem" addresses the central problem of language—i.e., where it comes from—from a position that is at least indifferent to religious discourse. Never once in his reflections on the mind and the unconscious does McCarthy use a word like "soul," nor does he speculate that language might be something deserving of a capital letter. Undoubtedly, to engage with that kind of thing would be to compromise the integrity of the investigation, and, indeed, the reader can be reasonably sure of what they are in for at the very start when McCarthy defines the unconscious (a notoriously tricky term) as a "biological system before it is anything else" and as "a machine for operating an animal" ("TKP"). This is a straightforwardly materialist premise, and it is one that never really wavers. To consider the qualitative elements of the unconscious mind—especially things like dreams, which, of course, McCarthy *does* talk about quite a lot—is here to consider the workings of a machine that produces them and that evolves in such and such a way, according to biological principles. So a few paragraphs later, when McCarthy lays out what will be the essay's substantial concern, that is, that the biological unconscious involves itself with language even though language appears not to be describable in biological terms, he avoids giving any impression that there might be a fault in the materialist picture. "There are influential persons among us," he says,

...who claim to believe that language is a totally evolutionary process. That it has somehow appeared in the brain in a primitive form and then grown to usefulness. Somewhat like vision, perhaps. But vision we now know is traceable to as many as a dozen quite independent evolutionary histories. Tempting material for the teleologists. These stories apparently begin with a crude organ capable of perceiving light where any occlusion could

well suggest a predator. Which actually makes it an excellent scenario for Darwinian selection. (McCarthy, “TKP”)

This passage is disorienting²¹—deliberately disorienting, I think—because its central point is a gesture toward something not yet finished, some absence in our understanding of what language is. McCarthy’s point is roughly this: that if language is not well-described by an evolutionary model, then the remaining gap in knowledge should by no means imply a deferral to the divine or to the kind of thinking that would frame language as “designed” in some tautological sense. Rather, what it ought to indicate is that the very premise of inquiry, the material premise, is incomplete.

“Teleologists”—and this is really the closest McCarthy gets to naming any figure of religious inclination—are thus shunned not exactly for their insistence on a divine order in things, but for their apparent certainty that such an order would counter the need for further scientific investigation. The true opponent, in other words, is the presumption of a final say. And in this respect the “teleologists” are not so far removed from the “influential persons among us,” those theorists who would lay claim to language, simply and totally, in the name of evolution.

What this double critique suggests is that the materialist conception of language requires considered and substantial revision; what this looks like in practice, at least for now, is the admission of bafflement and limitation. Here are the few short sentences that follow immediately after the passage just quoted: “It may be that the influential persons imagine all mammals waiting for

²¹ McCarthy’s use of vision as an example here seems to be a reference to a work by Steven Pinker and Paul Bloom called “Natural Language and Natural Selection.” In that paper, the case is made that human language is the product of Darwinian natural selection and that the “ability to use a natural language belongs more to the study of human biology than human culture. . .” (Pinker 111). At least part of the work of building such a case involves tangling with those questions of design, function, and purpose that, when it comes to biology, have tended to be asked about that apparently miraculous organ: the human eye. Pinker and Bloom are thus prompted to ask questions like, “[d]o the cognitive mechanisms underlying language show signs of design for some function in the same way that the anatomical structures of the eye show signs of design for the purpose of vision?” (121). The questions of teleology, in other words, are not to be dismissed so easily as might be imagined: there is still a need to reckon with them. For McCarthy, the teleological position on language is cause for some concern, but it still requires serious consideration, especially if, as he suggests, it has occurred but once, and in just one species.

language to appear. I don't know. But all indications are that language has appeared only once and in one species only. Among whom it then spread with considerable speed" (McCarthy, "TKP"). It is difficult to read this and avoid thinking of words like "miraculous" or even "magical," but what is indicated here, aside from the incredible uniqueness of a phenomenon whose origin we are no closer to understanding, is less the miracle than the question—the one that branches off into countless others as the reader patiently works through "The Kekulé Problem." That is, *how* did it appear? Where does language come from? Each time this question peeks out from beneath an apparently straightforward statement of fact ("all indications are the language has appeared only once and in one species only"), it reveals that statement to have been simultaneously obscuring something and presenting something fresh and new for our consideration. Just as with the startlingly direct "we don't know how it is that we manage to talk," McCarthy's assertion that "language has appeared only once and in one species only" bowls us over. There is something about it that requires care and attention, and that makes a demand upon the reader to ask what, exactly, is meant by "language" or what could possibly constitute an "appearance." There is an address in it not unlike what Williams refers to as a "word' from God."

This is the technical expression of the Logos in McCarthy's essay, the appearance of a theological conception of language in a decidedly untheological place. A remark that seems to dramatically oversimplify a topic the reader knows to be rich and complex, that seems almost insultingly out of place in a scientific publication, turns out to be a *way into* an entirely new set of questions. If the remark is considered for just a moment, then one notices not just what it lacks (where, for instance, are these so-called "indications" that language has appeared but once and in but one species?) but also what else it contains (if language "spreads" with considerable speed, then perhaps this foregrounds the virus-talk introduced later in the essay and so sends the reader off in a pre-emptively epidemiological direction). What follows is that, just as with any good work of fiction,

the contours of a greater world are sketched out of details that are sparse or, in some cases, outright absent. In the latter case, the work is left to the reader, who, tasked with assisting in the sketch, must summon the force of her imagination in order to ask appropriate questions. When we take into account the subject matter itself, which of course is concerned with language as a not-yet-reducible human idea (the idea that “one thing can be another thing”), then the Word having some unlikely part to play in “The Kekulé Problem” moves from the realm of the probably coincidental to that of the seriously plausible. The major point of contention in the essay, after all, is where language comes from if we are unable to account for it in evolutionary terms. That it consists in the material of the world as something intelligible because it has been spoken into being by an unconditioned intelligence is a thing McCarthy is probably not about to admit (to say the very least); nor is it a view that we should be in any great hurry to ascribe to him.

What *is* worth pointing out, though, is that the concept of the Word, the Logos, offers a vision of language which not only fits its “central idea,” that one thing is *always* also another thing, but which also continually opens that which would seem to be permanently closed. That is, to see the world as ordered by an infinite and unthinkable intelligence is to see our descriptions and representations of it as forever unfinished, as containing more and more fascinating questions. Surely this kind of intent and insistent questioning is exactly what we *can* ascribe to McCarthy’s critique of present scientific certainties regarding language. It is what allows him to close on a question of his own, a question to which any reasonable scientist or theologian ought always to return: “are you sure?”

II

In a recent essay, titled “Grace and Beauty,” Marilynne Robinson addresses a topic of some familiarity: the failure of a totalizing science to reach an essentially unreachable goal. “The tendency of the behavioral sciences,” she says there, “in their accounts of the evolutions of intelligence and language ability and also their stark models of human motivation, are parsimonious in ways and degrees experience cannot justify. And since we all do live with our motives, even struggle with them, and since we all spend a great part of our time putting thoughts into language, mere proximity to the phenomena should give us some credibility as witnesses” (Robinson, *WAWDH* 103). Here Robinson is writing in such a way that she might be taken for a phenomenologist, as she is, not infrequently, as though this might be enough to grant a comfortable resolution to the matter of what she is up to in passages like this one.

In one sense, of course, her project really *does* suggest phenomenology: it is concerned with inner life, the fact of consciousness and the particularities of human experience, and the efforts of the “behavioral sciences” to somehow muffle the splendour of those things, tucking them away and labelling them “adaptive” or “maladaptive” according to a model that does not quite have access to them in the first place. But there is more to it than this for a couple of reasons. First, this is not just a case of human experience versus human evolution. The latter, Robinson claims, is merely an inadequate account of the former, presuming the eventuality of a closed book where it is *likely* that there can be no closure. I am thinking here of McCarthy’s simple (but not really simple) assertion that we have no idea how we manage to talk. The mechanism is a mystery because evolution has a difficult time coping with the problem of language. If we suppose the issue is ironed out, though—that one day we will have a convincing account of not only how language operates but where it comes from—it is still difficult to imagine Robinson (or McCarthy, for that matter, but perhaps for different reasons entirely) being satisfied with the “explanation.” This folds into the second reason her project is not exactly, or not *only*, phenomenological: an eventual blueprint for language that

framed it in unassailably evolutionary terms would simply bolster the idea that human intelligence, language, and experience had led to such an elegant description—the act of explanation being something unreachable because of its implication of totality and, thus, divinity. This is to say that Robinson’s thoughts on consciousness, like her thoughts on science, are coloured by theology.

Somewhat strangely, then, it is rare that she addresses the subject of language head-on. In her most recent collection of essays (*What Are We Doing Here?*), there are two occasions for such engagement: the first is a shorter piece called “The Beautiful Changes,” an essay originally delivered as an address in 2015, and the second is the longer essay from which the above quotation is drawn. It is not, I think, a coincidence that each of these pieces of writing also deals with beauty, nor that they each work to develop—unusually, for Robinson—an ontology, a conception of being which finds what she calls an “active principle” at its heart. The essays’ concerns appear so broad because any reflection on language that is even remotely concerned with theology must admit the enormity and essential unapproachability of its subject matter, and, as well, that any conclusion it might offer must conclude not just on a system of human signification but on the nature of reality itself. Robinson’s project in “Grace and Beauty” and “The Beautiful Changes,” then, is to describe something unstable and basically unknowable, and yet utterly crucial to the way in which we exist in and interact with the world. The concept that she burdens with this seemingly impossible weight is familiar enough as a word—the word is “beauty”—but in these essays the word takes on a meaning which makes it completely unlike what the reader is sure to expect. This is because of the nature of the question which holds the project together—an unanswerable question because it presumes a totality to which we have no access, but a question which we will, and must, continue to address as part of the condition of being human and curious. The question, roughly, is “where does the idea come from?” But embedded therein is “how do we know what to write?” And, finally, “where does language come from?” To this end, Robinson’s inquiry in these two essays is a kind of inverse of

McCarthy's inquiry in "The Kekulé Problem." She begins with the unknowable and makes her way to the more concrete, the manifestly material, though this, it turns out, is just like beauty: it is vastly unlike what we have come to expect of it.

I would like to add one more essay to the mix, to bolster what I am claiming constitutes a distinct and developing argument largely set apart from Robinson's other works of nonfiction. This is a piece called "Realism," from her collection *The Givenness of Things*. In defense of the addition, I submit here a short passage from the beginning of that work in which she describes and queries the experience of succeeding "beyond our aspirations" at "something difficult":

The character on the page speaks in her own voice, goes her own way. The paintbrush takes life in the painter's hand, the violin plays itself. There is no honest answer to the inevitable questions: Where did that idea come from? How did you get that effect? Again, particulars are lacking. We have no language to describe the sense of a second order of reality that comes with these assertions of higher insights and will override even very settled intentions, when we are fortunate. (Robinson, *TGOT* 273–274)

It is hard to read this passage without sensing the genuine puzzlement of a novelist who is, despite her brilliance at the craft, completely in the dark about the origins of her own stories. Not, to be clear, about the ways in which those the stories get told or the ways in which certain important details creep into and fill out a world, but about the kernel of truth, of idea, that demands expression in the first place. Robinson has said of *Gilead's* John Ames that before all else she became "aware of an elderly, gentlemanly voice, the voice of a man about whom [she] seemed to know certain essential things" ("*Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson"). How to account for this? An act of speech unsolicited but complete in and of itself? This is perhaps the "second order of reality" that Robinson is talking about, the order of reality about which we are unable to speak sensibly, lacking as we do the language to describe it. The claim, to be sure, sounds a bit mystical and rather like its own

conclusion, but it is meant only to identify something important about language: that when it is “complete,” or full, or when a single word or phrase or detail seems to contain and participate in the entirety of being—as is arguably the case with the “character” of John Ames—language is powerless to address the situation, because language cannot step outside of itself to do so. The series is, in that moment, closed. For McCarthy, the question is more or less the same, though he approaches it via an entirely different set of parameters. It is the unconscious that delivers the idea or the effect, working on an order of reality that is not quite the same as the one Robinson has in mind but that nonetheless treads over some of the same problems. “The same thing that tells you what to write,” McCarthy says in the Winfrey interview, “tells you when to stop writing it” (Winfrey).

The effect of attempting to talk about the place where language breaks down, or about language as a subject of theological import, is that it becomes unhelpful to continue using words like “language” or “speech” or even “words,” because they cease doing justice to what is really at stake. To keep this in mind might be to begin making sense of just what is going on in “Grace and Beauty” and “The Beautiful Changes” and, to some extent, “Realism,” where the reader gets the impression of a crucial concept that refuses to harden into shape. Take, for example, beauty, which is one of the forms that this concept takes. “Some part of a definition of beauty,” says Robinson, “ought to be that it is an aspect of experience that can, and possibly should, compel attention and also reward it” (*WAWDH* 129). A relatively uncontroversial proposal, one would think, but consider that this is only a “part” of a definition, and that it is thus to be taken alongside other parts in an effort to edge incrementally closer to a whole. Here is another and rather more complicated part: “...I have been trying to earn the occasion to say that our intuitions having to do with the way things are and become are real enough to participate in the elegance of meaningful complexity, which may be one definition of beauty, a necessary if not sufficient one” (Robinson, *WAWDH* 113). Note the same language of incompleteness: “necessary,” but “not sufficient.” This second definition advances a

slightly more daring claim that beauty, as an aspect of experience which compels, is not separable from the “elegance of meaningful complexity,” basically the reality of the world. It “manifests itself in one thing or another” as a “kind of force active in reality, perhaps very pervasively, that we have no instruments to measure or record except our minds and senses” (Robinson, *WAWDH* 112). It should be clear enough from this that she is not talking about beauty in the same way that we are accustomed to talking about it, nor, for that matter, is she talking about “only” beauty exactly. There is something going on here that suggests other concepts and other ideas clustered around an order of reality, a language, whose origin is infinitely generative but ultimately indescribable.

It is in “The Beautiful Changes” that Robinson most directly makes this point, addressing the problem of linguistic origin with a comparison of beauty and language, both of which, she says, “shape and are shaped continuously as they are realized in our reflections, choices, and creations” (*WAWDH* 130). Our understandings of language and of beauty shape the world, we might say, but so too does the world inform our sense of what language and beauty are. To step away from this in search of some earliest instance of either one, or in search of a past where such things would have been unimportant or nonexistent, is to step away from the essential condition of being and away from the experience by which anything at all is registered and responded to. “If the starting point for language,” Robinson asks, “was not an original simplicity, a business of threats and warnings, perhaps, how else is language to be accounted for? What magic or miracle could have intervened to yield the very great complexity that characterizes human utterance as we know it?” (*WAWDH* 130). Complexity is the operative word here, for “magic” and “miracle” are useful only insofar as they point back to the kinds of interactions that characterize language “as we know it”—as we use it and feel it in our lives. If Robinson’s question is a rhetorical one meant merely to indicate that God is the source of language, then it draws perilously close to the “original simplicity” of the theory that it discards: Divine will takes the place of survival instinct at the start of the causal chain, and inquiry

remains effectively closed. Thankfully, something more interesting is happening here. This question, which is very real, aims at the heart of an experience of overwhelming complexity which, in one form or another, requires both our attention and our response. It is invested in the origin of language as it might be expressed phenomenologically—if that phenomenology is coloured by faith. “If our interest is in the given world,” says Robinson, “the world of experience, then unserviceable theories of origins ought to be put aside in favor of attention to the things themselves, leaving accounts of beginnings to the sacred unknowable—or to the empirically unknown and perhaps unknowable” (*WAWDH* 130). It is not, in other words, that the notion of linguistic origin ought to be ignored or abandoned, but that it should not be taken to nullify a breadth of feeling and intention that is unquestionably an integral part of where language comes from.

Another way of putting this—a slightly simpler way—might be to say that although the origins of both language and beauty (and remember that Robinson is circling around a concept that is not quite nameable, and that is curiously inclusive of both of these apparently unrelated things) are essentially indescribable, they are also undoubtedly *felt*. We *feel* that language comes from somewhere, that it must have had some instant of origin in which, as McCarthy flippantly suggests, “some unknown thinker sat up one night in his cave and said: Wow. One thing can be another thing” (“TKP”). Or, perhaps more accurately, we intuit such an instant as historical necessity based on our best available information about the human brain and the development of human beings generally.²² This sense of origin, though, does not limit itself to history. Insofar as it is possible to imagine a human without language suddenly coming upon it, McCarthy’s cave-dweller must have experienced something enormously overwhelming in the moment of acquisition, where one thing became

²² There is, of course, a considerable difference between intuition of an origin and evidence for one. We *know* that language developed or arrived or came into being at some point in human history because there is an archaeological record from which to draw such a conclusion. But we also *feel* that language has an origin because the condition of being human comes with the certainty of having, at some point, existed without language.

instantly charged with limitless possibility. The best approximation for something like this might be the familiar if occasional feeling of arriving at a new idea which is more or less fully formed, an idea which is, in some bizarre sense, external and happenstantial—not so much generated as encountered. Think, for example, of Robinson’s “encounter” with her character John Ames: it is not that she imagines a particular trait or aspect and then works to create a character for whom that could be believably deployed; rather, it is that Ames *arrives*, as though himself an agent, complete and sufficient to a world which need only be excavated with the tools that the author now suddenly possesses—namely, those desires, troubles, memories, and inclinations which are so much a part of the new voice that they reveal their own context. Carefully considered, they necessarily open onto the town of Gilead, Iowa, surpassing their own wholeness in some very real, if very peculiar, sense.

The novel *Gilead*, then, might be characterized as a kind of response to a felt instant of origin, an instant not unlike the one typically imagined for language itself. Robinson recognizes something in the voice of John Ames (that is, before it is possible to meaningfully speak of a “John Ames” at all) which, despite its fullness and sufficiency, is but the beginning of a sequence that demands elaboration and that must proceed in a particular way. Not exactly “determined,” but certainly constrained. This is a recognition not unlike what Rowan Williams describes when he talks about “‘understanding’ an utterance,” that crucial aspect of communication which, he says, is “a matter of *knowing what to do or say next*. Rather than being a matter of gaining insight into a timeless mental content ‘behind’ or ‘within’ what is said, it is being able to exhibit the next step in a continuing pattern” (Williams, *TEOW* 68). Knowing the little that she does about the “elderly, gentlemanly voice,” Robinson still manages to respond in a way that is faithful to its essential coherency: Ames finds himself surrounded with *these* sorts of people and lives in *this* kind of house, and he is acutely aware of life’s small pleasures—baseball, a fried-egg sandwich, the quality of moonlight. He writes constantly. He feels the weight of his godson’s doubt. And so on. These are

the things that “come next,” the things that constitute an adequate response to the “utterance” which is the original voice. “Practically speaking,” says Robinson in “Grace and Beauty,” “when I am writing I tend to think of a character as having a palette or a music. An aesthetic in other words. While this is in some ways constraining, it establishes the limits within which substantive invention is possible and, more to the point, within which variation is meaningful” (*WAWDH* 104). To think of Ames as having a “palette” is to think of the original voice—the “Ames” who simply shows up one day out of the blue—as shaping the parameters of the authorial response. Which means that what later becomes *Gilead* is simultaneously contained within that voice and vastly in excess of it.

Of course, by “confining” the novel in this way I do not wish to suggest that Robinson’s role in its creation is somehow less, but instead that what is so often taken to be a purely creative act is in fact *also* an act of discovery. “At its best,” says the author Annie Dillard, “the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace. It is handed to you, but only if you look for it” (75). The real work, in other words, is in paying attention, in keeping watch for what amounts to a gift so that when (and if) such a thing “arrives” its coming does not pass unnoticed. From there, it is a matter of response: remaining attentive to the possibilities that inhere in the initial moment, the initial “utterance,” and developing on those with great care and understanding while always, as Dillard says, searching for grace. This is the act of creation as a kind of selective uncovering, an act that must continuously recycle itself through an initial condition and the would-be-creator’s understanding of it. To return to Williams, it is the response that follows from an understanding of what to do or say next, and it is, it turns out, not something that is limited to the world of writing:

Many years ago, I heard a distinguished sculptor saying that he had discovered his vocation when visiting a gallery in his teens. “I knew,” he said, “that there was something missing from that gallery, and it was *my work*.” The gallery had been showing a set of exhibition pieces designed to lead up to the work of Rodin; the teenage visitor had sensed that he knew

how to go on from Rodin, so that his work would be the obvious next step in a story. (*TEOW* 71)

It is not just, says Williams, that this sculptor feels he can go on, but that he is impelled to do so. He feels a “pressure to respond and continue” that is “in some sense an address and invitation” (*TEOW* 71), a clear call from an object that is complete in and of itself, but which nonetheless suggests that to which it is connected—that which it effectively obscures. The work of Rodin in this example is much like the voice of the elderly gentleman who will become John Ames: it is the felt origin for what ought to come next in an apprehended series.

Because this kind of “address and invitation” is so bound up with the attentive recognition (think of Dillard’s insistence that grace is delivered only when it is sought) of some initial pattern or necessary connection, it makes sense that we could extend it even further, involving that which is most likely to escape such empirically immeasurable and apparently mystical exchange—namely, the world of science. “The innovative scientist,” Williams proposes, “is impelled to ask the hitherto unasked question and propose the new explanatory structure and/or interpretative schema: it is not fanciful to speak here of a sense of ‘pressure to continue.’” (*TEOW* 71). Interestingly, a podcast conversation between Robinson and the physicist Marcelo Gleiser winds itself round to something quite like this very conclusion—although, of course, it is properly no conclusion, because it upends the idea of a “final” say. Toward the close of the hour-long conversation, Gleiser asks what at first seems like a question one might put to any successful author, a version, more or less, of “where do you get your ideas?” “When you write and you create characters,” he asks, “do you feel like they drive you in a certain way?” (Tippett). The listener quickly learns that this is not so much meant to confirm a suspicion about the fiction-writing process as it is to confirm a suspicion about an affinity between art and science. Here is Gleiser’s follow-up: “Because we do too, you know. When you’re working on a technical problem, it seems to have a way to go that we are not always in control [of].

We're just making sure all the minus signs and the plus signs match" (Tippett). One imagines Robinson briefly stunned by the admission. And then, after a slight pause, she raises an issue that had perhaps, prior to this moment, been inappropriate for discussion. "Do you think," she asks, that, for example, teleology might be an inadequate way of articulating what you're talking about? You know, I mean, teleology is sort of forbidden? But you can feel the shape of something pulling toward something that you don't intend, and it's as if the shape is somehow intrinsic, and the conclusion is somehow necessary? (Tippett)

It goes without saying that this is uncertain territory. It is uncertain because the shape that Robinson has in mind is necessarily elusive: something "felt," something that is "as if" intrinsic, something that seems to have its own peculiar force—one which is intuited but not measurable. To say that what she has in mind here is simply teleology is to all but require a flat-out refusal from Gleiser, who, as a scientist, is charged with taking seriously evolutionary objections to theories of intelligent design—objections with long, well-worn histories reaching back to Darwin's eventual abandonment of the ideas proposed by William Paley in his massively influential *Natural Theology* (1802). Robinson, who has considered these same objections, cleverly frames the question as an omission. "It is *like* teleology..." or "it retains *elements* of the teleological..." but it does not suggest the sort of grand, dispassionate view of events that is bound to run into conflict with scientific rationality. At stake here instead is a profoundly personal sense of order on a much smaller scale, a sense of order that is *felt* before it is anything else and which, in that sensation, seems to demand not just engagement but also response: "something pulling toward something that you don't intend." Because of the difficulty involved in conceptualizing this thing that is not quite teleology, Gleiser hesitates. "Maybe," he replies.

By way of what is sure to seem like a long detour, this brings us back to "Grace and Beauty" and to language—to that difficult and essentially inexpressible concept which Robinson best

captures when she says of beauty that it might be a “kind of force active in reality, perhaps very pervasively, that we have no instruments to measure or record except our minds and senses” (*WAWDH* 112). This is, I submit, the same thing that she describes to Gleiser as inadequately articulated by “teleology,” the same thing that Williams calls a “pressure to continue,” and the same thing that allows Dillard to compare the “sensation of writing” to “unmerited grace.” It is the felt origin of language.

The connection is not exactly an obvious one. It requires a consideration of two tremendously important things: first, that Robinson is using the concept of beauty in an unusual way, not only to indicate a unity but to indicate a *divine* unity or holiness;²³ and second, following from this point, that if something is holy then it can be expressed in (Christian) theological terms as a manifestation of the Word of God. Andrew Ploeg offers some clarification on the first point: “For Robinson, as for Calvin before her, theology is a question of aesthetic rather than moral categories. The ‘signature of the divine’ is not to be found in sanctimony, but rather in the sacred fusion of beauty, singularity, and grace” (5). The implication here is of a profound and personal experience where what is beautiful imposes itself, not merely to be acknowledged, but to be wholly turned toward—to be, even if momentarily, the point at which both thought and language cease and the perceiver is overwhelmed by the “signature” of divinity. Experience of this kind forms the ground of Robinson’s theology, which, says Ploeg, focuses “squarely upon divinity and humankind’s participation in it, upon that which the human mind cannot fully imagine and which language cannot adequately articulate” (5). This is beauty, to be sure, but beauty expressed as what she calls a “second

²³ I am using the word “holiness” deliberately here so as to indicate something elusive of or surpassing definition. The word should be taken as an echo of Rudolph Otto’s sustained description of it in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), where he notes that what is holy contains not just an obvious “moral significance” but also “a clear overplus of meaning.” “While [the holy/holiness] is complex,” he says, “it contains a quite specific element or ‘moment,’ which sets it apart from ‘the rational’ . . . and which remains inexpressible . . . in the sense that it eludes apprehension in terms of concepts. The same thing is true (to take a quite different region of experience) of the category of the beautiful” (Otto 5). This latter point will be particularly interesting in connection with Robinson, for whom, as we will see, “the beautiful” is not such a different region of experience as might be supposed.

order of reality,” a vague shape to be sensed, felt, or intuited, if never precisely grasped. For Calvin, what is beautiful works in much the same way, making visible “to a certain extent”—i.e., on an order of reality that is comprehensible—that which is “invisible and incomprehensible” about God:

[W]herever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty, while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory. Hence, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly describes the visible worlds as images of the invisible (Heb. 11:3), the elegant structure of the world serving us as a kind of mirror, in which we may behold God, though otherwise invisible. (Calvin, *SOGC* 59)

There is, in the contemplation of whatever object at hand exhibits “some sparks of beauty,” a powerful sense of extension beyond the immediate. What is beautiful right here and right now not only suggests an “immense weight of glory,” which is to say an unfathomable scale for a vast collection of other beautiful events and objects and people, but also that something about *this* particular instance holds that immensity within itself. It reveals that there is something about it which must remain hidden, and this is its divine signature.

Such a conceptual picture of something that is at once superabundant and lacking should already indicate a connection with language by way of the Logos, that central Christian element which is, in Jesus Christ, both fully human and fully divine. But of course, this similarity is not quite enough to develop on the link between beauty and the felt origin of language in Robinson’s later essays. What *does* hint at a more substantial connection is what Calvin, whom we know to be one of Robinson’s theological touchstones,²⁴ says immediately after his remarks on the possibility of

²⁴ There are a number of different examples, both in interviews and essays, of Robinson’s abiding interest in John Calvin. Her essay collection *The Death of Adam*, for instance, devotes two entries to the French Renaissance figure Marguerite de Navarre, titling them accordingly. But at the beginning of the first essay, she admits to a kind of benign deception: “My intention, my hope, is to revive interest in Jean Cauvin, the sixteenth-century French humanist and theologian—he died in 1564, the year Shakespeare was born—known to us by the name John Calvin. If I had been forthright about my subject, I doubt that the average reader would have read this far” (Robinson, *TDOA* 174). Robinson

knowing divinity “to a certain extent” through the “elegant structure of the world.” “For the same reason,” he says—that is, for the same reason that beauty in the visible world offers a glimpse of divinity in the invisible—“the psalmist attributes language to celestial objects, a language which all nations understand (Ps. 19:1), the manifestation of the Godhead being too clear to escape the notice of any people, however obtuse” (Calvin, *SOGC* 59). This is a statement about the origin of language that couches it terms of what is beautiful, and specifically in terms of what is beautiful to each and every human being: the firmament. Just as, say, a stone from the seaside blasted absolutely smooth by collision and tide commands an attention that fronts onto what Calvin calls “the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around” in the *here* and *now*; so the night sky commands such attention from everyone, everyday, and has done so for as long as humans have had visual apparatuses capable of perceiving it.

Perhaps there is something to this monumental and sweeping perception of beauty that does, indeed, feel like an address, not only because of the sense one has, in perceiving it, of yet more, of some unthinkable totality, but because of the sense that others, too, are perceiving this same totality and must be overcome with the same urge to respond. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork,” says the psalmist, “Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge” (*KJV Bible*, Ps. 19.1–2). This version of linguistic origin seems naïve and totalizing today, but it is worth considering that something McCarthy says in “The Kekulé Problem” aligns reasonably well with it: “There is no selection at work in the evolution of language because language is not a biological system and because there is only one of them. The ur-language of linguistic origin out of which all languages have evolved” (“TKP”). Language, it seems, simply arrives. And it arrives as the revelation that one thing can be another thing, a

even goes so far as to use the Middle French version of the theologian’s name in order to strip him of “the almost comically negative associations” (175) of his anglicized name and, ideally, reveal something of his brilliance and influence without faltering under the weight of his cultural and historical reputation.

revelation that sounds remarkably like the experience of recognition one has in coming across something beautiful that is both a unique, material particular and a complete and unimaginable whole.

It is with this context in mind that one ought to read the first few paragraphs of Robinson's "Grace and Beauty." When she says that "beauty disciplines," it is in order to get at the enormous and challenging subject that will form the basis for the rest of the essay, a subject that is, in its essence, "the origin of language," but which contains a great deal more than that because of what it must mean—i.e., that to speak about linguistic origin is to speak about an inexpressible feeling, about a sense of completion that is also an invitation, and about an intuition of a "shape" or of something that is not-quite-teleological. In short: it is a thing almost certain to be dismissed if it is framed explicitly as "language," because that, of course, would imply an importation of the divine Word into a rather serious discussion of the phonemic word. When Robinson begins her essay with a remark about feeling "intrigued and comforted by the thought of everything we do not know," she makes sure to punctuate it with an image that recalls Calvin's theological fusion of language, beauty, and celestial objects: "The 95 percent of the mass of the universe that is dark matter holds the galaxies together, so they say. It is like a parable, this aloof and unknowable power sustaining us, the patron, so to speak, of the spangled heavens, which are so grand to our sight, and baubles when the universe is thought of whole" (*WAWDH* 101). But while Calvin leaps immediately from this "unknowable power" to the psalmist's pronouncement upon a site of the origin of speech, Robinson can only hint at such a connection. And why? Because to make "Grace and Beauty" into an essay about the origin of language would be to embark on an extremely difficult road through the territories of linguistics, anthropology, and evolutionary biology, and such a journey would be beside the point.

The essay—like “The Beautiful Changes” and like “Realism”—is concerned less with locating and examining a specific moment in time than with describing a distinctly human feeling that, as far as we know, has always been with us—a feeling beyond or before which it would be impossible to speak meaningfully. In “The Beautiful Changes,” Robinson very nearly addresses this issue head-on: “Much thinking about human things has been captive for a very long time to the methods and biases of anthropology. And anthropology has been governed by the assumption of an original simplicity in all things human, complicated over time, at least among the majority of the species, until we arrive at modernity” (*WAWDH* 130). Linguistic origin, felt linguistic origin as it is sought in these essays, is unconcerned with “original simplicity” of any kind. Which means that what is at stake here is an experience of some unknowable, unthinkable complexity that periodically allows itself to be felt, and that at some unknown and possibly unknowable moment it allowed itself to be felt in such a way that human language was the only fitting response.

This is language, then, not as it has evolved and re-formed and expanded over millennia from a distinct historical point, but language as an infinitely generative idea that remains present in human experience. It is what Christian theologians refer to as the Word of God, that divine creative speech which forms life and the world at the beginning of all things, but which is also incarnate as the human man, Jesus of Nazareth—simultaneously a distinct material particular and an absolutely overwhelming and transcendent totality. In a world that is so created and so populated, language, which must emerge in one way or another out of a material environment (because language is, fundamentally, a material phenomenon), becomes something more than just an accidental elaboration upon some simple, original, material condition, even if it appears to be no more than that. It becomes a response to some object, or event, or person that has been spoken into being by the same divinity who walked among them, who existed on their same plane of history and so imbued it, at every moment and in everything, with unfathomable vastness. To think of the origin of

language in this way is to do away with any consideration of “original simplicity,” and to hold to what Rowan Williams says is, in fact, an idea out of early Eastern Christianity, “that the world is a system of reasonable and coherent communications reflecting the infinite diversity of ways in which the one divine Word, the eternal self-bestowing of God, can be reflected and participated” (*TEOW* 121). The origin is one of limitless complexity because it is divine, but it is also one that is continuously renewed in the “eternal self-bestowing of God.” It is here that the felt origin of language and a more general question about “where language comes from” become, finally, indistinguishable.

Thinking about language in this way—that is, as affected to a staggering degree by the weight of experience and by what is felt in the faintest glimpse of the contours of the divine Word—I would like to suggest, at last, an especially peculiar overlap in Robinson’s “Grace and Beauty” and McCarthy’s “The Kekulé Problem.” It concerns what is perhaps the most intractable dimension of the problem of linguistic origin, namely, the assertion in McCarthy’s essay that the unconscious is “loathe to speak to us” and that it is, in a very real sense, older than language. There is an antagonism here that is difficult to overcome. After all, there is a component of our being, a biological system, McCarthy says, that is responsible for our insights, our thoughts, and probably our intuitions, and it would seem to override speech or at least outrank it. Here is how, in one of the essay’s more enigmatic and fascinating paragraphs, he characterizes the work of this system, which “wants to give guidance to your life in general” but “doesn’t care what toothpaste you use”:

...while the path which it suggests for you may be broad it doesn’t include going over a cliff.

We can see this in dreams. Those disturbing dreams which wake us from sleep are purely graphic. No one speaks. These are very old dreams and often troubling. Sometimes a friend can see their meaning where we cannot. The unconscious intends that they be difficult to unravel because it wants us to think about them. To remember them. It doesn’t say that you

cant ask for help. Parables of course often want to resolve themselves into the pictorial.

(McCarthy, “TKP”)

The idea that the purpose of dreams, and especially of dreams where speech is wholly absent, is to give us pause or to wrangle our attention is curious, because it implies a collection of information organized into the fragment of a narrative that is worth attending to in the first place. That is, what is presented to us here is a cogent whole. It is something that arrives, something that is perceived as an address which ought to be taken seriously, and which, possibly, deserves some form of response. To read in this description of the unconscious a correlate for the concept that Robinson works to develop in “Grace and Beauty” is likely to look for a too-pat solution to a problem that is bafflingly complicated and that is not going to be well-served by attempts to reduce it to overtly theological terms. That said, there is something in McCarthy’s picture of the unconscious that really *is* quite similar to the kind of felt experience of linguistic origin which crops up as beauty, as elegance, and as grace in Robinson’s essay. “It’s hard to escape the conclusion,” says McCarthy, seeming almost to admit that which he would rather leave unsaid, “that the unconscious is laboring under a moral compulsion to educate us” (“TKP”). Hidden in the morass of dream images is the thing we already know to be true and complete, cloaked until it is not, until the instant that response becomes a requirement because our attentions have made it one.

While it should go without saying that Robinson does not address the unconscious in the same way that McCarthy does, she does reflect on it in “Grace and Beauty” in a manner that is startlingly reminiscent of the dream passage from “The Kekulé Problem.” Speaking about the process of developing characters for a work of fiction, she notes that the “experience of human presence” is important above all else, that there is a sense of following (during the writing process, one presumes) “the grain of the credible,” which seems to be another expression driving at that familiar and elusive concept, the not-quite-teleological, the gentle invitation to continue on. As an

example of what she means, Robinson offers up some of the sorts of questions she might ask herself in order to determine just what it is that makes a gestating character unique: “What is the specific absence I feel when I miss someone? ... What is the abstract, the ghost, that persists in the mind, meaning him or her and no one else? What makes the atmosphere of a house change when some particular person walks in the door?” (*WAWDH* 105). But then, almost abruptly, the line of inquiry moves from the hypotheticals of waking life to the unnerving specifics of dreams: “Or to put the matter another way, how does our brain compose the ominous strangers who come to us in dreams, with their greasy hair and sidelong looks, full of insinuation and much too believable? Why just that coat? That crudely bandaged hand?” (105). These latter questions could as well appear in McCarthy’s essay, but their context here dramatically shifts the register of the impact. In “Grace and Beauty,” the looming dream figure is an image not out of some primordial, prelinguistic world, but out of a world that is precise and complete, ordered in such a fashion as to demand attention to its details and its entailments. The stranger in the dream that Robinson describes is ominous, certainly, but he or she is also a necessary part of an environment that must contain such a person. Just as, to belabour the point, the voice of John Ames, because of its precise timbre and sorrow and hope, turns out to belong in a town which could only be Gilead, Iowa.

All of this is not to say that the unconscious is somehow the felt origin of language. This would be to offer a solution not only massively beyond the scope of the present study, but also so simplistic as to be nearly meaningless. My point is, instead, that Robinson’s conception of the unconscious in the above passage offers another way of looking at what McCarthy proposes in “The Kekulé Problem,” and perhaps most interestingly, a way of looking at it that does not do any kind of violence to that essay’s essential integrity.

Of course, we have already remarked upon the extent to which the Word (the divine Logos) figures into “The Kekulé Problem” as a kind of formal organizing principle (surely unintentionally,

but that is beside the point). It should be unsurprising, then, to note that something very much like this happens in “Grace and Beauty,” “The Beautiful Changes,” and “Realism,” where the concepts that are burdened with describing the contours of language and where it comes from are themselves both lacking and abundant, suggesting that which they are unable to adequately reveal. Beauty, for instance, is not quite beauty in its usual sense: there is something about it that feels underdeveloped, almost as if it is being used incorrectly, and so the reader is left without the information necessary to account for the sentence or paragraph in which it appears. “Beauty disciplines” comes to mind. This “two-word sentence,” which Robinson notes at the outset of “Grace and Beauty” is “not intelligible by conventional standards” (*WAWDH* 101), requires a lengthy pause and a considered round of questioning—or, at the very least, some unconscious acknowledgment that no typical or terribly useful association exists between these two things. Ought not the beautiful, after all, to indicate a measure of freedom from the strictures of just such a thing as discipline? This jarring effect, an effect that might just as well be attributed to Robinson’s other uses of the same word as to her somewhat idiosyncratic deployments of “grace” or “elegance” or even “alleviation,” is one that occurs over and over again in McCarthy’s essay, where it tends to spring out of sentences rather than concepts. “[W]e dont know how it is that we manage to talk” is one such sentence; “[w]e dont know what the unconscious is or where it is or how it got there” (McCarthy, “TKP”) is another. These sentences exude what seems to be overconfidence, but to read them in this way—as brash or smugly certain—is to miss the fact that they open onto question after question, and that they are in actuality expressions of something much closer to wonder. That we appear not to have the slightest grasp of where language comes from is a thought which should draw us in, inviting probing questions and enacting the sort of response which must, at some largely incomprehensible level, be characteristic of the very idea of origin that we are after.

It is in this peculiar fashion that much of “The Kekulé Problem” can be said to obscure and reveal simultaneously, that its prose can be said to lack the essential elements with which it simultaneously and paradoxically overflows. The same is true of Robinson’s essays, but it is true of their central concepts rather than their individual sentences. Again, take “beauty disciplines” as an example: what is difficult about this little sentence is not that it compresses a large amount of information into a small space (although it certainly does this) and so appears to lack that with which it is bursting at the seams; rather, it is that beauty, which is one of the essay’s principle concerns, is incomprehensible in this context. There is simply not enough information to determine what sort of situation Robinson might have in mind. Only when the rest of the essay is taken into account, when the reader has pieced together out of a handful of other concepts and impressions what “beauty” is meant to signify, can this early sentence come into focus. In “beauty disciplines,” it turns out, beauty is two things at once: on the one hand a stopping point, a concept whose meaning is clouded in such a way that we are enticed to attend to what is “missing”; and on the other hand the unthinkable excess contained in that lack, the sense of some immeasurable force or shape variously described by, but never explained by, the other concepts that Robinson gestures toward in “Grace and Beauty,” “The Beautiful Changes,” and “Realism.”

As with McCarthy’s essay, this formal operation has its counterpart in the Logos, in the twofold reality of Christ—what Williams has called the “eternal self-bestowing of God.” This latter image is especially useful, because in order for anything at all to be bestowed there must be supposed a recipient, someone for whom this self-bestowal of God is recognized and accepted, not on the scale, obviously, of the eternal, but in a particular moment by way of a particular event or person or thing. The Word of God, which speaks everything into being and which thus marks the totality of what is, is only faintly perceptible—that is, as a kind of suggestion—in the material of the world because that same material cannot be separated from the reality of a being both divine and

human. That is, the simplest of elements is transformed by the idea that it is holding something back, that it is a veil of sorts for a second order of reality which exceeds our capabilities almost entirely, excepting the vague sense we might have of a “pull” or a “shape.” It is at this point that words fail and that they fail necessarily. After all, having lit briefly upon the felt origin of language, where is it that more words could come from?

This question, I claim, is the aim and the meaning of Robinson’s three essays, works which might be designated merely and finally “phenomenological” without so much as a second thought, but which reach well beyond that, deep into theological territory, to engage with questions about the origin of language. Certainly, these essays *are* phenomenological: they investigate the quality of a highly specific experience of a highly specific kind of intuition. The problem is that they also posit an inconceivable reality as the ground for such experience, a reality that is, before all else, spoken into being. What one feels in any encounter with this reality, however fleeting and impressionistic that encounter is, must be just that sense of necessity, of connection beyond and apart from, say, the starry night sky (to use Calvin’s example), to everything else that is or that might be suggested by it. And there is a shifting sense of what is perceived: an object that is complete in and of itself, an object that has until this very moment concealed its fullness, and an object that, by virtue of that concealment and the enormity of what has been concealed, is vastly in excess of itself. It is, in other words, the ongoing revelation of what McCarthy says is “the central idea of language—that one thing can be another thing” (“TKP”).

In an early, short essay for the *New York Times*, Robinson offers as a potential solution to the problem of what might be called “explanatory steamrolling”—what she sees as the tendency of current explanatory methods to “lead us to ignore such experience or intuition as cannot be accommodated by them”—a kind of “remystification of language” (“Language Is Smarter Than We Are”). Her proposition is as follows:

I propose that we think of language as so old that nothing living predates it. The world properly understood might be a kind of fiat, a genetic Let There Be, nuanced and inflected to conjure oysters and antelopes and elephant grass. Then age after age the writ would run and the particulars of its behest be the first gift of every generation to its children.

I propose this merely as metaphor. But it seems to me clear that the world has certain predispositions, and that language is too complex a thing to have occurred universally among us if there were not a bias in the nature of things to sustain the evolution that led to this most improbable result. (Robinson, "Language Is Smarter Than We Are")

Two things are striking here. The first is that in 1987, when this article appeared, Robinson was already turning over the idea of some nameless, unquantifiable force just beneath the fabric of our reality, as well as the possibility that such a force (a "predisposition," a "bias") might have a meaningful relation to what we think of as language. The second is that but for the dissimilarity of their terms Robinson and McCarthy, it seems, are driving at more or less the same thing: that there is a mystery at the very heart of how human beings perceive and engage with the world. And whether that mystery, that limit of our understanding, is a function of language or of the unconscious is ultimately of less importance than that it shapes our response to being. In each case, we are thrown back on that same timeless invitation to continue on, to respond adequately, and every time it is something radically and wonderfully new.

Chapter Two—Divinity, Wonder, and Sacramental Form in *Gilead* and *The Road*

Just as in chapter one I sought a point of contact between the distinctly theological and the manifestly material origins of language in the nonfictional works of Marilynne Robinson and Cormac McCarthy—a point of contact expressed not only in the content of the essays but in their forms as well—so, in what follows here, will I seek that same point of contact with respect to images and notions of wonder in the novels *Gilead* and *The Road*. It is my claim that in each of these works, astonishment has a peculiar function: on the one hand, to draw the reader into a state of contemplation that frames the “merely” material world as something capable of containing much more than it does; and on the other hand, to insist that such excess does not amount to an abandonment of the world’s strict materiality. Or, to put it another way: moments of astonishment give way to a kind of non-dualistic doubling, where the object or person or event perceived is revealed to be something that is at once wholly itself and vastly—unthinkably—greater than that. In both novels, these moments are transmitted to the reader via images that telescope outwards in time and space. Sometimes the images recall a geometric concept known as “self-similarity,” sometimes they are images of Christian sacrament, and frequently, as I will show in this chapter, they are images that combine the two, providing the reader with a sense that the thing under scrutiny is simultaneously not what it is and *only*, painfully, what it is.

What gives this doubling its force in both *Gilead* and *The Road* is a feature of narrative that I am calling sacramental form. This is yet another doubling, but what multiplies here is the perspective that the reader is asked to adopt with respect to the entire narrative world. In *Gilead*, this means reading the letters of a man who is writing from a position of both immediate presence and haunting transcendence, both “now” and in “eternity.” In *The Road*, this means observing the world through

the eyes of a character who, I will argue, sustains the very movement of the world as a story. “The boy” is a figure perpetually stunned by *The Road’s* bleak encounters and revelations, and he is both the simple observer of the harrowing post-apocalyptic journey and the “warrant” who makes it possible in the first place. Like *Gilead’s* John Ames, he seems to stand both within and apart from time itself. How we read—how we are asked to read—these two novels is inseparable from an ontological commitment that would deliberately blur the boundary between mundane materiality and dazzling transcendence. Indeed, it would render such a boundary and the idea of such a boundary incoherent.

I

Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead* does some interesting things with time—not the least of which is, because of the epistolary form of the work, placing the reader at a remove from the characters. In a sense, to read it is to be on one’s own. The novel’s narrator, the Congregationalist minister John Ames, crafts a mix of stories, reflections, and diary entries for his young son Robby in a series of letters that he has been writing in the last years of his life. Ames has a heart condition, we learn. He is dying. It is not “dying,” though, but Ames’ *death* that is the book’s primary assumption. The letters, after all, are meant for Robby when he grows up, that he might learn a little about his father and his father’s mind, and that he might have an experiential link to a part of his family history. And so the Reverend frequently makes remarks that warp time and perspective. Here is an example from the very first page: “If you’re a grown man when you read this ... I’ll have been gone a long time” (Robinson, *Gilead* 3). Considered for more than an instant, this construction sends the mind reeling. It envisions the past from a conditional future, but it does so from a point at which, for the utterer,

time has stopped. At other moments the register changes, and Ames is inhabiting a present—the time of his writing: “I went up to the church for a few hours this morning...” (127). The result of the shift is that the reader becomes aware of a doubling, of two narrators. One exists within the continuous story that he tells in the mundane and material world of everyday life in Gilead, Iowa, with his family and his neighbors, taking the measure of his own devout but cloistered life. The other is long passed, observing the events in the life of the “first narrator” from a position beyond the present, somewhere (or when) that is suggestive of the hereafter. If time has not stopped, then it has, unknowably, changed. And here is the isolation of the reader: located well after the time of the events in the book and unable to approach or even think about the time of the transcendent narrator. Ours is the position of the grown-up Robby—a being yet-to-come.

If there is a “solution” to this predicament, one which might overcome the distance, then the novel provides it. It is this: at each instant the reader encounters the complete and non-contradictory overlap of the two John Ameses. One is a corporeal inhabitant of the material world, and he is present in that world even when not apparent in a given scene. The other is an inhabitant of eternity for whom the material world has become “Troy ... the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets” (57)—which is to say, not a gross physical burden successfully shaken off, but a marvel at once physical and holy. This overlap of the material and the metaphysical is precisely why the experience of reading *Gilead* never *feels* isolating, even when its narration ought to leave the reader stranded. Consider, for instance, the following passage, which I include here in its entirety to demonstrate both its weight and its effect:

I saw a bubble float past my window, fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst. So I looked down at the yard and there you were, you and your mother, blowing bubbles at the cat, such a barrage of them that the poor beast was beside herself at the glut of opportunity. She was actually leaping in the air, our insouciant

Soapy! Some of the bubbles drifted up through the branches, even above the trees. You two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors. They were very lovely. Your mother is wearing her blue dress and you are wearing your red shirt and you were kneeling on the ground together with Soapy between and that effulgence of bubbles rising, and so much laughter. Ah, this life, this world. (9)

This beautiful passage is a familiar one,²⁵ and rightfully so. It condenses the narrative form of the novel into a single image, where John Ames looks out at the yard in fascination from two different temporal vantage points. But of course, they cannot be “different,” or even separated, or we lose the effect that the passage creates: a sense of wonder at the holiness of the everyday and at the presence of God in the material world. The writing Ames, the Ames of the present, scans outward and upward to take in the “celestial consequences” of the rising bubbles, linking the particulars of his wife, child, and cat to the infinity of space. The word “celestial” lies carefully between the more religious “heavenly” and the scientific connotations of something like “astronomical” or even “planetary.” This should be a hint that Ames is already acting as both himself and not-himself, as both a part of the scene in the yard—at least, symbolically—and radically apart from it, looking “backward” in time and down from some great height. What clinches it is the shift in narrative tense right before the final amazed utterance: “Your mother *is* wearing her blue dress and you *are* wearing your red shirt...” There is a slippage here, and there are questions. For instance, whose present does this suddenly become? That of the simultaneously observing and writing Ames? That of some

²⁵ A few different studies of Robinson’s novel have called attention to this passage, perhaps because of its effortless condensation of the beautiful and the ordinary, but perhaps, as well, because of its clear manifestation of the sort of temporal peculiarity that is characteristic of *Gilead* and its structure. In his essay “Becoming a Creature of Artful Existence,” Chad Wriglesworth points out that the “scene features expansive images of birth, emergence, and the ecological design of patterns set within similar patterns” (123)—something which I will discuss later on in this chapter when I turn to self-similarity—while Christopher Leise considers the scene’s varied temporal inflections. “[P]ast and future given due consideration,” says Leise, “Ames is also deeply concerned with representing his most immediately present moments” (349). Indeed, the passage contains much that is worth studying and returning to.

watchful transcendent Ames? It does not matter. The point of the image is that they are one and the same. This is *Gilead's* ontological message, and it is driven home again and again.

The examples are emphatically material, but there is an asterisk to that materiality: the novel's overlapping narrative temporalities indicate *how* we might read its worldly and "ordinary" moments, and this means, to put it somewhat over-simply, that the same "doubling" applies to both time and space. It should be obvious that Ames expresses a renewing astonishment with the simple events, objects, and interactions of daily life, but what is perhaps not obvious—what is, shall we say, unlocked by the book's deliberate fuzziness concerning time—is that these things are not made less basely material by his suggestion of their unfathomable beauty.

In a reflection on the sacrament of baptism, Ames marvels at the shimmer of water produced by the Baptist method of total immersion and compares it to that of his own denomination, Congregationalism. "For us," he says, "the water just heightens the touch of the pastor's hand on the sweet bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection" (Robinson, *Gilead* 63). In each case what is marvellous is not the intercession of God as metaphysical abstraction from the event itself, nor is it the loveliness of the event's worldly peripherals (i.e., the "sweet bones of the head" or the shimmer of water that pours "off the garments and the hair" [63]); instead, it is the total overlap of the worldly and the divine, of the material and the metaphysical. But Ames notes a distinct difference between the flash of the Baptist method and the minimalism of the Congregationalists, going so far as to wish that his own baptisms had been more akin to the former. This desire, which seems at first blush like nothing more than affection for the beauty of the ordinary, something apart from the rite of baptism, is in fact more complicated than that: it is a sense of wonder at the miracle of water, that substance which changes and is changed in the sacramental act. Water, in this comparison, spills the banks of its liturgical context and is considered as something holy in and of itself. It illuminates an image of Robby and his friend Tobias playing in

a sprinkler, it sacralises the notion of “electrical connection,” and, when it is marveled at by a narrator both present and transcendent, it manages to retain the very form of sacramentality.

Of course, to speak of retaining a sacramental form without its corresponding content is to tread on friable ground. There is an immense theological tradition behind the word and what it means, and this is not the place to begin even scratching the surface of such a thing. I will, however, offer a brief summary of what I take it to mean here, providing a few preliminary historical and definitional points of contact before talking about what I think is going on in *Gilead*.

In Christian theology, sacrament is the physical manifestation of divinity.²⁶ Its most instantly recognizable form is probably that of eucharist, the rite that transforms ordinary bread and wine into the blood and body of Christ, but the Catholic Church recognizes six others: baptism, confirmation, reconciliation, the anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony. The tendency of the Reformed tradition is to recognize but two of these—baptism and eucharist—though there are some interesting variations within Protestantism. Lutherans, for instance, retain reconciliation (penance), while Anabaptists and Pentecostals drop the word “sacrament” entirely, insisting that each act has more to do with individual faith than with an external divinity or grace. In what has become a foundational definition, St Augustine describes a situation in which “the word is added to the elemental substance, and it becomes a sacrament, also itself, as it were, a visible word” (*TOTGOJ*, Tractate 80). This confluence implies Christ himself, that is, Christ as the Word of God made flesh. But what it does not imply is a divide between material and word. The two are one and the same. For Martin Luther, writing over one thousand years later, sacraments are restricted to “those

²⁶ This is obviously an over-simple description, though as I have said it will be necessary to sketch out some kind of starting point for a discussion of what I will be calling “sacramental form”—even if that starting point is to be necessarily limited by the strictures of the present study. In *On Christian Theology*, for instance, Rowan Williams enlarges this kind of basic picture of what constitutes “sacrament” by placing an emphasis on action and effect. “The Christian sacraments,” says Williams, “are not just epiphanies [i.e., literally, manifestations] of the sacred; or rather, the *way* in which they are epiphanies of the sacred is by their re-ordering of the words and images used to think or experience social life” (*OCT* 209).

promises which have signs attached to them” (127) and are thus practically limited to baptism and eucharist. The historical consequences of this limitation are enormous. For definitional purposes, though, Luther’s sacrament is remarkably like Augustine’s, the implication of the former being that the divine promise is apparent in the *visible* sign, and there, again, as Christ. John Calvin offers a version of these definitions that is, by his own admission, no different from the Augustinian conception, calling sacrament “...a testimony of the divine favour toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith towards Him” (*IOTCR*, Book IV, Ch. 14). But in this final clause there is an insistence on the role of the individual faithful. This is something that does not appear in the other definitions, and it is something that suggests one of the primary practical differences between branches of Christianity—namely, an emphasis on either the power of individual faith or on a divine grace imparted from without. It is in this distinction—and, again, it is necessarily simplified—that we find the contested meaning of eucharist. The sacramental bread and wine are either the *real* body and blood of Christ (as in the doctrine of transubstantiation), or they are body and blood only symbolically.

These practical and denominational differences, however, are less important for narration in *Gilead* than that we now have some definitional touchstones. Sacrament is the “visible word”; it is a divine promise in a visible sign. It is, above all, Christ made flesh. What does it mean then that water, in John Ames’ reflections on river baptism and his son’s youthful sprinkler hijinks, retains a sacramental *form*? It means that while the shimmering water is not, strictly speaking, baptismal (even in the case of the river baptism, Ames’ focus is on the “superfluous” elements rather than the rite itself) it still contains the presence of the divine. It means that what is so miraculous about water is both entailed by the baptismal act and extends beyond it: as a substance directly involved in the sacrament it becomes the visible word, that act which signifies the presence of God; but as a substance apart from the act, it is still sustained by the same divinity that is now a part of the

material world. What is so fascinating about sacrament is that it binds²⁷ particular and infinite, making God a part of the very world for which God is the cause. The water that is “adjacent” to the baptism has a sacramental form, and Ames recognizes it as such because it is the same form he is forced to consider in the writing of his letters, where, for his son, he must be a voice both present and transcendent.

By this logic, of course, the unique temporal position of John Ames places the whole narrative world—indeed, everything that the reader encounters in *Gilead*—under the heading of “sacramental form.” *Every* act or object becomes a sacred act or object because it is glimpsed by the narrator as a slice of doubled time: specifically present and infinitely and unthinkably “after.” Thus, a conversation between Ames and the troubled Jack Boughton on the nature of predestination becomes indistinguishable from a description of Ames’ grandfather’s physical characteristics, which in turn becomes indistinguishable from an extended reflection on baseball and the imagination. In practical terms these moments offer very different things—impressions of Jack’s self-perception, confusion about what sort of man the elder Ames might have been, feelings of nostalgia and admiration for the radio broadcast—but they are on equal footing when it comes to their sanctity. On the one hand, to say such a thing is just to point out what is intuited in the reading of this novel: that every little thing in it is perceived by the dying Ames as a beautiful but transient flicker, as though for the first and last time. On the other hand, though, it is to create a philosophical bind. If everything in the narrative world is taken to be sacred, then that category has lost its meaning. All that is sacred, all that is contained in the world of *Gilead* as sacramental form, becomes just as easily profane.

²⁷ There is no appropriate single word for what is happening here. Really, there can be no “binding” or “joining,” because particular and infinite are, and have always been, in direct relation. It is perhaps rather that a relation which had not previously been apparent is suddenly and incredibly shown forth in all of its bizarre and paradoxical splendour.

There is something about Ames' narration, though, that resists this logical reduction. That is, it never *feels* as though his observations become any less "religious" for slipping too far into the territory of the "material." Any number of passages from the text might confirm this fact, but consider the following sentence: "When the roof hit the fence, which was just chicken wire nailed to some posts and might as well have been cobweb, there were chickens taking off toward the road and chickens with no clear intentions, just being chickens" (Robinson, *Gilead* 35). Here is an example of something which the novel does continuously, capturing, as Alex Engebretson has rather concisely put it, "the particularities of a certain time in a certain place through careful descriptions of quotidian life" (47). The destruction of the chicken coop is, for Ames (and certainly for Ames' mother), a "general disaster," but the disaster is related with a lovely mix of humour and reverence. The point that he makes is finally a religious one—the idea, imparted again with humour, that there might be some blessing in the chaotic event, even though it is unquestionably ordinary or worldly. Indeed, it contains no explicit references to, for instance, eucharist or predestination or the Song of Songs: so why does its telling communicate such a sense of vastness? If the sacramental form of Ames' narration renders everything that he says sacred and thus meaninglessly sacred, why does a reading of this seemingly simple and homey event from his past evoke something larger than its own ordinariness?

Two things are going on here. The first inheres in an adjective which I have just quoted in Engebretson's description of *Gilead*, namely, "careful." What are captured are not just descriptions of quotidian life but *careful* descriptions of quotidian life. Ames narrates certain moments with great care and attention, and frequently this attention boils over into full-blown astonishment. But is such an attitude—a kind of sustained and deliberate seeing—enough to coax the sacredness out of a thing? This is perhaps the wrong way of looking at it. Instead of drawing forth the sanctity of a moment or object, Ames' rapt attention blesses it. What he has to say about the act of baptism is

particularly instructive: “There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that” (Robinson, *Gilead* 23). By taking the time to attend to elements of the quotidian, he acknowledges the sacredness of those elements. This implies, however, a meaningful “underlying” sacred to which it would be possible to attend. Which is to say, if blessing acknowledges sacredness and everything is sacred, then what, really, is being acknowledged? The answer, it seems, is both “that particular thing” and “everything.” But how can this be so? Here I arrive at the second thing at work in the narrative expression of ordinariness that surpasses the ordinary: the recursive structure of sacramental form.

I have said that the enormity of the everyday, its communication to the reader as miraculous—as in the chicken coop example, and as in the sprinkler scene and the scene with the rising bubbles—rests on a narrative foundation that cleaves to the form of sacrament. But because of this peculiar narrative form, every moment and act becomes sacred, and thus, every moment and act becomes profane, the unique definitional content of “sacred” having been rendered null by its claim to totality. The problem with stopping here is that sacrament deals in a kind of complexity that is not easily overwritten. That is, what it offers is the infinite. To say that “everything is sacred equals everything is profane” is fine, because, sacramentally speaking, everything *is* profane, but then everything is sacred, and so on, and so on. If sacrament is the “visible word”—that is, if it is Christ as the Word made flesh—then it causes the very reality it becomes a part of. Hence, the eucharist is at once wafer and flesh, and the material and the metaphysical are never divided. What such a thing instigates is a nesting effect which opens the world up to just the sort of fascinated reflection John Ames provides in *Gilead*. It is the ground of sanctity that makes possible the blessing of his attention, and it looks not unlike what the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter has dubbed a “strange loop.” The phenomenon of the latter, Hofstadter says, “occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we find ourselves right

back where we started” (10). With sacrament, the “hierarchical system” is causality, and the loop is a rather short one: the rite enacts the presence of Christ in the material world; Christ is God incarnate and has created that material world. “Back where we started” in this case might, however, have an asterisk beside it, for as Ames points out, there is a power in the acknowledgment of sacredness, and that power might be as simple as a new attentiveness.

In *Gilead*, moments of sustained attention become blessings, acknowledging with a sense of wonder the sacred that is both in and inextricable from material things. These moments punctuate the formal narrative structure of the work. When Ames tells of his wife and son blowing bubbles in the yard, for instance, he primarily reveals an attitude of astonishment at the grandness of such a simple event, and it is only by altering the verb tense in his letter (something the reader can imagine him doing accidentally) that he hints at a doubled frame of reference and thus at an unusual narrative form. What Ames sees is the coextension of sacred and profane, and he blesses it simply by acknowledgment. Recall, though, the form that his attention takes: watching the bubble on its slow path from ground-level to the treetops and then up into the atmosphere. There is something in this image which gestures toward infinity—indeed, the phrase “celestial consequences” seems to imply just that. Robby blows a few bubbles; those bubbles drift up into the sky, greatly enlarging the scene; and, finally, although this is never stated outright, the bubbles burst into the atmosphere. In principle, it is possible to trace the molecules beyond this point. They will condense along with other water molecules and eventually fall as rain, making green and inviting the yard of their “origin.” This is a stretch, but it illustrates the possible “strange loop” which inheres in the scene and thus points to the same sort of paradoxical form we have seen in sacrament. Ames’ amazement, we might then say, arises from his catching a glimpse of sacramental form in the voyage of a soap bubble.

But if the infinite loop is merely suggested and requires some work of extrapolation from the text, a related concept might be better suited to addressing passages which tend toward infinity.

Take, for example, the following scene in which Robby and Tobias are once again playing together:

You and Tobias are on the porch steps sorting gourds by size and color and shape, choosing favorites, assigning names. Some of them are submarines and some of them tanks, and some of them are bombs. I suppose I should be expecting another visit from T.'s father shortly.

All children play at war now. All of them make those sounds of airplanes and bombs and crashing and exploding. We did the same things, playing at cannon fire and bayonet charges.

There is certainly nothing in that fact to reassure.

Cataract that this world is, it is remarkable to consider what does abide in it. (Robinson,

Gilead 192–193)

The loop here is a fairly simple historical one: Robby plays at war in the same way that Ames once did. Playing at war provides preparation for and an expectation of violence, that violence eventually comes to fruition, and, finally, war shows itself in the play of a younger generation. But once again: the loop is not the *explicit* mechanism by which the passage proceeds. Instead, what is apparent in Ames' fascinated reflection is the shifting scale of his attention. There is the suggestion of infinity, though it emanates outward from the particular. In the gourds, Ames sees what the children see: the toy tanks and submarines and bombs. In those imagined toys he sees the real objects and instruments of war, and beyond that he sees the “cataract that this world is”²⁸—the great and baffling chaos which nonetheless contains something so beautiful as children at play. What is

²⁸ The word “cataract” here has a biblical weight to it. See, for instance, Psalms 42.7 (*KJV Bible*): “Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.” “Waterspouts” is sometimes translated as “waterfalls,” though in the Septuagint the word appears as “cataracts,” and its implication is certainly of divinity.

“remarkable to consider” is that as Ames moves “outward,” he is aware of each new layer being contained in the preceding one, such that “inward” and “outward” become one and the same thing.

The concept at work here is known as “self-similarity,” and it is, I claim, something that comes up again and again at crucial moments in *Gilead*. It is not quite the same thing as a strange loop—for one thing, its “kind” of infinity does not close in on itself—but it has important affinities with what I have been discussing so far. Self-similarity offers a vastly different way of looking at what I have said is the novel’s ontological message: that the sacred and the crudely material are not different things.

An excellent description of what self-similarity is comes from an unlikely place. In their fascinating book *Ecological Design*—a work which is as much about scale-linking and complexity as it is about ecology and architecture—Sim Van der Ryn and Stuart Cowan touch on the bizarre geometrical effect one encounters when trying to map a coastline. The length of the coast changes, they note, as the cartographer views more and more detailed maps of the same area: “An apparently straight stretch of coastline on a coarse map would resolve itself into a series of coves, bays, headlands, and peninsulas on a finer map” (Van der Ryn and Cowan 35). Not only that, but the magnified view resembles closely the view of the same coastline at a larger scale. The two maps are geometrically similar. Van der Ryn and Cowan describe this as a kind of symmetry in which “[t]he whole form is built up from subforms that echo the whole” (38). “This symmetry,” they write, “has appropriately been dubbed *self-similarity*, and forms possessing it are termed *fractals*. Self-similarity is a direct consequence of identical processes shaping form across many scales” (38). In the coastline example, it is possible to imagine an endless array of subforms such that one never arrives at a satisfactory account of the coast’s length. Must it not also be possible, then, to move in the other direction? Expanding the scale rather than sharpening it and making the map itself into a subform?

This expansion of scale is just what the reader encounters in *Gilead*. When Ames rests his attention on some simple thing, that thing so often begins opening outward to reveal an unexpected grandness. These moments of attentional devotion read as metaphors, and indeed they are; but they are *more* than that. Matthew Scherer writes convincingly of Ames' meditations in terms of their successes and failures. "Ames's successful expressions," he says, "most often come when his thoughts are connected, metaphorically, to sensory experience. His writing most often fails when it is absent of those connections..." (Scherer 182). Ames' meditation on "the shimmer on a child's hair, in the sunlight" (Robinson, *Gilead* 52) constitutes one such successful expression, because, Scherer says, it gets at doctrine by way of sensory metaphor. Here is the passage:

There is a shimmer on a child's hair, in the sunlight. There are rainbow colors in it, tiny, soft beams of just the same colors you can see in the dew sometimes. They're in the petals of flowers, and they're on a child's skin. Your hair is straight and dark, and your skin is very fair. I suppose you're not prettier than most children. You're just a nice-looking boy, a bit slight, well scrubbed and well mannered. All that is fine, but it's your existence I love you for, mainly. Existence seems to me now the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined. I'm about to put on imperishability. In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye. (Robinson, *Gilead* 52–53)

Scherer is right to note its success—but consider *how* it is successful. Each complete image unfolds and becomes the subform that echoes the larger whole. At bottom, there are the "tiny, soft beams" of colour, which show themselves on the child's hair, in flower petals, and on the child's skin. Then the scale of the meditation shifts, and suddenly we are looking at Robby, a child whose dark hair would seem to cancel the very notion of a rainbow shimmer were it not for the truer connection at work: the reader sees both things through the astonished eyes of a loving father. What is beautiful in "the dew sometimes" becomes what is beautiful about Ames' son, and Robby comes to contain the

beauty of the former. Finally, the scale shifts again, and it is with this final shift that the passage arrives at its doctrinal content. What Ames loves about Robby, the reader learns, is his very existence, and so the father's awe is at last directed to existence—being—itself. Each new whole is made a part that echoes what is “really” the whole.

Although this self-similarity “opens out” infinitely, it is not so far removed from the strange loop, and thus not so far removed from the novel's sacramental form. In the self-similar, the tiny particular (in the previous example, the play of light and colour on a child's hair) is contained as a part in the larger whole. The shimmer, for Ames, evokes Robby's being, and it is contained in the image of that being as a similar instant of the beautiful. From here it can only move “outward” or “upward” into existence in a larger sense. What astonishes Ames about the shimmer of light is what astonishes him about being, though the image of the latter is much enlarged. It is this continual increase, this expansion of scale, which ensures the difference between the forms of the self-similar and the strange loop. The loop is of course closed, while the pattern of the self-similar extends infinitely in one direction. But in the present example there is a meaningful sense in which all of being really *is* contained in the shimmer of light: Ames attends to it carefully enough to begin making larger and larger connections, and so the “rainbow colors” in “a child's hair” become not just a part of existence but the generative moment for all of existence. This is the suggestion of a closed loop, even where, strictly speaking, there is no loop at all.

What all of this means for a reading of *Gilead* is that the moments of wonder or fascination which are communicated by way of formal self-similarity emphasize the novel's sacramental form. These moments—some preliminary examples of which I have provided above—point to the sacred which is also the profane and ask the reader to consider why she has imagined there to be a dividing line between the two things. Robinson, I think, does not intend to imply the total isomorphism of material and doctrinal, instead leaving room for an “after,” that placeless place where part of Ames'

narrative voice dwells or will dwell. But Ames himself offers a cryptic remark on this very topic: “I don’t imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try” (57). It is a construction, it is worth noting, which is yet another loop: Ames’ piety is born of the world, and thus any projection of a world to come must be framed in this-worldly terms. The mystery is as much material as it is the province of some “beyond.” And this is why, when a young Ames, waiting on his father to help clear debris from a burnt-out church, receives a soot-covered biscuit, he views it as a sacramental act. “Grief itself,” he says “has often returned me to that morning, when I took communion from my father’s hand. I remember it as communion, and I believe that’s what it was” (96).

II

Unlike *Gilead*, whose doubled time is always a kind of redemption of the material present, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* offers no alternative to the momentary, the fleeting. Indeed, the large part of what is so beautiful about *Gilead*—Ames’ astonishment at a world with which he has but a limited time remaining—is terrifyingly inverted in McCarthy’s novel. In the latter, a father and son (referred to only as “the man” and “the boy” throughout) wander the landscape of a blighted and post-apocalyptic America, seeking food and shelter where possible, and ultimately heading for the sea. The man is sick, dying, and afraid for the safety of his son. At first, the reader is given little more than this to go on. The watchword is “survival” and the motives themselves are unclear. Slowly, however, the contours of the world begin to emerge, and we are granted a glimpse of what has happened to cause such a state of affairs: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (McCarthy, *TR* 52). The suggestion is of nuclear war, or perhaps a

meteor strike, though the name of the cause turns out to be of little importance when measured against the hard reality of its effect, which is both a significant change in global climate and the large-scale obliteration of plant and animal life. What comes to matter is, as never before, the time of *right now*, and the reader experiences that time, along with each new calamity and wonder, as the boy does. The latter cannot understand a time before because any time before seems to have no bearing on what comes after. And just as in *Gilead* our readerly position is coextensive with that of a grown-up Robby who has found his father's letters, our position in *The Road* is coextensive with that of the boy: the past and future vanish before us, and each act and thing in the present, never mind how repugnant, is a surprise and a mystery.

The comparison is by no means a perfect one. *Gilead* is a series of composed letters that really *are* meant for Robby Ames, and the reader encounters those letters as Robby would: set apart from the moment of their composition but also (it goes without saying) set apart from their connection to transcendence. The only bridge is the narration itself and what I have called its sacramental form. Narrative parameters in *The Road*, on the other hand, are more obscure, and frequently outright baffling. Most of the story is related by a narrator whose identity remains concealed and whose very existence begins to seem less plausible as the world takes shape. After all, who would be around to tell such a tale? And why would they tell it? And to whom would they speak? These questions are only complicated by the intrusion of different narrative modes and tenses, and by the author's well-known proclivity for omitting quotation marks in dialogue. Lee Clark Mitchell, who devotes considerable attention to the issue in his book *Mere Reading*, suggests that while the identity of McCarthy's narrator is likely to remain a mystery, there is nevertheless something important that comes from the bare fact of the story. "Whatever the enigma behind its telling," he says, "the novel brings narrator and man (and occasionally a directed reader) together in their intersecting efforts, each wanting to make sense of ways in which experience can still be

justified, narrated, negotiated in recognizably humane terms, even when all else seems lost” (Mitchell 190). These efforts are what keep *The Road* from lapsing into a tone of utter despair, but they are also, we must know, doomed; for to live in the justification, narration, and negotiation of experience is now to live in a vanishing time. Experience, along with the rest of the world, is in the process of grinding to a halt.

This much is apparent in the singular and continually renewing aim of the man and the boy: to survive the day, to survive the night. They can build up small stores of food when they come across them, they can plan to avoid exposed areas of land, but the business of survival is an immediate affair. It repudiates both past and future. When the man wakes from a dream about his “pale bride” coming to him “out of a green and leafy canopy,” the reader is set straight regarding its meaning: “He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death” (McCarthy, *TR* 18). And in one of the book’s rare moments of more substantial memory, the man recalls the “perfect day of his childhood,” what he calls “the day to shape the days upon” (13). Far from providing some quick and peaceful escape from the ghastly present, the memory, which is of a quiet day-trip to retrieve firewood with his uncle, reveals only the complete inadequacy of the man’s experience. The type of “survival” that he remembers can bring nothing to bear on what that word must mean in the present. Even the style of the book’s narrative begins to feel as though it is slowing down, begrudgingly conforming to, or at least battling with, the strictures of a radically new lifeworld. Consider tenseless fragments like “[i]n the livingroom the bones of a small animal dismembered and placed in a pile” (26), or “[d]ried blood dark in the leaves” (70). These and countless other similar examples are just observations of material fact, suggesting nothing about past or future because there is nothing to suggest.

But here is the challenge of the text, and indeed the challenge for any human being who would inhabit the kind of world on offer in *The Road*. How to make sense of the present without

appealing to a memory that no longer applies or to a future that can mean only the gradual erasure of life from earth? A version of this problem appears as a “query” in one of the novel’s more obscure passages. “On this road there are no godspoke men,” says, the reader presumes, the man. “They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: how does the never to be differ from what never was?” (McCarthy, *TR* 32). The formulation of this query, which is an inversion of a statement from the Book of Ecclesiastes,²⁹ baffles. Because its temporal reference point is unclear (i.e., the phrase “never to be” blurs the future and the present), and because it deals in abstract negation, the question becomes a sort of koan, emptying itself of content. Interestingly, this effect is the same as that of the likely answer to the question—which is: “it does not.” There is no difference. The “never to be” and “what never was” are the same, and so the reader—the queried—is left stranded in the present, whether by confusion at the structure of what is asked or by the slow realization that *The Road* truly offers no past and no future.

Thus, where *Gilead* appears to strand its reader in time by mooring the letter-reading Robby in some deferred future, *The Road* does its isolating work by bringing the reader “too close” to the story and making a nothing of everything which is not happening right now. The problem, though, is that despite this isolation in time, and despite the unavoidable sense of dread which accompanies it—i.e., never knowing what father and son might happen upon, because this is a world almost literally unprecedented—the novel frequently suggests that there is something more going on than the mere act of survival.

On the one hand, this much is obvious. The story, as McCarthy has said, is based on his own relationship with his son, its setting derived from the author’s sudden vision, from the window of a hotel where both he and his son were staying, of the El Paso skyline at night “in 50 or 100 years,”

²⁹ The relevant verse is Ecclesiastes 1.9: “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun” (*KJV Bible*).

with “fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste” (Winfrey). Indeed, an image not unlike this one appears in the novel, though it is considerably intensified: “Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road” (McCarthy, *TR* 32–33). In the face of this nightmare is the love of a father for his son, the simple premise by which McCarthy’s difficult book proceeds. It is a premise that reaches the reader by way of moments which are sometimes tender (the man slyly fills his own mug with hot water so that the boy might have the remaining cocoa [34]) and sometimes horrifying (the man wrestles with the idea that he will have to kill the boy so as to spare him a more terrible fate [114]).

Not obvious, however, is how or why such a delicate and seemingly pointless love exists at all, especially if we grant that the time of this broken world is set up to erase both memory and hope. How, for instance, is the reader to reconcile the bleak, overwhelming, and slowly degrading material present with the undeniable sense of love or light that infiltrates it? If there is nothing apart from the present, and the present is abhorrent, then where does the will to continue come from? For the man, it seems to come from the simple fact of the boy and the boy’s very being, something which really does appear to exceed the present. This much is made explicit at the beginning of the novel when we learn the child’s “position” in relation to his father: “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). A great deal is happening here. First, the suggestion that the man is enamored of what the boy *is* should recall John Ames’ statement about his own son: “...it’s your existence I love you for, mainly.” But in *The Road* the boy is not a part of the world his father laments leaving behind—he is, rather, the whole of it. Where Ames goes on to marvel at all of existence the man stops short, seeing either everything or nothing at all. Second, the connotations of the word “warrant” are tremendously interesting in this context. The implication is that the child is a “surety” or “guarantee” or “justification” for the journey itself. By some authority he has been granted to the man as a kind of protection, something which should

sound at least a little odd when we consider that the story is built on exactly the opposite assumption. And third, there is the hint that this protection—whatever manner of protection it is—is divine. Either the boy is “the word of God,” or he and everything else are nothing at all.

By now this biblical allusion will be familiar as a reference to Christ, but more specifically it refers to a passage in the Book of John: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth” (*KJV Bible*, John 1.14). In McCarthy’s phrase, “word” is not capitalized, and so the status of the boy remains somewhat ambiguous, either divine message or divinity itself.

The statement “If he is not the word of God God never spoke”—which, it should be noted is one of the rare instances of McCarthy attributing dialogue where it seems unnecessary for him to do so (this is said aloud, and not merely thought, by the man)—offers a way out of the narrative bind which *The Road* creates. That is, the reader is anchored to the present with no sense of how or why things might move forward, and with little knowledge of what has come before or what, if anything, might come after. She shares this perceptual orientation with the boy, who is required to be at home in this “new” (and now only) time and also to trust in the wisdom of the man. This so-called wisdom, though, which is the principle guiding and reinforcing the journey, turns out to be little more than a fragile insistence upon the connection between the boy and the divine. So, to put it simply: the child carries on because of a faith in his father, and the man carries on because of a faith in his son. There is a mutual reinforcement at work here and it is sustained by the possibility of transcendence which inheres within the boy. What this means for the narrative is that, once again—that is, just as with *Gilead*—there is a crucial doubling at work. In reading the story from the figurative perspective of the boy, a rare being who is completely *of* the post-apocalyptic world and so bizarrely suited to its temporal structure, one is lodged within the always-now of an inescapably material landscape where the only and proper activity is observation. Things simply *are*, which is

something that we come to note in the novel's bits of exhausted narrative description: "Tea in a rusted metal caddy. A plastic container of some sort of meal that he did not recognize. A half empty can of coffee" (McCarthy, *TR* 230). In reading from this perspective, though, one also inhabits the implied transcendence of "the word of God," imbuing encounters, events, and objects with a significance beyond that of "mere being." Or, more accurately: one illuminates the simple fact of this tired and ragged existence with a meaning which reaches beyond the novel's dreadful present.

Excepting some clear and important differences in personage, then—and a ludicrously obvious difference in tone—*The Road's* ontological structure is strangely similar to *Gilead's*. That is, what I have called the "sacramental form" of the narrative in the latter shows up again in *The Road* in the figure of the boy. The child is, according to the man, the "word of God" made flesh: the visible word—a bold pronouncement, certainly, but one whose utterance (and remember, McCarthy takes special care to note that this is *spoken*) is enough to grant a place for the sacred, even where it is hedged with a conditional. The boy is the "word of God," *or*, "God never spoke."

This might be a good time to pause in order to ask a looming question, one which is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid asking as I engage with explicitly biblical concerns. Namely: is it really possible to consider *The Road* as a religious book? And, as an extension of that question: will the novel permit the same sort of reading as *Gilead*? The question, I think, is a valid one. As I have suggested in the introduction to this project, I am inclined to the view that McCarthy is not a "religious writer" in any easy sense of the phrase—and if *The Road*, in particular, contains biblical allusions then it contains much else besides. But because I am proceeding with a claim about sacrament in the narrative, it will be worth deciding now, briefly, whether such a claim might be altogether invalid. Will it simply bounce off the hard shell of a book so mired in darkness as to repudiate entirely a concept like "sacramental form"? Or is there some precedent for this interpretation?

Gilead, it will be noted, is a work of what might popularly (and in some sense accurately) be called “religious fiction.” One review of the book calls it “religious, somewhat essayistic and fiercely calm” (Wood), taking care to frame Robinson’s theological interests and leanings before sketching an outline of the story. But it is almost as difficult to imagine a review of *Gilead* proceeding along other lines as it is to imagine a review of *The Road* dwelling on McCarthy’s relationship with Catholicism. This is because McCarthy’s novel, apart from its considerable distance from the affairs of organized religion, sometimes seems to grant authority to nihilistic voices. The tattered old traveller “Ely” not only denies the existence of the divine, but ventures that “[t]here is no God and we are his prophets” (McCarthy, *TR* 170). The narrator, addressing the reader directly, asks if we think our “fathers are watching” or if they weigh us “in their ledgerbook.” “There is no book,” the narrator assures us, “and your fathers are dead in the ground” (196)—a plain and final image. What, though, of the fact that “Ely” is himself a biblical figure who appears in the Books of Samuel?³⁰ Or that to even invoke the image of the “ledgerbook” is to enter into the terms of a conversation about divine judgment? Any claims that might be made about the presence of nihilism in *The Road*, then, must be counterpoised not only with a possibility of hope, which is admittedly a fraught subject, but with a liberal use of religious imagery. This is something which Vereen Bell, the critic most often (though not-quite-accurately) associated with a nihilistic reading of McCarthy’s work, never really dwells on. McCarthy’s “metaphysic” is, says Bell, “none, in effect; no first principles, no foundational truth; Heraclitus without logos” (“The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy” 32). Interestingly, though, this remark follows a quote from *Suttree* in which the title character, speaking with a priest, says that God “is not a thing,” and that “[n]othing ever stops moving” (qtd. in Bell 32),

³⁰ There he is “Eli” rather than “Ely,” though the relation is surely no coincidence. The Eli of the Bible is a figure upon whom a curse is placed for complacency in the face of the transgressions of his sons. In *The Road*, Ely wanders alone in the afterlife of just such complacency—i.e., that same sort of turning aside which has undoubtedly made possible the bleak world of the novel. “Suppose,” says Ely, “you were the last one left? Suppose you did that to yourself?” (McCarthy, *TR* 169).

an enigmatic moment which ends up feeling quite like Ely's insistence that "there is no God and we are his prophets." It vastly complicates a theological discussion, but it still insists on employing the terms of one.

A number of scholars have taken to this idea, developing it to different ends. Petra Mundik, for example, sees in McCarthy's work and in its sometimes-theological terms evidence of Gnosticism, noting that the author "consciously draws inspiration from the symbols, allegories, and belief systems of this ancient religion" (5). *The Road*, for Mundik, is the "culmination" of a "world view" that forms in McCarthy's Western novels: a metaphysics that lifts elements not only from Gnosticism, but from Christian mysticism and Buddhism as well (5). Manuel Broncano goes so far as to propose that McCarthy has "adopted the language and rhetoric of the Bible to compose an 'apocryphal' narrative of the American Southwest" (2), where the Western novels work in concert to form their own "peculiar Pentateuch." Broncano sees *The Road* in this formulation as a kind of capstone, not in direct correspondence to any specific biblical text (he figures *Blood Meridian*, for instance, as the Book of Genesis); but rather as "McCarthy's apocryphal version of the Second Coming, in which Jesus ... returns to the world as a child, to shed celestial light in the darkness that has shrouded the earth" (127). Finally, Matthew Potts, who admits to a suspicion of religious readings of McCarthy—readings which might force a complex body of work into some fixed metaphysical cage—aims still to address the persistence of religious imagery in the author's writing, paying special attention to images of sacrament. "[S]acramental imagery in McCarthy's work," Potts claims, "serves precisely to undermine structured systems of meaning, and thus complicates what we might too uncritically recognize as 'religious'" (*CMATSOTS* 5). The importance of the sacramental image, which, says Potts, is invoked in *The Road* "more directly and consistently than any other of McCarthy's novels" (186), is that it jams the very question of religion as an easy or pat description, while unquestionably remaining a part of it.

It would seem, then, that there *is* a precedent for looking seriously at the religious elements on offer in *The Road*, but also, and importantly, that each instance of such serious consideration arrives at the kind of reading which does not then reduce the book by claiming it as an exemplary “religious” text. Hopefully this brief digression has been clarifying, making it possible now to consider the present comparison of McCarthy’s novel with *Gilead* on slightly more equal terms.

Although there are numerous images of sacrament in *The Road*—some brief and seemingly incidental; others, as Potts has pointed out, more obvious and perhaps more significant—it is the appearance of a sacramental form in the book’s narrative that I am once more curious to examine. To this end, I do have some explaining to do. What I have called the “sacramental form” of *Gilead*, while not exactly obvious, does correspond to a clear structure: John Ames is a doubled voice, and it is his voice that both frames and inhabits the text. This is a specific and unusual case. In *The Road* the narrative has nothing of this stability, giving the reader no real sense of who is speaking, let alone any communicable idea of where they might be speaking from. Yet there *is* a similar sense of doubling—of a world that is harshly and merely material but that also tends toward some principle of transcendence. The latter might be as overt or shocking as the man’s fierce insistence that his job is to take care of his son and that he “was appointed to do that by God” (McCarthy, *TR* 77), or it might be as abstract as the mantra of the two travellers, that continued insistence that they are “carrying the fire.” Where this sense of doubling inheres, though, is not in the voice of the narrator but in the being of the boy: the “warrant” whose existence accounts for every next step taken and the figure whose appearance is so unlikely in such a place that the traveller Ely is shaken by it (“I didnt know what he was,” he says. “I never thought to see a child again” [172]). The fact of the boy’s life—that he has not been cannibalized or murdered—points to something curiously in excess of the world in which he exists, some surfeit of humanity that is out of alignment with the dreadful economics of his environment. The reader sees this, and in it she, like the man, sees the

unimaginably precious and enormously powerful “word of God.” But the reader also sees the boy’s fragility: sees him seized by a stranger at the roadside and held “with a knife at his throat” (66), sees him undressing to swim in the sea and revealing his “[k]nobby spinebones” and “razorous shoulder blades” (218), and so on. The boy is starving and dirty and totally vulnerable—every bit as much an inhabitant of the cold world as his father, Ely, and even the cannibal who takes him at knifepoint. What is important, though, is that his vulnerability does not exclude his sanctity, and that the terms are even, and perhaps especially in *The Road*, mutually reinforcing.

The boy is more besides: he is an *observer*. Early on in the novel the man and the boy come across a gas station where the reader suspects that they might find some few remaining supplies. Once inside, however, the man seems occupied by other matters: “He crossed to the desk and stood there. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father’s house in that long ago. The boy watched him. What are you doing? he said” (7). Moments after they leave, the man realizes he has been careless, that in his distraction he has neglected to look thoroughly and seriously for materials, and they return for a second look. There are two takeaways here. The first is the more obvious lesson: that the past no longer has any bearing on the present and that dwelling on the past might well be deadly. In this respect, the reader learns that the man is unsuited to the conditions of his new (his present) world, because he cannot help holding on to the old one. The second takeaway is more overt, but it is perhaps easier to overlook: the boy is simply *watching* this, and he watches it just as the reader does. One can imagine, for instance, that his question here (“what are you doing?”) is both a genuine curiosity—an unfamiliarity with the phone as an object—and a kind of disbelief or indictment. In the latter case, the boy becomes the reader, unable to fathom such timewasting in a situation of clear peril. If this seems incidental, consider that it is not the only instance of the boy’s

“mere” watching.³¹ A little later, when the man is fixing the “wonky” wheel of their cart, the boy looks on: “[h]e bolted it all back together and stood the cart upright and wheeled it around the floor. It ran fairly true. The boy sat watching everything” (17). Here “everything” is the whole process of repair, each step required in the effort to fix a cart, but it is also considerably more than that. It is as if the boy sees what the man cannot.

This configuration of the boy’s qualities and roles suggests a link to John Ames in *Gilead*. The boy is a vulnerable material being inhabiting a world whose “merely” material quality is repeatedly emphasized; he is a figure of transcendence whose transcendence is not at odds with his corporeality; and lastly, he watches and experiences a surrounding environment with, if not exactly knowing, then certainly awe. The connection has its failings, of course, and it would be a poor and forced comparison of two such different texts that attempted to unite them in simple sameness. Consider, for instance, that narration—narrative voice, that is—falls outside of this neat summary of likenesses. In *Gilead*, Ames is quite clearly the storyteller, a voice of experience enchanted by life and intent on transmitting its wisdom. And this wisdom is directed to one specific reader: a mature Robby Ames, the intended recipient of his father’s letters. Narrative voice in *The Road*, in contrast, is a thing uncertain and even slightly malevolent. A reasonable person might assign it to the man, admit a sort of quirky version of free indirect discourse, and leave the book’s final paragraph, which is presumably narrated after the man’s death, open to “mystery” (“mystery” being the text’s final word). Christopher White does something like this, not exactly pinning the voice on the man but arguing that the novel’s narrative style serves as a conduit for empathetic engagement with him. “McCarthy’s uncharacteristic use in this novel,” says White,

³¹ Indeed, there are many more examples of the boy “watching” or keeping watch in *The Road*. In the man’s childhood home, when he is lost in thought: “The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see” (26). When the man tries to surreptitiously give all the remaining cocoa mix to his son, the boy actually says, “I have to watch you all the time” (34). There is perhaps a separate study—beyond the scope of the current chapter—in the role of “watching” in the novel.

of a sustained, close third-person narration that mingles at times with snatches of direct first-person narration is responsible for generating much of the novel's affective power. One effect of this technique is that it dramatically enhances the experiential dimension of the narrative—the sense of *what it would feel like* to have the experiences that the man (and, to a lesser extent, the boy) undergoes in the course of the novel. (“Embodied Reading” 533)

White's case for narrative empathy is a compelling one, but I would argue that it misplaces the locus of *The Road's* “experiential dimension”: that it is not the man at all, but rather the boy, who acts as the reader's perceptual and phenomenological stand-in. Regardless of who speaks to tell this story, the immediate *experience* of it is the boy's, both within the text as a fragile being encountering everything for the first time and beyond the text as a figurative reader—as a watcher who makes possible the movement of the tale in the first place.

Intimations of this latter role—the boy as figurative reader or watcher—are present from the very beginning. In the novel's first sentence, for example, the boy is set apart from his father. He sleeps only a short distance away, but the impenetrable darkness makes his existence an open question. So the man must verify the boy's presence by reaching out through the darkness to close the gap which has opened between them: “When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him” (McCarthy, *TR* 3). His verification involves ensuring that the boy still meets the only required terms for existence in the novel's world: those of material presence. He reaches out to feel for the rise and fall of the boy's chest, for his “precious breath” (a phrase which already hints at divinity and has its allusion confirmed when, at the close of the book, the boy's new guardian tells him that “the breath of God” is “his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” [286]). Satisfied, the man rises at first light to survey the landscape and returns to find his son still asleep. When the boy stirs, the man attempts to

provide the same comfort which he himself had so needed in the night, and it turns out to be unnecessary:

The boy turned in the blankets. Then he opened his eyes. Hi, papa, he said.

I'm right here.

I know. (5)

This seemingly straightforward acknowledgement of presence is a counterpoint to the panicked searching of the prior scene. Here, in the book's first exchange between father and son, is the first instance of the boy "watching everything" and seeing as the reader sees.

But there is even more to these early moments of separation. What is subtle and crucial about *The Road's* first sentence is that the man's action is not a single particular instance; it is, instead, a habitual and ritualistic gesture. The contraction "he'd" implies that the reaching happens regularly, and it is not until the man feels the boy's moving chest that the story gets its locomotive force. That is, once the reader learns that the child is "warrant" and "word of God," it becomes clear that no journey can proceed without him. The gesture of touching, as well, of feeling for breath, takes on a eucharistic quality. The boy is the "word of God" made flesh, and it is the man's physical encounter with that body which renews his faith and resolve. As if to provide an inverted image, McCarthy later reveals what the opposite of this physical encounter—and thus, the absence of any story—might look like:

The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great

marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. (15)

In the absence of a sacramental moment in which the man encounters the material being of the child, there is only nauseating emptiness—a darkness whose ground is not the warm and “precious breath” of human divinity but the coldness of some indiscernible vastness of rock. For a frightening instant the man is no longer “carrying the fire,” instead briefly becoming nothing more than his own “vestibular calculations,” an eerie echo of a phrase used later in the book to describe the cannibal who will try to take his son (“The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes” [75]). This emptiness, though, can only be hypothetical, because there *is* a reader lurking in the background to watch these machinic calculations, and to decide whether or not the meaning of “no fall but preceded by a declination” is as much about morality as it is about momentum and astronomy. What this passage imagines is not a book with the lights turned off or a story without motion. Really, it can only hint at these things. Instead, it offers a look at what *this* story would be without its “reader” set down inside it. It shows that removing the boy, removing his physical being from the world, is as good as emptying out *The Road* entirely.

Here, then, by a kind of negation, is the site of “sacramental form” in *The Road*: in the doubled figure of the boy, whose position entails a simultaneity of material presence and divine transcendence, and who, as the being who fulfills each of these roles at once, also “watches everything” from the same vantage point as the reader. Recall that this is more or less John Ames’ position in *Gilead*, but that Ames both experiences and *records* the events in his letters. His astonished gaze is the gaze of the narrator, not the reader. In *The Road*, the record of events points the way to the story’s locus of experience and to the kind of immediate seeing that its world requires, almost as though the act of narration is subordinated to the act of reading, which here is synonymous with perceiving or experiencing.

But how far should we be willing to extend such a claim? That is, to what extent is it possible to defend sacramental form in *The Road* without simply anointing the novel and glossing over—or ignoring—some of its more horrifying scenes? At one point, for example, the man and boy come upon an old plantation house, approaching it despite its proximity to the road and its implied association with two “bad guys” recently and narrowly avoided. It seems that the father and son have little choice: they are starving, exhausted, and in dire need of supplies. After quickly exploring the house’s main floor, the man spies a padlocked hatch in the pantry, and what follows when the lock is broken is nothing short of the most terrifying sequence in the novel—a challenge to any uncritically or optimistically sacramental reading of the text:

He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous.

Jesus, he whispered.

Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us.

Christ, he said. Oh Christ. (110)

This moment represents not the expected fright which is the culmination of a suspenseful search, but a horror so far in excess of that as to be unimaginable: here, finally, is the very real image of cannibalism with its nightmarish logistics on full display. Compounding the nightmare is the briefest emergence of a hope which is quickly snatched away—the man, terrified and recognizing the danger of the situation, recoils from the captives and flees with his son back up the stairs, slamming the hatch behind them. Is it, then, even possible to speak of the “sacred” in all of this? Or of

“salvation”? Marcel Decoste, who notes that God persists in *The Road* as a kind of challenge, rightly points out that the man’s blasphemies (“Jesus” and “Christ”) constitute engagement with the challenge in the form of incredulous outrage. “[S]uch moments of rage and terror,” Decoste says, “make God present as a vital concern for protagonist and novel both” (70). There is, as well, a clear sacramental dimension to the scene: not only is its ultimate subject the eating of human flesh, but when the man first descends the stairs into the cellar he flicks a lighter and “[swings] the flame out over the darkness like an offering” (McCarthy, *TR* 110).

Acknowledging the religious components of this passage, of course, should not limit its horrific power, nor should it safeguard against the devastating realization that people are keeping other people for consumption. Indeed, a reading of the scene that emphasizes its sacramental *form* only enlarges the shock experienced by the reader, because the event becomes an ontological as well as a moral one. That is, the boy, who is at once corporeal and divine, who shares his position with the reader, and who, by virtue of watching the world gives it a kind of motion, must see everything before him in its twofold being—as base material *and* as image of divinity. (And, to reiterate: these terms indicate the same thing.) Thus, what the boy sees is more than the capture and confinement of human beings by other human beings; it is more than the grim, living example of cannibalism or its collective, anguished, and ultimately unanswerable cry for help; and it is more than his father’s (and by extension, his own) refusal to aid these people for fear of some vicious and violent reprisal, whether from the returning captors or from the frantic prisoners themselves. These are the scene’s moral wounds. What the boy, and hence the reader, must also perceive is the degradation and destruction of sanctity, of being, that is on top of all else a kind of infinite *ontological* wound. This much is in keeping with the image of sacrament on display, where, in the form of a mutilated man on a mattress, the body of Christ awaits not the moment of ultimate sacrifice but of murder.

To emphasize sacramental form in *The Road* is to admit not only that the captives in the plantation house basement are sacred beings, but that so, too, are their captors. This is a difficult assertion, to be sure, but one which accounts for the immensity of the episode's horror: that the infinite possibility of one being has issued in the destruction of the infinite possibility of another—a double tragedy, and one that only expands upon contemplation. In this respect, the encounter in the cellar is an inverted version of John Ames' encounter with the river baptism in *Gilead*. Recall that beyond the context of the sacramental act, water, for Ames, becomes something marvellous and sacred in its own right, because the river water adjacent to the baptism is still a part of the same material reality which comes to contain the presence of God. The boy in *The Road* witnesses something similar, though the sacrament is perverted beyond reckoning. Instead of conferring the blessing of communion through sacrifice, the legless man is consumed against his will and eventually—in all likelihood—murdered. There is an important distinction to be made here. Regina Schwartz, who writes of the difference between sacrifice and murder in this same context (i.e., the eucharist), notes that the former “is substitutive and metonymic: the individual dies for the community, on behalf of the community,” but that “[i]n murder, the emphasis shifts away from the community to the individual whose death does not satisfy collective justice, but whose murder threatens collective peace” (*SPATDOS* 46). Both agency and dignity vanish outright in murder, and because it is impossible to speak of murdering a divine being—Christ, for example, must have full knowledge of, and hence agency in, his own crucifixion—what happens in the plantation house must be nothing less than the destruction of the sacred in an act that wounds infinitely. When the boy encounters the body of the half-consumed man what he sees and what we see is a dark and terrible reflection of the eucharist, stripped of its holiness: the man has been consumed not to establish community but in the interest of a crazed individual subsistence. His body is not “given,” as is Christ's at the Last Supper, but taken—not as sacrifice, but in an act of murder. And as with

Ames' vision of the shimmering water which marvellously contains the same material reality as God in the sacrament of baptism, the boy's vision here expands from the empty eucharist to the other captives in the room and to the whole world outside the house, where all has been drained of its sanctity.³²

This ontological disruption, though, which is really unlike anything that occurs in *Gilead*, is not one that undoes the story. As if to emphasize the fact, McCarthy offers what is basically a renewal by repetition of the book's first few lines once the man and the boy have escaped from the plantation house: "He woke in the dark of the woods in the leaves shivering violently. He sat up and felt about for the boy. He held his hand to the thin ribs. Warmth and movement. Heartbeat" (*TR* 116). The word "warmth" suggests that the pair is still "carrying the fire," even if it is for now diminished by the atrocity just witnessed (that the man drops the lighter in the cellar is symbolically interesting in this regard). What has happened is that the boy, who, again, and like John Ames, gives structure to the world by his perception of it, has offered his considered attention to something extraordinary and horrible. And that thing has momentarily become everything, not damaging the peculiar ontological form of the narrative but briefly threatening its stability. This is the constant tension in *The Road*, where at any instant one might come across such a horror.

When the boy's attention falls on something wondrous, though, as it frequently does, the effect is the opposite. The idea that the material and the sacred are one and the same is secured and celebrated. In another eucharistic image much earlier in the book, this is precisely what happens. The man and the boy are crossing a great expanse of ash-covered country, with the cold moving in: "The road beyond ran along the crest of a ridge where the barren woodland fell away on every side.

³² This much is clear when, upon emerging from the cellar, the boy spies the captors—the "bad guys"—outside the window: "... the boy was pointing out the window and when he looked he went cold all over. Coming across the field toward the house were four bearded men and two women" (McCarthy, *TR* 111). The evidence of murder, the fact of it, is no longer confined to the horrible dungeon. Now it is out in the field, in the greater world.

It's snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom" (16). This time the sacramental image is explicit, and what is wonderful about it is also what is terrible: its heartbreaking uniqueness and inevitable "expiry." In this sense, the ashen snowflake points back to the boy, that fragile form whose material being cuts such an unlikely figure against his hard surroundings. As the reader knows, it is only a matter of time before death closes in. The "last host of christendom," then, is a shockingly appropriate vehicle—for what is the boy but the "word of God" where the Word of God seems to have no place at all? Here, simultaneously, is fragile humanity and fragile divinity. There is an awful beauty to this little passage, but it would be misguided to read in it the idea that the "host," and hence the possibility for redemption, has vanished from the world. The point is not that the snowflake-host has winked out of existence and that so, too, must silly notions of salvation or justice; it is that it *is* here, and it *is* expiring right now. The miracle and the mystery is that it has happened at all.

Consider, too, the form that the image takes and the way in which the reader encounters this scene. Certainly, its content-level connection to the moment in *Gilead* when Ames watches the slow path of bubbles rising to burst in the higher atmosphere is coincidental—another bizarre but interesting inversion. What is not coincidental, though, is the formal similarity which links these two moments. In each case, the sense of scale is altered enormously. In *Gilead*, the single bubble travels from the ground, up through the treetops, and onward into the sky. In *The Road*, the snowflake drifts down from the sky and lands, melting, in the man's hand, but before it can melt completely the tiny bit of ashen matter expands again, becoming the final remaining eucharist—both material and divine. The substance in *The Road* even provides a hint about the scene's formal structure: the snowflake, famously, is a fractal or self-similar object which suggests an infinity of intricate patterns

despite its clearly finite area. To examine the “Koch snowflake,”³³ for example—a geometrical figure consisting of an equilateral triangle whose trisected sides have annexed to their middle thirds yet other equilateral triangles in a continuous process—is to have one’s perception constantly reframed at successive levels of scale. “Zooming in” on such a snowflake provides an effect just like the perceptual movement of the above scene in *The Road*, where the reader’s attention shifts from a “complete” picture of the road, the woods, and the sky, to the image of a tiny piece (the snowflake) of that whole, and, finally, to the new whole (the “last host of christendom”) which is “contained” in the smaller particular. The effect is disorienting because it seems to create a loop or an impossibility. In fact, what it does is reveal the enmeshment of the finite and the infinite, which here take the form of the material and the sacred. The boy’s enamored attention, which is also to say the reader’s enamored attention, points back to the sacramental form in the novel.

This is by no means an isolated case. In a later scene, when the man and the boy finally arrive at the sea, the boy wonders aloud what might lie beyond the smudged grey horizon and suggests that maybe another father and son could be sitting on another beach on “the other side.” That night, the man considers this in greater detail:

³³ Benoit Mandelbrot describes the Koch curve (Koch snowflake) with respect to the mapping of a coastline. I have offered a simplified description of the figure, but I include his considerably more detailed version here:

A regular triangle of side 1 has a single scale, triangles of side $1/3$ have a smaller scale, and triangles of side $(1/3)^k$ are of increasingly small scale. And by piling these triangles on top of each other . . . one is left with a shape combining all scales below 1.

In effect, we assume that a bit of coastline drawn to a scale of $1/1,000,000$ is a straight interval of length 1, to be called *initiator*. Then we assume that the detail that becomes visible on a map at $3/1,000,000$ replaces the earlier interval’s middle third by a promontory in the shape of an equilateral triangle. The resulting second approximation is a broken line formed of four intervals of equal lengths, to be called *generator*. We further assume that the new detail that appears at $9/1,000,000$ results from the replacement of each of the generator’s four intervals by the generator reduced in a ratio of one-third, forming subpromontories.

Proceeding in this fashion, we break each straight line interval, replacing the initiator by an increasing broken curve. Since we deal with them throughout this Essay, let me coin for such curves the term *teragon*. . . .

And, if the same cascade process is made to continue to infinity, our teragons converge to a limit first considered by von Koch 1904. . . . We must be specific, and shall call it the triadic Koch curve. . . .

This curve’s area vanishes. . . . On the other hand, each stage of construction increases its total length in a ratio of $4/3$, hence the limit curve is of infinite length. (34–35)

He got up in the night and walked out and stood on the beach wrapped in his blankets. Too black to see. Taste of salt on his lips. Waiting. Waiting. Then the slow boom falling downshore. The seething hiss of it washing over the beach and drawing away again. He thought there could be deathships out there yet, drifting with their lolling rags of sail. Or life in the deep. Great squid propelling themselves over the floor of the sea in the cold darkness. Shuttling past like trains, eyes the size of saucers. And perhaps beyond those shrouded swells another man did walk with another child on the dead gray sands. Slept but a sea apart on another beach among the bitter ashes of the world or stood in their rags lost to the same indifferent sun. (McCarthy, *TR* 218–19)

The alteration of scale in this passage should be obvious enough: the scene begins with a single individual, extends outward to include the “slow boom falling downshore,” and finally reaches beyond the ocean and its abyssopelagic contents to some unnamed beach where, perhaps, another man has a similar daydream. Embedded in this symmetrical image, though, is the hint that the imagined man has the same imaginative power, and that he might well be gazing across the cold sea and thinking of the same “deathships” and the same giant squid—perhaps even thinking of a man and his son. What is hinted at is that the scene does not simply scale outward indefinitely, but that, formally, it unfolds in exactly the same way as the snowflake-as-eucharist episode. That is, it begins with an image of vastness and totality (the ocean); it extends that vastness to a particular which seems to be an endpoint or a mere part of the whole (the other man); and, lastly, it offers the implication that the particular is not a stopping point at all but a site of new possibility, another container for the enormity of the beach, the ocean, the “bitter ashes of the world.” Thus, the “zooming out” becomes a “zooming in” which will expand outward again, engulfing all it

encounters. “The brain,” to quote Emily Dickinson, “is wider than the sky... is deeper than the sea.”³⁴

Lee Clark Mitchell sees in this telescoping passage something hopeful, not just in the possibility that another father and son might be “carrying the fire” on some distant beach, but in the very fact of the imagining. He sees the latter as a prerequisite for goodness, for “carrying the fire” in the first place. “What is crucial,” says Mitchell, “is a figure of imaginative, even poetic capacities, able to construct in narrative a kind of tapestry for lives under duress” (195). Imagination is here attributed to the man, but it can only be possible in relation to the boy, who watches and inhabits and sustains the entire journey—who provides the glimpse of transcendence which allows for any projection beyond the present. In a very real sense, then, the imaginative flight across the ocean is the boy’s. It is the boy who figures the story, who looks on in wonder or horror, and who nourishes what little hope there can be in such a place.

And in the imagining, in its awesome scope, is self-similarity. The fractal form of the passage echoes the ontological structure of *The Road*, where a material present is charged with incredible possibility and might, at any moment and under careful consideration, open outward to reveal its infinite sanctity—or its infinite emptiness. The plywood hatch in the floor, for instance, conceals an unthinkable desecration of human life, a partially cannibalized human larder—or it conceals a stunning bounty of supplies, goods beyond belief in a fully stocked and forgotten emergency shelter. A can of coke is a wonder for its unprecedented sweetness, for its utter newness to a boy who has never before tasted such a thing, but it is a wonder, as well, for its scarcity. It, like everything else, might be the last of its kind. For *Gilead*’s John Ames, it is this same sense of a vanishing material

³⁴ Although Michael Lynn Crews, in *Books Are Made Out of Books*, notes that McCarthy clearly alludes to a Dickinson poem in the book *Child of God*, it is not clear whether the author has her in mind here. I include the reference primarily because it offers a helpful (and almost bizarrely apropos) clarification of scale, but also because it provides another connection between McCarthy and Robinson. The latter makes a direct reference to the poem in her essay “Considering the Theological Virtues” and has declared it one of her favourites.

world that is so arresting. Each sermon and meal and radio broadcast carries the meaning and weight of all the preceding ones. *This* evening stroll is everything because it might be the final thing. And his attention to these events and objects takes in their immediate particularities as well as their expansive totalities because the novel's sacramental form requires it. In *The Road*, the boy attends to the world in the same fashion. Like Ames, he sees in each new thing the image of everything—the sacred and the material. And like Ames, his attention constitutes something that, in the bleak and ruined world of McCarthy's novel, ought to be an impossibility: a blessing.

Chapter Three—"I Have Been Here Before. So Have You": Fate and Retro-causality in the Border Trilogy and the Gilead Novels

In some respects, the following chapter could be said to be concerned with the nature of “the sequel” and the peculiar relations which bind a single work to another which purports to involve itself with the same story. I am interested, though, not only in the relations which obtain between separate books in a series (and here, those series will be McCarthy’s “Border Trilogy” and Robinson’s “Gilead” tetralogy), but also those relations which would seem either too obvious or too frivolous to require comment—namely, the way in which the reader approaches the world of the text as a single, continuous story; and the way in which the story-world has been constructed by the author in the first place. In every case, I am interested in the function of time within a given work of fiction, and in the temporal slippages and peculiarities which must emerge as soon as we stop to seriously consider that a story spread across multiple books must contain multiple temporal registers: that of the characters is distinct from that of the reader, that of the reader is distinct from that of the author, and so on, accounting for all possible permutations within, across, and beyond the works themselves.

Where these delineations become more than merely obvious fact—i.e., that the time of a book’s sequel is not, for its characters, the same as that which is experienced by its reader or its author—is at the point of their interpenetration. If, for instance, a given protagonist has undergone a process of slow transformation in order to become especially heroic, and if this new classically heroic aspect was not quite visible in “book one,” but only truly and finally emerged in “book two,” we might be expected to return to that first novel to marvel at the many ways in which this formerly ordinary person had changed. In this example, though, the return is only a return for the reader,

whereas the actions of the protagonist, which had formerly been isolated and to a certain extent unreadable, now become fixed by events occurring later on in her life. The word “fated” now best describes them. The role of the author in all of this is perhaps even more inscrutable, but because different people proceed with the telling of their tales in different ways, we can imagine any number of relationships here. The time of the author lies somewhere on a continuum between that of the reader and that of an omniscient observer whose access to the end of the story must suffuse every moment of its earlier parts. Of her story “Good Country People,” for instance, Flannery O’Connor has said that it emerged without any kind of general plan, that it “produced a shock” for the reader precisely because it produced a shock for the writer, and that it was “a story that almost no rewriting was done on” (100). Something like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, on the other hand, with its basis in horrific historical reality,³⁵ necessarily places its author at a remove from the reader, for whom the full weight of the being of its title character, as well as the full weight of its protagonist’s actions, must remain at first unknowable and unknown. These “kinds” of time are only complicated by the addition of new volumes, in which authors may revisit earlier moments in their stories, interrupt existing stories, or even lead their characters toward ends which have begun to seem inevitable.

McCarthy’s Border Trilogy and Robinson’s Gilead tetralogy provide remarkable examples of these different kinds of time, both because of the stories that they tell and the manner in which they are/were composed—which is to say that in each case (in each series) the chronology of composition does not match the chronology of the works themselves. Rather than using the uniqueness of these series to make a claim about a variety of different temporal modes and experiences, though, I want to claim that the temporal disjunctions at work in both McCarthy’s and

³⁵ *Beloved*, writes La Marr Jurelle Bruce, is “inspired by the life of Margaret Garner, a fugitive from slavery who escaped a Kentucky plantation with her family in 1856 and settled in the neighboring ‘free’ state of Ohio. When slave catchers . . . apprehended Garner, she attempted to kill her four children rather than see them repossessed into slavery. . . . She succeeded in killing only her two-year-old daughter, Mary” (19).

Robinson's books operate as expressions of a single form which communicates a single and singularly unbelievable kind of time. In each series, albeit in slightly different ways, the time of the reader, of the author, of and the characters is brought into alignment by way of a relation which inverts what we would expect from a typical causal sequence. This relation, I will argue, is best described by the doctrine of biblical typology, but finds its scientific "counterpart" in a somewhat obscure consequence of quantum nonlocality known as "retro-causality."

In the Border Trilogy, this relation—this form—reveals itself in the particular image of a tolling bell, which, I will claim, does not simply appear in each book in separate but thematically similar instances (though it does do this); it also constitutes a single event which spreads "across" the three books and radically changes how we are to understand the operation of time and fate within and beyond the world of the text. The bell which tolls "later" in *Cities of the Plain* is in a very real sense responsible for events which seem to precede it in *All the Pretty Horses*, the first book in the trilogy. In the Gilead novels, a similarly impossible kind of time is made visible by another repetition, though here what is repeated is not an image but an entire scene—what Tiffany Eberle Kriner has called the "predestination porch scene." While there are, I will argue, certain clear overlaps and repetitions which run throughout these novels, there is only one moment that is literally doubled: a conversation whose elements of dialogue are repeated verbatim in *Gilead* and *Home*. The breakdown in narrative attribution at this moment in *Home*, coupled with the strange, temporally disjointed order of the series itself, upends linear causality in a way that marks it as quite similar to the tolling bell in the Border Trilogy. In the case of each series, I claim, we can begin to make some sense of this apparent destruction of causal regularity by conceiving of it materially along two enormously different lines: that of the typological and that of the quantum. My hope is that this contradictory conception will, like much of the rest of the current study, show itself to be

simultaneously *non*-contradictory, and thus offer up the possibility of a kind of reading that is altogether new.

I

When in 1992 Cormac McCarthy published the first book in what would become his Border Trilogy, there seemed little to indicate that the hero's fate was already decided. John Grady Cole was quiet, capable, good—remarkably so, in fact, especially by the standards of a McCarthy novel—and above all he was, or seemed to be, free. An early episode in *All the Pretty Horses* confirms this assumption: just after John Grady and Lacey Rawlins set off on what they must feel (but never say) is a great adventure, the pair rides up onto a “high prairie” where the lights of civilization are no longer visible and where the journey to come is suggested by an incredible vastness of stars. It is a rare moment in which choice is dramatized. On the one hand is the light from which John Grady and his friend have come untethered, the light of their youth and apparent stability; and on the other is the unimaginably distant light of each separate star. Having decided to embrace what is unknown, they ride off into the night, “loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing” (McCarthy, *ATPH* 30).

If the suspicious reader is unmoved by this image of possibility at the outset of the novel, recalling, perhaps, that a similar sort of freedom was present at the start of *Blood Meridian*, then she will surely be convinced by the book's ending. After having covered an immense stretch of territory both into and back out of Mexico, John Grady finally returns home to San Angelo. He is changed, of course—deeply so. He reunites with Rawlins and tells his friend of his intention “to move on”: the country of his youth is no longer the sort of country in which he feels at home. There is a

characteristically laconic goodbye, and then, true to his word, John Grady saddles his horse and rides west “with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land” (302). Here the “ten thousand worlds” narrow into one, but importantly the heroic cowboy still selects his own course: a single world which is nevertheless an unknown one. His destiny remains his own, and a new and meaningful story can begin to unfold about him. This is the conclusion which the reader is asked to draw both at the beginning and the end of *All the Pretty Horses*.

With the release of what was at least nominally a sequel in 1994, this conclusion must have started to look a little unstable. *The Crossing*, which follows *All the Pretty Horses* thematically, introduces an entirely new protagonist and takes place about ten years earlier. It is very much *not* a tale of adventure and romance in the same way that its predecessor is, and because of this fact it can more capably inquire into what is arguably the same narrative world. What *The Crossing* reveals is the extent to which *All the Pretty Horses* teeters on the edge of a great darkness, a ground of being both frightening and final. One of its characters, for instance, an old man in one of several long stories told to the protagonist Billy Parham, can claim the following: that “the path of the world also is one and not many and there is no alter course in any least part of it for that course is fixed by God and contains all consequence in the way of its going and outside of that going there is neither path nor consequence nor anything at all” (McCarthy, *TC* 157–58). Even though he is a character within a story, submitted to the protagonist and thus to the reader for consideration, the man is nonetheless describing something about the kind of world in which Billy is an inhabitant. Most disturbing is the effect that this has on the comparatively safe world of *All the Pretty Horses*. The reader, after all, must assume that place is the greater part of what binds these two books together, and so she is bound to be shocked by the complete intrusion of what is, in the first novel, merely suggested. Admittedly,

John Grady's freedom or lack thereof can be little affected by a book which makes no mention of him, but this is precisely where the third and final book in the trilogy attains its gravity.

Cities of the Plain, which was published four years after *The Crossing*, finally and formally combines the worlds of the first two novels. The trilogy's concluding volume finds John Grady and Billy working together on the same ranch near Alamogordo in New Mexico, and it more or less splits the difference between the Western-inflected first novel and the metaphysically dense second. Here at last is the destruction of the cowboy myth which was already on dangerous footing in *All the Pretty Horses*; and here, too, is the bizarre repetition of earlier events which had once been markers of virtue. The knife fight in the Saltillo prison, the passionate love affair with the beautiful Alejandra, Billy's valiant but ultimately futile effort to save his younger brother's life—these things are darkly recast in *Cities of the Plain* as if to signal that the whole story is no more than some perverse eternal recurrence—which, in a sense, it is.

To reduce the novel to its illustration of a Nietzschean concept,³⁶ though, is to disregard the complexity of what is happening within these repetitions. As the McCarthy critic Edwin Arnold has put it, “[w]hat becomes clear in reading the complete trilogy is how thoroughly and complexly McCarthy uses repetition, not simply to retell the same story (for, as his characters so often say, all stories are one) but to create a deep resonance as each parallel story moves towards its inescapable conclusion” (232). What is happening here is not just—or not exactly—the same things over and over again indefinitely, but rather the appearance of similar things which point backward and

³⁶ The concept of “eternal recurrence” shows up in a number of Friedrich Nietzsche’s works, though it is probably most famously expressed in *The Gay Science*, where it is offered as a kind of thought experiment used to determine whether or not one is living well (i.e., for Nietzsche, in accordance with an exuberant expression of personal will). In that book, the aphorism, which I abbreviate here, is as follows: “What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it. . . . Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.’ . . . [H]ow well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?” (Nietzsche 273–74).

illuminate embedded determinisms that had always been the case. Or to put it another way: *Cities of the Plain* transforms all that comes before it, radically reconfiguring especially what the reader would have taken to be John Grady's unassailable freedom.

On the face of it this is to say no more than that a later part of any story which is told in linear time will have some effect on a reader's understanding of what has come before. The third part of a trilogy might be expected to reallocate the significance of events in its first part so as to maintain the coherence and integrity of a single story, just as I might be expected to reassess earlier events in my own life according to criteria generated by new experiences. Something much more than this, though, is going on in the Border Trilogy. Take the early episode on the high prairie in *All the Pretty Horses*. There is an obvious sense in which this scene must be recast after one has read to the end of *Cities of the Plain* and learned of John Grady's tragic and bloody end, but there is also something about the scene which seems to prefigure the later tragedy. For the first-time reader this comes down to a strangely inconspicuous but nevertheless ominous detail: the tolling of a bell in the early morning darkness.

They rode out along the fenceline and across the open pastureland. The leather creaked in the morning cold. They pushed the horses into a lope. The lights fell away behind them. They rode out on the high prairie where they slowed the horses to a walk and the stars swarmed around them out of the blackness. They heard somewhere in that tenantless night a bell that tolled and ceased where no bell was and they rode out on the round dais of the earth which alone was dark and no light to it and which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so that they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand world for the choosing. (McCarthy, *ATPH* 30)

What is so curious about this passage is that it obscures its most interesting element. Four simple, declarative sentences prime the reader to barrel on into the fifth and sixth, so that when the “bell that tolled and ceased” appears it disappears almost as quickly into a background of endless possibility. To read this paragraph is to inhabit the excitement of the young cowboys and thus ignore the intrusion of what is unwelcome—namely, thoughts of death or failure. But the reminder is not so easily suppressed. As the reader pushes on and learns of John Grady’s fate in *Cities of the Plain*, it becomes clear that the tolling bell was the rule rather than the exception, and that the anomaly was the idea of unlimited choice.

For the returning reader, the tolling of the ghostly bell presents not just *an* inevitability but *the* inevitability: the specific scene in which John Grady succumbs to his terrible, mortal wounds at the end of *Cities of the Plain*. It does this first and foremost by functioning as a reminder of death, a *memento mori*. Petra Mundik has made the case that in light of the first novel’s conclusion it is possible to take the image of the bell as an allusion to John Donne’s well-known Meditation XVII (“Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee” [Donne 243]). “[T]he tolling of the symbolic bell at the beginning of the novel,” says Mundik, “foreshadows not only John Grady’s forthcoming initiation into the darkness of a world permeated by death but also his realization that a profound interconnectedness runs through all living things” (122–23). Her conclusion is convincing insofar as it emphasizes death as that which briefly interrupts the boys’ sense of freedom, and *especially* insofar as it requires a later passage for the interpretation of the earlier one.

I am not convinced, however, that the image of the bell is symbolic—or at least, I do not take it to be only or primarily symbolic. There is simply too much to suggest the importance of the real material fact of a distant ringing bell. What does it mean, for instance, that both John Grady and Rawlins can make out the sound? Surely that it is very much real and has therefore come from

somewhere. But what then of the fact that the bell “toll[ed] and ceas[ed] *where no bell was*”? Does this just mean that the young cowboys cannot see it? Or is the narrator relating some crucial detail about the sourceless nature of what is perceived? It might be simpler to dismiss these sorts of questions as beside the point if the tolling bell did not sound again at John Grady’s final and most vulnerable moment and thus forge an eerily specific connection to the passage at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*. It is as if, in addition to indicating his death in some abstract sense, the tolling bell also has as its source the precise time and location of John Grady’s actual death. The latter, which occurs at the end of *Cities of the Plain*, is described as follows: “He heard the distant toll of bells from the cathedral in the city and he heard his own breath soft and uncertain in the cold and the dark of the child’s playhouse in that alien land where he lay in his blood. Help me, he said. If you think I’m worth it” (McCarthy, *COTP* 257). It is a moment both touching and frightening, a vision of surrender to what is and always was to come. The reader, of course, is left with no sense of whether the bell has registered with anything like familiarity, or if, indeed, it has registered at all. How to make sense of this?

Beyond the interesting but hardly irrefutable fact of the connection between these two scenes, there would seem to be scant evidence of a world in which time was out of joint, let alone one in which causality had been turned upside down. What, then, is the meaning of the strange, doubled bell? I would like to claim that it is exactly what seems most improbable: that the conclusion of the Border Trilogy is not only determined at the outset of the story but is also somehow causally linked to it—though its characters are unequipped to recognize the fact. And further: that the form of this bizarre causal relationship, which transforms the final moments of John Grady’s life into a single moment of foundational importance for everything that happens over the course of *All the Pretty Horses*, *Cities of the Plain*, and even (as we will see) *The Crossing*, is best described by comparison with an unusual theory—the doctrine of biblical typology. Obviously,

these are claims that will require careful elucidation, and so by way of providing some background I turn now to what unites them: a key element in the composition and life of the Border Trilogy—namely, the order in which the stories themselves were written.

At some point in the reading of the three volumes of this trilogy, the reader is likely to discern a disjunct between the ambitions of individual characters and the coldness of the world. Eventually the disjunction sharpens, and the reader comes to understand that the conflict is not exactly between ambition and oppression so much as it is between free will and fate, between a character's desire to achieve a certain end and the hard fact of the world's having selected an altogether different course. There are a number of passages throughout the three novels which emphasize this second dynamic, but it is not really until *Cities of the Plain* that it becomes possible to recognize the immensity of what is (and what had always been) at stake. Here, for example, is an early exchange between John Grady and Rawlins in *All the Pretty Horses*:

You ever get ill at ease? said Rawlins.

About what?

I don't know. About anything. Just ill at ease.

Sometimes. If you're someplace you aint supposed to be I guess you'd be ill at ease. Should be anyways.

Well suppose you were ill at ease and didnt know why. Would that mean that you might be someplace you wasnt supposed to be and didnt know it?

What the hell's wrong with you?

I dont know. Nothin. I believe I'll sing. (*ATPH* 37)

What is disguised as banter and resolved in comedy is, in retrospect, absolutely charged with meaning. Rawlins is here considering the idea of a fixed course—that there is somewhere he *ought to be*, and that it might be possible for him to have wandered off into a version of events substantially

darker and less comfortable. It is tempting to say, after having read a little further or even to the end of the final book, that this feeling of discomfort is also or is in actuality a premonitory feeling—an intuition of the mess and violence and death that is to follow. But all it is possible to say during a first encounter with the exchange is that Rawlins has a strange feeling and that certain unknown and unknowable events have caused it. What changes things for the reader is returning to the passage with knowledge that extends beyond the scope of the first book. This is where things get a little strange.

It turns out that the after-the-fact knowledge which is eventually acquired by the reader—that is, the knowledge of the story’s conclusion which allows for a somewhat more fatalistic reading of its introduction—is not only acquired after the fact; it is also built subtly into the composition of *All the Pretty Horses*. There are clues to indicate as much, hints that the novel is bent toward some sinister and particular end: the tolling of the ghostly bell, the knife fight with the young cuchillero, Alejandra’s alarmingly accurate vision of John Grady’s death at dawn in a strange city. But of course, these things can be no more than unsettling to the reader who has not yet read to the end of John Grady’s story. Where they become more than that is in relation to the timeline of their conception, which is to say that incredibly these moments form part of a story whose conclusion was set firmly in place long before its earlier interactions and entanglements.

According to Richard Woodward, who in 1992 wrote an article on McCarthy and the then-nearly-published *All the Pretty Horses*, the third part of the projected trilogy had already, in 1992, “existed for more than 10 years as screenplay” (“Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction”). This screenplay was “Cities of the Plain,” a slimmer version of the story that would be published as a novel some six years later. Its central figures were “John Grady” and “Billy,” its central concern was the same doomed romance that would ground the later novel, and its result was the same catastrophe in which that novel would later culminate. Perhaps most significant, though, was the

fact that despite notable changes in emphasis and characterization (changes Edwin Arnold carefully delineates in his early essay on the novel), McCarthy appeared finally to make no effort to alter either the basic shape of the story or its conclusion.³⁷ Arnold offers a guess as to why this might be the case: “It is possible,” he says, “that in establishing John Grady Cole’s background in *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy cannibalized his own script and then found himself unable or unwilling to revise the concluding narrative even though he had already used much of the same material” (228). Whether this is true or whether, as Arnold also suggests, McCarthy “had the overall plan of the trilogy in mind for some time” and “never wavered from carrying it to its tragic conclusion” (228) ultimately matters less than the simple fact of chronology: *All the Pretty Horses* was and is, unbeknownst to the reader, a kind of backstory for a character with a sealed and dreadful fate.

To return with this in mind to those events which hint at uncanny connection between *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain* is to recognize at last that something might be at work in these books which is not only curious or quirky, but which is also ontologically disruptive. Suddenly, the feeling to which Rawlins gives utterance and which the reader will knowingly take as either grim foreshadowing or the unconscious registration of some sense of being followed (the “outlaw” Jimmy Blevins appears only two pages later) is transformed into a much darker thing. It becomes a flicker of illusory agency. Rawlins’ sense that he might somehow choose rightly or wrongly and so wind up anywhere more or less “right” is set against a fixed and inevitable endpoint. His choice is a false choice. Or, to put this differently: because it is possible to say that McCarthy is writing the story of John Grady and Rawlins toward its inescapable conclusion, and because he has written certain references to that very fact into the narrative of *All the Pretty Horses*, it becomes possible also to say that those actions taking place in *Cities of the Plain* actually have a *causal* effect on the ones

³⁷ This does not take into account obvious changes required by the act of translating a screenplay into a novel. McCarthy clearly “changed” the story by adding description and narration, shaping it to accommodate the requirements of a new genre. The arc of the story, though, remained untouched.

which precede them in time. They negate the openness of the earlier events by virtue of, in some sense, having already happened.

What this says about free will in *All the Pretty Horses* and in *The Crossing* should be obvious right away: there is nothing like it anywhere in these books, nor was there ever. What it says about the reality of the worlds themselves is much less clear. How, for instance, could something *which has not happened yet* in any sense be said to cause that which is happening right now? Would such a bizarre order of operations not merely obliterate time as we perceive and understand it? This, it seems to me, is exactly the point. When John Grady and Rawlins hear the tolling bell at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*, they are revealed to be a part of a world in which time, the reality of time, is incomprehensible. It is a revelation which belongs to the reader, but its consequences for the reality of the narrative are nonetheless enormous: that an individual character's perception of a given moment might at any point be so flawed as to wrongly identify not just where it is or what it is but even *when* it is. This is perhaps the meaning of a particularly confusing scene in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain* (and there are few straightforward ones) when a dream figure accepts and drinks a potion which causes him to forget "the pain of his life"—to forget, presumably, all but the "now" that is before him. As he looks around and studies the things in his immediate vicinity, "[t]he stars and the rocks and the face of the sleeping girl upon her pallet," what he sees is something transformative: "...the strangeness of the world and how little was known and how poorly one could prepare for aught that was to come... that a man's life was little more than an instant and that as time was eternal therefore every man was always and eternally in the middle of his journey, whatever be his years or whatever distance he had come" (McCarthy, *COTP* 282).

In these moments and with these objects, time stretches out to fill an eternal present, just as it does for John Grady and Rawlins at the outset of *All the Pretty Horses*. What is specific to the bell, though, and what is not communicated in the episode with the dream figure, is an inversion of

origin. It is not only that this sound has spread out in time but that it has propagated backward, passing from later to earlier and thus imposing a paradox—that is, John Grady hears something which is made possible only by a series of decisions that at some point, and at however minute a scale, must have included that very sound. In one respect, this is just McCarthy working through the unusual chronology of his own creative endeavour. If he has written the basic outline for *Cities of the Plain* prior to writing *All the Pretty Horses*, then the latter is constrained by an absolute endpoint.

A useful way of thinking about this, strangely, involves recourse to the doctrine of biblical typology, a theory which, despite its apparent insufficiency to or divergence from the present subject matter, offers a way into the problematic of time and causality that is clearly so much a part of the structure of these stories. To put the doctrine as succinctly as possible, I borrow from St Augustine: typology is a method of theological inquiry which operates on the assumption that “the New [Testament] is hidden in the Old [Testament] and the Old is revealed in the New” (*WOTOT* 125). There are certain figures or “types” within the earlier biblical texts that can only be comprehended fully or properly—so the theory goes—in relation to later “antitypes,” images or events which will finally reveal crucial bits of information about their precursors. Erich Auerbach, in his excellent essay “Figura,” offers a particularly lucid description of the process: “[f]igural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life” (53). In the context of biblical typology, this illuminating second “event or person” is, in one way or another, Christ. It is Christ as divine Word incarnate come to establish an ultimate meaning for and to redeem all that has come before and all that will come after. Auerbach, however, is quite clear to make the point that the fulfilling event or person—Christ or some aspect of his being—is not to be taken abstractly: “Only the *understanding* of the two persons or events is a

spiritual act, but this spiritual act deals with concrete events whether past, present, or future, and not with concepts or abstractions...” (53, emphasis added). In other words, the connection is primarily between real, material, historical events. This is a fact which should, at the very least, provide a faint suggestion of the kind of link that I want to make with the Border Trilogy. After all, the aim here is to make some sense of a baffling connection between two actually occurring events where the earlier seems to prefigure the later: the meaning of the tolling bell is finally exposed and, really, fulfilled at the moment of John Grady’s death.

But there is more to it than this. It is not just that a moment at the end of *Cities of the Plain* is prefigured by a moment at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*; it is that what comes after erupts through time and has a real effect on what comes before. The idea of linear time is thrown out of joint. This is where the meaning of the later, fulfilling event must be examined, for according to the theory of typology that event can be none other than a piece of the life of the incarnate Word of God. If this is taken to be the case, then there must be some sense in which there is simultaneously a real historical connection between two events, with an earlier prefiguring a later, and a strange, inverted causal relationship. Take, for example, the figure of Moses, who is sometimes held up as a type for or a prefiguration of Christ. There is doubtless a link between certain aspects of his life and the later life of Jesus as they are recorded in the Old and New Testaments: the slaughter of infants at the beginning of the Book of Exodus anticipates Herod’s Massacre of Innocents in the Book of Matthew; the display of the salvific “serpent of brass” upon a pole in the Book of Numbers suggests the crucifixion of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels; and so on. These connections are understood to be spiritual ones, but for the purposes of typology they are first of all to be taken literally and historically³⁸—that is, these linked events in the lives of Moses and Jesus are connected in time such

³⁸ There is a balancing act to be performed here. I do not, on the one hand, wish to advocate for a literalist interpretation of the bible. Treating these texts as historical records in any way that does not also recognize their enormous symbolic, semantic, and linguistic complexities is surely a disservice to what they are and to the manifold ways

that the earlier event leads to and “repeats” itself in the later. Christ’s rescue from the murderous decree of Herod is, in this sense, prefigured in the rescue of Moses from the murderous decree of the Egyptian Pharaoh. What is fascinating to consider, though, is that the second event in the temporal sequence, the fulfilling event enacted by the incarnate Word of God, must also, by virtue of its being bound up with the divine and hence with creation, have some sort of causal role in that which precedes it. And although it is Moses who prefigures Christ in the above examples, it is equally possible to reverse the formulation and say that Christ as divine Word is in fact the first term in that sequence, responsible not only for the fulfillment of the earlier acts of Moses but for his being as well.³⁹

While this kind of theological ground seems at a substantial remove from the dark reality of the Border Trilogy, it turns out that only a little effort is required to bring the two worlds into alignment. It is possible, after all, to frame a number of events from *All the Pretty Horses* in typological terms, finding their fulfillments in similar events from the trilogy’s final novel. When John Grady delivers the final, fatal blow to his would-be assassin at the close of the knife fight in *All the Pretty Horses* (“...sank it into his heart and snapped the handle sideways and broke the blade off in him” [McCarthy, *ATPH* 201]), he enacts and prefigures that which will be repeated in *Cities of the Plain*, his moment of violent triumph over Eduardo, the pimp (“[h]e brought his knife up underhand from the knee and slammed it home and staggered back” [*COTP* 254]). The actions are alike right down to the precise method of their execution: in each case, John Grady strikes out after appearing to have been defeated. To recognize the typological connection here is to claim a real and necessary

in which they are read, applied, and experienced around the world. On the other hand, though, I want to make clear that for the purposes of typology, they cannot be taken as merely abstract or symbolic, because the point is to recognize a very real connectedness that binds events or people across historical time to an incarnate divinity.

³⁹ We can perhaps already see some of the different ways in which this kind of description is inadequate to its target. To speak of a “first term” in a “sequence,” for instance, is to presume a straightforward, linear chain of causal relations that simply cannot exist within the parameters of typological discussion. Such as they are, though, these terms will need to be taken as stepping-stones across a temporal/ontological mire that might otherwise pull us in. They are, and will be, necessary placeholders.

bond between the two events, but it is also—and this is crucial—to regard that bond as grounded in a fullness that is brought about by the second event and *that was always to have been brought about* by the second event.

This temporal configuration makes an abstract sort of sense when one observes the intertextual repetitions and places those alongside McCarthy's continual return to issues of fate and premonition, but it is really the bell which clinches it, concretizing a relation that might otherwise have been taken as merely symbolic. When the cathedral bell rings in the "future" it is not just that an event has occurred which has an intrinsic connection to some similar event in the "past," but that an event has occurred which has radically reconfigured time—really and incomprehensibly—and set the whole structure of the story on its head. It is a single moment which annihilates the possibility of any single exceptional moment, binding the seemingly discrete and freely chosen actions of John Grady, Rawlins, Billy, and the other characters in the narrative world to a single source and outcome, and thus revealing them to have been bound, at all points, within the confines of a closed and ordered system. This is the form of typology. Christ as the ultimate element in a proposed relation between Old and New Testament events redeems that which comes before, but simultaneously, as the Word of God, through whom and with whom the initial act of creation is/was carried out,⁴⁰ causes it. At any moment, then, in the typological formulation, the subtle particularity of "now" might open onto its connection with divinity and the divine whole.

This is the case that I want to make for the Border Trilogy: that by examining the work typologically—that is, by paying careful attention to its more obvious intertextual connections and repetitions—it becomes possible to make sense of characters, events, or instants whose appearances or occurrences had previously seemed purely coincidental, or even spooky; and at the same time to

⁴⁰ In the Bible, the role of the Word of God in creation is noted on a few occasions, but it appears most famously in the Book of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God" (*KJV Bible*, John 1.1–2).

see that what holds the narrative world together is a connection, in each moment, between prefigurative part and fulfilled whole. What is to be uncovered here is ontological—it just happens to pertain to a peculiar conception of time. At the beginning of *Cities of the Plain*, for instance, there is a memorable scene in which Billy and one of the other cowboys from the ranch, Troy, are driving back at night from a visit with the latter's brother. Not long after leaving they pass a group of Mexicans whose truck has a flat tire and whose prospects seem grim. Billy thinks about it for a second and then stops his own truck, reverses back to the stranded group, and offers to help with the repairs. (It is, as Troy flippantly puts it, the act of a "Samaritan.") When later Troy wants to know why it is that he stopped, whether it was not maybe "[s]ome sort of religious thing," Billy offers the following explanation:

No. It aint nothin like that. It's just that the worst day of my life was one time when I was seventeen years old and me and my bud—my brother—we was on the run and he was hurt and there was a truckload of Mexicans just about like them back yonder appeared out of nowhere and pulled our bacon out of the fire. I wasn't even sure their old truck could outrun a horse, but it did. They didn't have no reason to stop for us. But they did. I don't guess it would of even occurred to em not to. That's all. (*COTP* 36)

This is a coincidence that Billy recognizes and acts upon, offering help as a kind of repayment for his cosmic debt. On the one hand it is just another one of the trilogy's many repetitions: a scene that is prefigured in an earlier novel and that thus comes to contain and to make sense of that earlier moment. Here is the earlier moment's fulfillment, its enlargement—the suggestion that it was always to have been included in the tire-repair encounter in *Cities of the Plain*. And with this revelation comes the transformation of the later scene into a twofold version of itself: simultaneously a singular moment and a complete timeline of events. Bizarrely, though, this connection also functions *in reverse*. That is, when Billy and Boyd, in flight from a band of riders from Boquilla in *The Crossing*,

come upon a flatbed truck that will be the younger boy's salvation, there must be a sense in which the truck only arrives because Billy has decided to pull over in *Cities of the Plain*. The later portion of the story is told and decided upon before the earlier; it causes it. So the linkage is always there, and even when Billy pulls his horse alongside the truck in *The Crossing* (which truck, interestingly, "grind[s] slowly down through the gears" [TC 272] in the same way that Billy's truck in *Cities of the Plain* "grind[s] slowly back down the highway" [COTP 30]), the reader must imagine that he has already lost his brother, that he has pulled over to aid the stranded Mexicans, and that he has walked out into the early Juarez morning with the corpse of John Grady draped across his arms.

This last image, which may well be the most indelible in all of the third novel, will be a good place to make one final point about how it is that I am using "typology" and how it is that I am not using it here—for it is in this image that the reader finds a familiar Christian pose. The murdered John Grady is gathered up into the arms of his weeping friend and carried, past a group of schoolchildren all of whom stand "blessing themselves in the gray light" (COTP 261), out of the place of his undoing and home to El Paso. According to Russell Hillier, the image "invites comparison with the pietà of the anguished Madonna and deposed Christ, a correspondence that underwrites John Grady's sacrifice and his positive influence upon those who love him" (30). For Hillier, this point of reference is complicated by another—that terrible moment in which King Lear enters bearing the body of the murdered Cordelia⁴¹—but the fact of its emergence is never in question. That is, in his final appearance in the novel John Grady is transformed into the murdered

⁴¹ I wonder, actually, if there is not a further connection to be made between Shakespeare's play and this final episode in *Cities of the Plain*. Hillier notes that "the affronted Billy's choice of words," as he carries John Grady's body through the city streets, "echoes almost exactly Lear's own" (30), the similarity between the two moments hinging on the frantic question "do you see?" Yet there are two other questions in the play which are perhaps significant as well. The first to speak after Lear is Kent, who asks "Is this the promised end?" and this is followed up by a question from Edgar: "Or image of that horror?" (Shakespeare 24.258–59). In light of the kind of reading of the Border Trilogy that I am proposing here, it might be interesting to read in these latter questions the familiar themes of fate and temporal inversion which I have located in McCarthy's work, and thus find in the reference to Shakespeare further justification for the peculiar typological thread which I am interested in pulling.

Christ. What I would like to avoid in reading these novels typologically is putting too much strain or emphasis on precisely this kind of thing.

That John Grady should be a Christ-figure here and that he should, at other points in *Cities of the Plain* and *All the Pretty Horses*, also exhibit Christ-like tendencies analogically is of less interest to me than that he should live and die in a world whose *form* is essentially Christ-like, whose single instants might at any point telescope outward and reveal themselves to be necessarily connected with totality and eternity. If John Grady and Billy are, at the close of *Cities of the Plain*, transformed into Christ and Mary respectively, it is only an indication that a typological reading of these texts is on the right track, and that at any other moment it might be equally possible to say that the same transformation is effected—that when the bell tolls and ceases “where no bell was” at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*, the simultaneous materiality and transcendence of the Word of God made flesh emerges there too. All of this is to say that in reading typology in the Border Trilogy, I do not aim to read by analogy (though others—Manuel Broncano, for instance⁴²—have done this brilliantly and to great effect) but rather to locate intrinsic connections between real, material events across time. In doing so, it is my hope that something about the peculiar temporal structure of these books—the order of their composition, certainly, but also the very fabric of their inescapably predetermined worlds—will reveal itself to be not so peculiar at all, even if this means, paradoxically, that it must first appear to be impossible.

At the end of *Cities of the Plain*, after Billy has carried his dead friend “out of that nameless crossroads,” and after he and the presumably frightened schoolchildren have “continued on to their appointed places which as some believe were chosen long ago even to the beginning of the world”

⁴² In *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands*, Broncano offers a reading of McCarthy's “southwestern cycle” which imagines it as a collected “apocryphal’ narrative of the American Southwest” (2) with each book loosely tied to a corresponding New or Old Testament text. He does not go so far as to read allegorically; rather, Broncano notes that he is interested in the “religious elements that support the narrative architecture of [the biblical] texts” (3). The project is an impressive one. I am more concerned, though, with the ways in which these “religious elements” are expressed in the fabric of the reality of the narrative worlds—which is to say, ontologically.

(McCarthy, *COTP* 262), the reader encounters what is ostensibly that novel's conclusion: a dense, cryptic epilogue in which the later life of Billy Parham is briefly revealed and in which an unnamed stranger relates the contents and consequences of his unusual dream. The encounter is a surprising one, mostly because the story is already so thoroughly and devastatingly concluded: its romantic hero is slain, his corpse borne off into the gray dawn light in an inversion of a classic Western trope. It is not, of course, that the reader should not expect an epilogue in one of McCarthy's novels—quite the opposite—but knowing what we do about the provenance of these books and their tendency toward an established end (i.e., the death of John Grady), it seems strange that further material should be appended to what is effectively a closed system.

So, why the need for this “second” ending? What is to be gained by such a glimpse into the bleak and distant future? One possible answer is that the epilogue serves as an extra-textual working-through of some of the more peculiar aspects of the Border Trilogy. The stranger's questions about his own dream are really McCarthy's questions about the nature of reality and free will, the dream-figure's demand to know if he is dreaming or not is the character's demand upon the author, and so on. What this interpretation neglects, though, is the epilogue's form, which is not essayistic but fictional, still a part of the same fictional world as the rest of the story. Billy need not be involved in these musings, but he is. McCarthy is thus stepping outside of the apparently closed and deterministic system of the Border Trilogy to query the boundaries of that world, and in doing so he is bringing along a part of that world so as to extend its deterministic reach. The epilogue, then, as a second ending composed well after the first (the ending of “Cities of the Plain,” recall, toward which the trilogy was always pointed) is concerned with the same notions of fate, only now it extends them outward and into the world of the reader. This is an ending which asks after the very possibility of ending, making each character, and even the reader, a potential dream-figure who has been called forth fully formed from some unknown and unknowable place. As the stranger puts it: “The log of

the world is composed of its entries, but it cannot be divided back into them. And at some point this log must outdistance any possible description of it..." (COTP 286). Even the teller of the tale is a part of this logbook, bound by a set of forces over which, ultimately, he has no control.

This is perfectly consistent with what I have so far called a typological reading of these texts. An earlier event is linked to a later one: it prefigures it and is fulfilled by it, but also, by virtue of this connection, it indicates a greater totality, be that McCarthy's logbook or Christ. The great revelation of the epilogue is that what appears to be a fully formed whole—that is, the world of the first three books up to and including the "pietà" scene—is in fact but a sliver of time, expanding toward limits that neither author, nor reader, nor characters will ever comprehend. And yet always there are strange connections between moments within this time sliver, connections which reveal a shimmer of the inconceivable whole. Typological form, in other words, does not vanish at the close of the novel proper but extends into the new events and encounters of the epilogue, because it is constitutive of the world which only expands there.

At the end of the stranger's dream-narrative, for instance, there is a short description of a false awakening (the dream-figure's awakening into the "higher-order" dream of the stranger) that re-enacts with uncanny accuracy an earlier episode from *Cities of the Plain*. In the later scene the stranger and his new companion survey a "primitive," long-abandoned encampment: "[w]e walked together through all that desolation and all that abandonment and I asked him if the people were away at some calling but he said that they were not. When I asked him to tell me what had happened he looked at me and he said: I have been here before. So have you. Everything is here for the taking. Touch nothing. Then I woke" (COTP 288). Earlier in *Cities of the Plain*, it is John Grady who has awakened from his dream to find himself in another, where he is set down upon a lonely, empty waste: "[h]e was alone in some bleak landscape where the wind blew without abatement and where the presence of those who had gone before still lingered on in the darkness about. Their voices

carried back to him, or perhaps the echo of those voices” (104). Especially significant here is the fact that John Grady has just awakened from a dream of ritual sacrifice, a dream in which a “great confusion of obscene carnival folk,” some of whom have “blackened eyes” and “carry candles,” wait to assist in the death of “a young girl in a white gauze dress” who lies “upon a palletboard like a sacrificial virgin” (104), and that the stranger describes nearly the same episode to Billy in the earlier part of the epilogue. In the latter case, a great procession of “men bearing torches in the rain,” variously attired—not unlike the carnival folk—descend to meet the dream-figure and reveal a “litter” upon which lies a “young girl with eyes closed and hands crossed upon her breast as if in death” (279). To say that John Grady’s dream prefigures the stranger’s is to bind the epilogue to the rest of the novel (and thus, to the rest of the Border Trilogy) by pointing out that, in at least some form, its central concern is something that has already happened. “When” it has happened is a matter of immense difficulty, both because the events occur in dreams and because it is impossible to know the extent to which McCarthy, consciously or unconsciously, conceived of their doubling.

The epilogue’s second dream sequence, anyway, appears to be something to which McCarthy has devoted a great deal of thought. Not only is it prefigured earlier in the same novel, but it is also foregrounded in *The Crossing*, where Billy, on his first journey in Mexico, lies down to sleep and dreams of his father.⁴³ It is a long passage, but worth quoting in full:

He slept and as he slept he dreamt and the dream was of his father and in the dream his father was afoot and lost in the desert. In the dying light of that day he could see his father’s eyes. His father stood looking toward the west where the sun had gone and where the wind was rising out of the darkness. The small sands in that waste was all there was for the wind

⁴³ In his “Dreaming the Border Trilogy: Cormac McCarthy and Narrative Creativity,” Christopher White maps some of the other connections I have not elaborated upon here. The whole dream sequence from the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, White notes, “resonate[s] both backward and forward through the Trilogy, creating an eerie echo effect” (124), showing up in another of Billy’s dreams at the end of *The Crossing*, and, fascinatingly, in “Billy’s final nighttime vision at the end of *Cities*” (125), where he sees a distant illusion that is reminiscent of the dream procession in the epilogue.

to move and it moved with a constant migratory seething upon itself. As if in its ultimate granulation the world sought some stay against its own eternal wheeling. His father's eyes searched the coming of the night in the deepening redness beyond the rim of the world and those eyes seemed to contemplate with a terrible equanimity the cold and the dark and the silence that moved upon him and then all was dark and all was swallowed up and in the silence he heard somewhere a solitary bell that tolled and ceased and then he woke. (TC 112)

This is the same waste dreamt of later on by John Grady, and then, after that, by the stranger in the epilogue. It is finally related back to Billy as though it were new information—and, indeed, he does learn something new from the stranger's dream-figure: that he has "been here before." Of course, if the reader looks carefully enough at the whole of the trilogy, she can determine this crucial detail before arriving at the bitter end of *Cities of the Plain*. Just look at how Billy's dream of his father closes, with the tolling and cessation of a "solitary bell" issuing from "somewhere."

This is the same bell that tolls at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* on the high prairie and that sounds from the moment of John Grady's death at the "close" of the story in *Cities of the Plain*. It is an indication that time in this world is not at all what it appears to be, flowing backward as well as forward with later events seemingly causing earlier ones. Here, the apparently atemporal dream, which cuts through *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain*, and the epilogue, reveals itself to be connected to that fateful instant around which the whole story revolves. And what that instant—which is to say, the tolling of the bell at the end of Billy's dream—finally prefigures is typological form itself, the very shape and reality of the story: the dream-figure's insistence, at the end of the stranger's dream, that everything they are looking upon is the repetition and fulfillment of something else. "I have been here before. So have you." These words are as much for the stranger as they are for Billy, for John Grady, for the reader, and even, incredibly, for the author himself. All was fated to have unfolded in exactly this way.

While the Border Trilogy is generous with this kind of language—about the inevitability of events, determinism, and so forth—and returns to it frequently, perhaps the most succinct expression of the worldview comes from its epilogue. Unsurprisingly, this concerns the nature and origin of dreams. “You call forth the world which God has formed,” the stranger explains, “and that world only. Nor is this life of yours by which you set such store your doing, however you may choose to tell it. Its shape was forced in the void at the onset and all talk of what might otherwise have been is senseless for there is no otherwise. Of what could it be made? Where be hid? Or how make its appearance? The probability of the actual is absolute. That we have no power to guess it out beforehand makes it no less certain. That we may imagine alternative histories means nothing at all” (*COTP* 285). The reader will have encountered such determinism before: the old blind maestro makes a similar claim earlier in the same novel, and at the end of *All the Pretty Horses* Alejandra’s great-aunt, the Dueña Alfonsa, imagines the world as a kind of “puppet show” in which the strings, traced upward, “terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on” (*ATPH* 231).

What is new about the stranger’s pronouncement is that it proposes a system wherein individual choice is not just limited or meaningless but wholly illusory, wherein one’s life has its shape “forced in the void at the onset” and so can never become more than an outcome following on a set of initial conditions. An unsettling thought, but one which, in a narrative world so concerned with fate and inevitability, requires careful consideration. Indeed, according to Michael Lynn Crews, it seems that the author has done that very thing. In an early draft of *Cities of the Plain*, says Crews, the above quoted passage from the epilogue “in which Billy encounters a stranger who seems to promote a theory of radical determinism” appears alongside the following pencilled-in note: “See Bell’s Theorem” (237). The note is, on the one hand, just another example of “how far off the beaten track [McCarthy] is willing to travel in the name of understanding” (237). His search

for a coherency of worldview in the already bafflingly complex epilogue extends, apparently, even into the prohibitively difficult world of quantum mechanics. On the other hand, though, the note is a key to making sense of what kind of world the Border Trilogy sustains, and not only that, but how it might be possible for such a world to contain rare moments in which effects precede their causes.

A little research is required here to make sense of the connection between the hyper-deterministic speech of the stranger and the obscure note which accompanies it in McCarthy's draft. "Bell's Theorem," it turns out, is a kind of verification of an earlier theory on the subject of quantum entanglement; or, rather, it is the provision of an experimental basis for the refutation of that theory.⁴⁴ By conceiving of a somewhat more nuanced version of the famous "EPR" ("Einstein–Podolsky–Rosen") thought experiment, a scenario in which two particles would be fired in opposite directions and remain "inherently" linked despite their distance from one another, Irish physicist John Stewart Bell arrived at the conclusion Einstein had been at pains to avoid: according to Bell's research, there was no "hidden variable" or missing piece to account for what was "really" going on in EPR. The fact was that by measuring one of the entangled particles, a hypothetical experimenter would gain apparently impossible information about the other—even if that other particle were light years away. As the physicist Marcel Gleiser puts it in his book *The Island of Knowledge: The Limits of Science and the Search for Meaning*, "[m]easuring one of the two 'influences' the other instantaneously (or at least superluminally), irrespective of how far apart the two are from each other" (205). Bell's breakthrough was not to confirm this interaction but to show how it could not be explained with recourse to classical physics. His experiment, says Gleiser, "rule[s] out local theories of quantum mechanics using hidden variables to explain instantaneous action-at-a-distance" (214), and thus

⁴⁴ Stephen Hawking, in *Brief Answers to the Big Questions*, provides a helpful, non-technical introduction to Bell's Theorem, placing it in context. While Hawking's book can at times feel almost aggressively reductive—with chapter headings ranging from things like "Is there a God?" to "Should we colonise space?"—its style is nonetheless tremendously beneficial to the layperson wishing to begin navigating those subjects which do not always lend themselves to easy expression. For a slightly more detailed, but still accessible, account of Bell's Theorem, see Jim Al-Khalili's *Quantum: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

seems to demonstrate the reality of what is called “nonlocality,” a bizarre quantum phenomenon in which particles remain connected across vast distances for reasons that are extremely murky.

Unhappy with the fuzziness of this conclusion, Bell suggested it might be overcome (and the classical model might be restored) if one were to view the world as “super-deterministic”—that is, as a collection of determined and determinable results where even the experimenters and their choices were not exempt. Imagining the world as so composed framed it in a way that was once again acceptably rigid and that did away with the quantum “spookiness” which had bothered Einstein.

It is in this corrective that Crews finds the meaning of McCarthy’s note in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*. Bell’s “speculative antithesis,” he claims, “sounds more in line with the stranger’s proposal” (Crews 239) than does the sort of the extreme uncertainty which the theorem itself entails.

This is an entirely reasonable assessment—particularly if one considers that the note “See Bell’s Theorem” appears alongside an ominous pronouncement about the meaninglessness of imagining alternative histories. There is, however, another way to take McCarthy’s marginal instruction.

Around the time of the drafting of *Cities of the Plain*—the novel, that is, not the screenplay—an Australian philosopher of physics named Huw Price had just published a book on quantum theory and time wherein he considered a totally different “solution” to the problem of nonlocality in Bell’s Theorem. Price was convinced that Bell had overlooked a relatively simple way to keep Einstein and special relativity in the picture without resorting to outright fatalism: what has been called “retro-causality,” or the inversion of cause and effect. “The idea,” said Price, “that Bell’s work needs to be explained in terms of advanced action, or backward causation, is an old idea on the fringes of quantum mechanics ... However, I suspect that Bell did not appreciate that what this idea involves—the common future hypothesis—is very different from the common past hypothesis” (241). It seemed Bell had not seriously considered retro-causality, because, as far as he was concerned, it amounted to something much like what he had already proposed as super-

determinism. To Price, this conflation was a mistake. The two views, he thought, appeared to have “very different implications concerning human freedom” (Price 242).

While many of the more detailed features of this argument would run the risk of derailing the present subject, the argument’s central concern should set off alarm bells. “Bell’s Theorem,” to McCarthy, who at about this same time would have been working on the draft of *Cities of the Plain* and thinking about settling into his position at the Santa Fe Institute, would have indicated not only the superdeterministic corrective but also the retro-causal one. And given the author’s well-documented interest in science and his preference for “spend[ing] his time with scientists, like the physicist Murray Gell-Mann” (Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction”)—the latter well known for his quantum theoretical work—it is reasonable to speculate that he would have kept abreast of developments like these. But how to verify such an assumption?

For one thing, it will be instructive to return to that passage in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain* where Crews locates the “See Bell’s Theorem” note and to consider what *follows after it*—to see if there is any suggestion of backward causality or the inversion of time. A glance at the scene reveals that Billy in fact responds to the stranger’s deterministic assertion with a question: “So,” he says, “is that the end of the story?” (McCarthy, *COTP* 285) And the stranger replies in the negative, because, of course, it is not the end of the story but the beginning of it, the moment at which the dream-figure wakes into the world of the desolate and abandoned encampment. It is a place that he recognizes, a place where, as he tells the stranger, he has been before. The reader recognizes it from the dream sequences of the previous novels, even *All the Pretty Horses*, where in one instance John Grady dreams of horses, “and the horses in his dream moved gravely among the tilted stones like horses come upon an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed and if anything had been written on the stones the weathers had taken it away again...” (*ATPH* 280). This is a place consistently dark and ancient: a beginning shot through with an ending, with death—and

specifically, in the case of Billy's dream in *The Crossing*, with the sound that issues from the moment of John Grady's very real death at the end of *Cities of the Plain*—the sound of the tolling bell.

What is so interesting about this connection is that it provides a measure of justification for a reading of the Border Trilogy which ought to be more or less indefensible. How, after all, is it possible to say that in this apparently realistic world time flows both forward and backward? And how is the reader to make sense of those events which seem to have “happened before” without diving headlong into superstition? Well, if something has “happened before” in exactly the same way then one must admit that in its first instancing the event was causally responsible for all that followed from it. This is what makes these books so disorienting: occasionally, their “realistic” world will peel away to reveal an event or person that seems familiar, though the reader will have an impossible time saying precisely why. When at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* Rawlins admits to feeling “ill at ease,” perhaps because he is somewhere he “aint supposed to be,” we are certain to think that something bad is coming. But what we might think, too, is that the bad thing has already come, that it has asserted itself in some remote place or time and so has jostled poor Rawlins sideways into the fated path which he so dreads. The cause of his ill feeling—the proximal cause, anyway—is the arrival of the hapless Jimmy Blevins in the next scene. How far this sort of thing extends, though, could be said to be one of the more pressing concerns of the entire trilogy, and its most impressive and convincing instance could be said to be the “simultaneously” tolling bell.

It is here that McCarthy plays with both the timeline of his own creative output and its attendant consequences for story *and* the real, physical implications of such a bizarrely inverted timeline. Though retro-causality, to be sure, is not something which lends itself easily to translation from the world of quantum to that of the macroscopic,⁴⁵ it is still not exactly absurd to think that

⁴⁵ In *The Island of Knowledge*, in a chapter on Bell's Theorem, Marcelo Gleiser anticipates some of the questions that a non-initiate might be expected to ask of nonlocality: “[w]hat does this mean for our perception of reality? Is this something confined to the world of the very small, a fragile quantum effect lost in the large-scale dimensions of human

McCarthy has, in these novels, undertaken an experiment of his own. A kind of large-scale hypothetical where every moment exists as the possible consequence of another that is, strictly speaking, later in time. More fascinating still is that by having his narrative world unfold in this way, McCarthy has imbued the Border Trilogy with a form that is surprisingly well suited to description in the terms of biblical typology. The later event or person is prefigured by the earlier, but because of the nature of this relationship, where a single part is suggestive of the whole, it is possible to say that the later (the fulfilled whole) is actually the cause of the earlier (only a part of that fulfilled whole). Just as the rescued infant Christ is bound in time to the rescued infant Moses, and, by virtue of his divinity, not only fulfills but also *causes* the earlier event, so does the tolling bell in *Cities of the Plain* fulfill and cause the tolling of the bell in *All the Pretty Horses*. These sounds are one and the same, and the reader learns this only by granting what should be impossible: that time might somehow flow in reverse; that, like the stranger's dream figure in the story's epilogue, we might encounter each new moment as one in which we truly have been there before.

II

The problem that Lacey Rawlins touches on so briefly—and even comically—at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* is taken up with great seriousness in the character and person of Jack Boughton in Marilynne Robinson's "Gilead" novels. Unlike Rawlins, whose remarks about feeling "ill at ease"

affairs? Or does it have meaning for the way we interact with physical reality, with each other? ... [c]ould there be some measure of large-scale entanglement that our minds can somehow sense?" (215). These questions, it seems, are not merely rhetorical: they really are unknowns. But Gleiser is careful to offer a caveat. "This," he says, "is where we tread the extremely thin line between serious science and loopy speculation. The science is solid: quantum nonlocality is not going away anytime soon. Speculations of these effects influencing the sphere of macroscopic phenomena are, at least for now, unfounded" (215). We might safely file retro-causality under this same heading, while noting, at the same time, that it is by no means a closed line of inquiry.

and not knowing precisely why seem plucked from the air almost at random, Jack is someone who has had time to think the matter over, to weigh its meaning and some of its implications. In particular he has been called upon to answer a version of Rawlins' question that the latter must never have considered—namely, what it means not just to *feel* ill at ease but to *be* ill at ease; to live not momentarily with the consequence of some bad feeling, but to live with it at all times. For Rawlins, the effect of such a feeling is that the agent finds himself in the wrong place without realizing it. Fate intervenes here in some incomprehensible way. When the condition, however, is taken to be permanent rather than transitory, a fascinating and terrible possibility comes to light: the sufferer is at each and every moment in the wrong place, and so is completely at odds with his surroundings. This is where Jack finds himself.

After an absence of twenty years, the prodigal son of the Boughton family returns to the small town of Gilead, Iowa, in a tentative effort to make amends for past transgressions, but also to see how—or if—he might fashion some sense of a belonging that never was. His concern is as much to find a place for his own new family (he is married now and has a young, mixed-race son) as it is to find reconciliatory terms with his old one. Beneath this, though, is the dreadful certainty of failure, a personal knowledge that no matter what he tries, the old disjunctions and difficulties will assert themselves and deny the simple acceptance which Jack so desires.

It is this apparent certainty which so unsettles. On the one hand it is nearly impossible to imagine that Jack could know for sure how his overtures in Gilead would be accepted. After all, he has travelled there with something like hope in his heart and thus granted at least the possibility, however slim, that his future prospects might be unknowable. On the other, though, there is the hard fact of his life: a seemingly unbreakable pattern of grim expectations fulfilled, despite the interventions and reassurances of loved ones. In one episode in the novel *Home*, Jack's sister Glory (the book's central consciousness, though not quite its narrative voice) suggests that her brother

make an effort to get himself “on better terms” with the Reverend John Ames, their father’s neighbour and closest friend. “How can you do that,” Glory asks, “if you don’t let him—well—treat you like a friend? Ask you to supper? It’s the most ordinary thing in the world” (Robinson, *Home* 201). But something about the suggestion clearly worries Jack, whose own experience has never been so simple. “There it is,” he says. “My lifelong exile from the ordinary world. I have to learn the customs. And somehow persuade myself that they pertain to me” (201).

There is an element of the fraught relationship between Jack and Ames that Glory does not understand, and perhaps cannot understand, but she asks her brother to promise to have supper with the Ameses anyway. The consequences are, at first, innocuous, but finally they are devastating. After attending a dinner—pleasant enough, it seems—at the Ames household, Jack follows up by going to Ames’ Sunday church service and is blindsided by a sermon on Hagar and Ishmael. “[T]he application,” he tells Glory back at the house afterwards, “was the disgraceful abandonment of children by their fathers. And the illustration was my humble self, sitting there beside his son with the eyes of Gilead upon me” (206). Jack is shattered, but worse than that he is vindicated: his earlier certainty about his relationship with Ames is here verified, which must give Jack (as well as the reader) the impression that his terrible intuitions are to be trusted above all else, that his dejection and weariness and alienation are justified by unique experience.

Try as we might, the reader never really escapes the impression that Jack is, for these reasons, doomed. His caution has a kind of prescience in it: it warns with bitter accuracy of the unwanted conversation or interaction that is to unfold where the ordinary or encouraging exchange has been hoped for; and it warns, too, in some small measure, against the well-meaning assurances of others that everything will work out fine. It is a quality whose authority is only bolstered by the recognition of those who know Jack best. Glory, for instance, is unsure of how far to push her brother toward making the amends he so desires because, she thinks, he might well have access to

insight that she is unable to fathom. “[H]is reservations,” she considers after having convinced him to visit with Ames, “were the fruit of his experience, and his experience was the fruit of his being Jack, always Jack, despite these sporadic and intense attempts at escape, at being otherwise. Dear God in heaven, no one could know as well as he did that for him caution was always necessary” (*Home* 205).

Such doubts accumulate slowly, but by the middle of *Home* the reader is ready to concede to Jack an understanding of something that his family can never and will never quite appreciate. When one day, then, a conversation between Jack, his father, and Ames in the Boughtons’ back porch turns to the subject of predestination, we are made to start at Jack’s tentative suggestion that he might be an instance of that doctrine’s negative aspect—that he might be “intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition” (219). It is a thought so neatly appropriate to his situation and to his peculiar set of feelings and concerns that to turn away from it, to deny the possibility of knowing such a thing, as both Ames and Robert quickly do, is to deny a line of inquiry which ought to be approached with the utmost seriousness. Jack, after all, and for all of his faults, knows himself. He feels the weight in his own life of a profound absence which may as well be damnation, and so more than anyone else he seems qualified to pronounce upon the condition of his soul. The question that the reader is asked to consider is whether or not this qualification ends up amounting to something like foreknowledge.

Theologically, the matter is fairly straightforward: Jack can have no knowledge of the ultimate destination of his immortal soul because to presume such a thing would be to adopt a position beyond human comprehension, one in which the infinite wisdom and goodness of a divine being might be taken as somehow knowable, or at least accessible—a position which, by definition,

is unacceptable. According to John Calvin,⁴⁶ divine election occurs *outside* of human time, before the beginning of the world, and so it remains always at its core mysterious. Precisely who is destined to receive God's grace is a thing absolutely unknowable, even to the faithful:

[W]hen we receive the doctrine of God with obedience and faith, and rest ourselves upon his promises, and accept this offer that he makes us, to take us for his children, this, I say, is a certainty of our election. But we must here remark that when we have knowledge of our salvation, when God has called us and enlightened us in the faith of his Gospel, it is not to bring to nought the everlasting predestination that went before. (Calvin, *SOGC* 392)

This is perhaps what Robert Boughton has in mind when he responds to Jack's question about the difference between predestination and fate, and whether they are not, in fact, the same thing. For Calvin, predestination is not merely the expression of something determinate in time, but rather the consequence of an act carried out in eternity, beyond or before time. It is distinct from fate because it reflects a temporal order radically unlike the one in which human beings find themselves.

Damnation, then—or more accurately reprobation—is not a condition which ought to lend itself to being forecast. Granting Calvin's terms, which Jack does in his own grudging sort of way, one finds that there is no room for certainty when it comes to the destination of the soul. It is all a matter of trust in the grace of God.

The problem with this, of course, is that it still depends to some extent on the *act* of trusting, something with which Jack has acknowledged difficulty. In the same conversation with Ames and Robert, the former cites a passage from the First Epistle of John as a possible rebuttal to Jack's soteriological concern ("If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart"), but Jack can take little comfort from it. "He is writing to the 'beloved,'" he says, "the church. I do not enjoy the honor

⁴⁶ I refer to Calvin here both because (as I have already noted) Robinson is so strongly influenced by his theology and ideas and because the doctrine of predestination tends to be associated with him, even though it has a long and complex theological history.

of membership in that body” (*Home* 225). While this renunciation—or inability—is not enough to disqualify Jack from the kingdom of heaven with any complete certainty, it nonetheless presents a serious challenge to his salvation. The refusal of grace, one would think, would constitute a separation from God and thus an inevitable damnation. For Calvin, it is a grave matter indeed, even though, strictly speaking, it is beyond the power of human comprehension. “The Gospel,” he says, “is preached to a great number, which notwithstanding, are reprobate; yea, and God discovers and shows that he has cursed them, that they have no part or portion in his kingdom because they resist the Gospel and cast away the grace that is offered them” (Calvin, *SOGC* 392). Undoubtedly, there is a tension here. The state of reprobation is revealed to the reprobate in his or her very act of refusal, and so there must be some sense in which this person is both free to turn away and required to do so. Still, at bottom must be the unknowable mystery. As Mark Scott has put it in his wonderful essay on soteriology in *Gilead and Home*, “[j]ust as we are unable to apprehend the unity and plurality of God and the coexistence of the humanity and divinity of Christ, so we cannot comprehend the interrelationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom” (164). It may be that Jack is consigned to perdition and that he knows some terrible thing which others do not, but there is a limit to the reach of his experience, and that limit consists in experience itself—the fact of its humanity.

Here is where the importance of Robinson’s larger project becomes apparent and where a peculiar similarity to McCarthy’s “Border Trilogy” emerges. Like John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, Jack has some vague sense of a malign tendency in the world to come, but also like the two young cowboys he is unable to substantiate his hunch with anything more than insistence upon a pattern of diversions or irregularities. When all is said and done, he is fallibly human: he can have no knowledge of matters exceeding the limits of own fragile, human life. The reader sees this most pointedly in *Home* when Lila Ames, in response to Jack’s question about the nature of predestination

and reprobation, weighs in with an authority which is drawn from her own hardscrabble past: “‘What about being saved?’ She spoke softly and blushed deeply, looking at the hands that lay folded in her lap, but she continued. ‘If you can’t change, there don’t seem much point in it’” (Robinson, *Home* 226). The interjection would not feel so powerful if it were not spoken by someone whose own situation did not bear the traces of similar experience. Like Jack, Lila is an outsider, and in this moment we are asked to consider that her life offers a vastly different look at a remarkably familiar problem. Jack’s claim to certainty on the issue of his own predestination is troubled by the intrusion of another story—one in which, and this is so important, he sees himself.

For the reader, the realization of a kind of doubling or overlap here is bound up with the form of the work itself—which is to say, *Home* is a complete story, a standalone story, but one which relies to a certain extent for its effect on the existence of its “companions,” the other novels in the Gilead series. Alex Engebretson has said of *Home* that it reveals “the extent to which *Gilead*’s characters are mired in error and misperception,” and that to read the two novels together is to create “a form of irony, a doubleness wherein anything a character knows about another is both subjectively true and objectively false” (56). One might expand his claim to include *Lila* and also the more recent *Jack*, but one might also, perhaps, qualify his use of “truth” as something to be known rather than merely tended toward. The existence of other characters with other stories is something which must be taken as a given in these novels, and so any lasting claim to authority on any one of their parts is bound to be conditional or fleeting. In any new claim, though, is the hint of a grander and ultimately incomprehensible world, an unknowable whole suggested by (and inherent in) the fallible part. The tolling bell at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses* functions in this way, intruding on the start of an adventure with the image of that adventure’s end. While Robinson’s project is not quite so ominous, its effect is the same: each character in the world of Gilead ends up precariously

positioned in both time and relation, so that he or she is always in a state of prefiguring and/or fulfilling some other.

At least in part this can be attributed to the relationship between the chronology of the story (or stories) and the chronology of its composition. Just as McCarthy committed the concluding episode of the Border Trilogy to paper before its introduction (remember that “Cities of the Plain” existed as a screenplay prior to the writing of *All the Pretty Horses*) so Robinson wrote *Gilead* (intentionally or unintentionally) as a container for certain episodes that would be hinted at in other as yet unpublished works. These episodes would be “written toward.” *Home* is the best example of this, taking place as it does at almost exactly the same time as *Gilead* and covering, in some cases word for word, a few of the same conversations; but *Lila* and *Jack*, too, function in the shadow of these two earlier books and work with and toward crucial episodes in them.

In *Lila*, for instance, the reader finally gets a look at that character’s arrival in Gilead, at everything which leads up to her appearance, soaking wet, at the back of Ames’ Congregationalist church on a rainy Sunday morning. Mostly this is attributed to weariness and chance: Lila is tired of wandering and in need of respite, and so she takes up residence in a little abandoned cabin on the edge of town—or, rather, she squats there. After a while, she grows lonely enough to begin making forays into Gilead:

She never meant to talk to anybody. She had a dress she wore and a dress she saved, and she was wearing the good one, the clean one, the one she kept a little nice so that she could go walking where people might see her, when she got caught in the rain that Sunday and steeped into the church, just to save her dress. And there was that old man, speaking above the sound of the rain against the windows. (Robinson, *Lila* 27)

In some respects, this encounter in *Lila* actually damages the impression that the reader of *Gilead* will have carried into the newer novel—namely, that Lila’s appearance was and is nothing short of

miraculous. “That morning,” says Ames in *Gilead*, “something began that felt to me as if my soul were being teased out of my body, and that’s a fact” (*Gilead* 203). Our engagement with the event through Ames’ eyes ensures its wondrousness, but when the narrative shifts from the literal and metaphorical shelter of the church to the street outside its door what is revealed is an excess which was, in *Gilead*, entirely beside the point. On Lila’s part, the act of stepping into the church is an act of convenience that culminates not in an ecstatic experience of love but in the simple contentment of a moment’s rest. It is a sort of resignation to the situation: “...she guessed she liked the candles and the singing. She guessed she didn’t have a better place to be” (*Lila* 28). Of course, there is another way of looking at all this, one which involves admitting that precisely *because* Ames is so struck by the enormity of what turns out, in *Lila*, to be no more than an accident of circumstance, we are led to look at the entirety of the event from the separate perspectives of both Lila and Ames in a way that refashions it into a new and more astounding whole. Because we know the huge consequences of Lila’s mundane act, the supposed ordinariness of it gets recast as divine grace.

As if to emphasize this point—that at any moment what is ordinary might reveal itself to be astounding in implication—Robinson dramatizes a shockingly similar event in her most recent novel, *Jack*. The image is much the same: an outsider, out for a stroll, stumbles into a church and finds himself surprised to feel welcome there, content. This time it is Jack whose lonely walk is interrupted for reasons which seem wholly inconsequential. Out walking near a black church, he feels a “fluttering touch of some kind at the back of his neck” (Robinson, *Jack* 156) and takes off his hat to inspect it. But there is nothing there—just “a thin strip of fabric, a part of the disintegrating lining of his hat” (156) which has irritated him momentarily and which has led him, unwittingly, to assume the pose and aspect of a beggar. Before he knows it, Jack is handed the spare nickels and dimes of a few parishioners and invited inside. He acquiesces, though only because, as he perceives

it, his saving face in the disastrously humiliating situation requires attending the service in order to “find a place to put the money, a collection plate or something” (157).

This episode is significant for a couple of reasons. First, and perhaps most obviously, it demonstrates that same ordinary grace that the reader of *Lila* will recognize at once from the above scene. Where, on the one hand, and from the hypothetical perspective of, say, one of the congregants, the act of having convinced Jack to attend the service will look very much like a victory for the effort of salvation, this is not at all the case. He has not wanted to attend: accident and circumstance have forced his hand. Thus, potentially, the hopes of the well-meaning churchgoers are unfounded. On the other hand, though, it is exactly this ordinariness and seeming accident which amplifies all that comes after: Jack’s meeting with the sympathetic minister, Hutchins; his encounter with the numerous small kindnesses which perhaps make it easier for him to accept the love of Della Miles as something not entirely without precedent; and so on. The very notion of simple cause is obliterated, and the possibility of grace comes to permeate every new moment of the novel. What is interesting is that it does not quite stop there—and this is the second reason that the “hat” episode is significant. The instant of briefly illuminated ordinariness on display here in *Jack* actually prefigures its “companion” instant in *Lila*. The reader is of course liable to draw certain conclusions about the meaning of the misunderstanding that ends in Jack’s attendance at church, but it is not until she has read what is effectively the same moment in *Lila* that the full weight of the scene becomes graspable and its implications for Jack’s metaphysical predicament become apparent. Jack’s flustered entrance to the unfamiliar church is doubled and fulfilled by Lila’s, the gesture in each case resolving in consequences that are, first, wonderful (Jack’s marriage to Della, Lila’s marriage to Ames) and, finally, unknowable.

Curious, though, is that the order of things—that is, of what prefigures and what fulfills—ends up being a matter of some difficulty. Clearly, there is a sense in which what I have called

“typological form,” as it functions in McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, is at work in Robinson’s Gilead novels, but the latter case is complicated by a somewhat less straightforward narrative chronology. That is, while certain earlier images in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* can be said to repeat themselves in *Cities of the Plain*, the images and people and episodes that get doubled in Robinson’s novels are not obviously “unidirectional.” The first novel in the series is technically *Gilead*, a narrative work which takes place contemporaneously with its “sequel,” *Home*, yet there are scenes in the former which prefigure scenes in the latter—despite the contemporaneity of the two works. That John Ames, the namesake and spiritual father of Jack (christened John Ames) Boughton, has lost a wife and daughter as a young man should tell us something about the nature of the strained relationship that exists between the two men: Ames simply cannot understand how anyone would walk out on a child, having lost his own (“How could young Boughton have taken advantage of that girl? And then to have abandoned her?” [*Gilead* 158]). And, certainly, it does. But what it also tells us is that the two men are bound by similar events, and that Ames’ loss prefigures Jack’s, something that the reader learns a little more about in *Home*. Far from having callously put the transgression behind him, Jack, it seems, is haunted by the event:

“Say you do something terrible. And it’s done. And you can’t change it. Then how do you live the rest of your life? What do you say about it?”

“Do I know what terrible thing we’re talking about?”

He nodded. “Yes. You do know. When I was out walking the other day I took a wrong turn and ended up at the cemetery.” He said, “I’d forgotten she was there.” (*Home* 99)

This brief exchange with Glory reveals the extent to which Jack dwells upon the catastrophic loss—his own failing—and so it also serves to draw Jack and Ames closer together. The lost wife and child of the older man prefigure the lost “non-bride” and child of the younger. But bizarrely, this prefiguration is arranged not from before to after but from side to side, with Ames’ ruminations on

his departed wife and child occurring at about the same time as, and just down the street from, Jack's conversation with Glory. The examples of this kind of thing are multiple, and in some cases what is prefigured in a doubling (i.e., what comes "after") actually ends up preceding the first instance of that thing in narrative time, as is the case with Jack's unburdening conversations with the Reverend Hutchins in *Jack*. In these, he manages to say to the Reverend, "as if to his father, the very things he would never tell his father" (*Jack* 169), doubling and effectively redeeming those stilted conversations with Robert Boughton that occur years later in the novel *Home*.

The question, then, is how in all of these linked episodes to identify which is the first instancing and which the second of a thing. What does it mean that Jack speaks with Reverend Hutchins as if with his own father? What does it mean that both Jack and Lila "accidentally" stumble into church services to profound consequences? What does it mean that so many characters in these books are bound by relationships which contain multiple valences of meaning (Jack's father is Robert Boughton, and so is his son; Ames' son is Robby, and his spiritual "son" is also John Ames; etc.) that are spread out in time? I would like to claim that this ambiguity is a function of the same kind of expression of typology that I located in McCarthy's Border Trilogy, a reimagining of the very boundaries and possibilities of causality.

When Jack's conversation with Hutchins in Robinson's most recent novel doubles one (or really any) of the difficult conversations Jack has with his father in the novel *Home*, it fulfills that which has, for the reader, already happened—even if for the character the conversation remains years in the future. We are comforted to learn that Jack finds, or has found, a father figure with whom he can truthfully share his doubts and concerns, and that comfort is in no way eroded by the rejections we know are coming. This is because the order of events is rendered briefly meaningless by a view that cuts across the whole story. For just a moment, the reader is asked to do the impossible: to see, as Robinson puts it at the beginning of *Home*, "as God can, in geological time"

(*Home* 4). The image here, which Glory relates fondly, is of an old oak tree in the Boughtons' front yard—a tree which, considered in connection with a greater temporal whole, might “leap out of the ground and turn in the sun and spread its arms and bask in the joys of being an oak tree in Iowa” (4). Although the example is slightly imperfect inasmuch as it is still slightly human (time here is radically compressed but remains linear), it is meant to invoke a kind of divine and mysterious eternal present, the very thing Robinson continually gestures toward in the confluence of her Gilead novels. It is as though her fiction works to enact a point that she frequently returns to in her essays, a point that she makes succinctly by way of an oblique reference to quantum theory in “The Sacred, the Human.” “Determinism,” she says there, “should be a little humbled by the fact that for a century causality itself has been seen to be a profound mystery, the old rules of sequence and locality not exhaustively descriptive” (Robinson, *WAWDH* 52). This is something which bears out not only in the apparently negligible acts of checking the inside of a hat or stepping out of a rainstorm, but in the less than certain sequences of effects which follow, forward or even backward in time, from these miniscule causes.

Arguably, there is even a precise moment at which the reader's certainties regarding cause and effect must break down, and at which typological form must move from the background and into the foreground of these novels. This is the conversation—or the argument—which appears nearly word for word on two separate occasions, first in *Gilead* and then in *Home*, and which covers, finally, and in a sense explicitly, the enormously complex subject of predestination. It is that episode which Tiffany Eberle Kriner has appropriately dubbed the “predestination porch scene”: a kind of “portal between the books, a point of connection between *Gilead* and *Home*” (136). That the episode constitutes such a crucial link within the fictional world should be apparent right away, not only because it is an instance of doubling but because it is an instance of a *kind* of doubling previously absent in these books. That is, while the reader of *Home* is presented moments of obvious narrative

overlap, these moments tend to hint only obliquely at some event that we have already seen in *Gilead* (Jack's drinking binge and botched suicide attempt account for his absence at dinner, for example); they never look directly at the same event a second time. What happens, then, when Jack asks Ames if "some people are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition" (*Home* 219) is something wholly new, because strictly speaking it is not new at all: the reader who has finished *Gilead* is familiar with this same question posed in this same way, and so she experiences the moment once again. This time, though, the episode is related via the consciousness of Glory, who perceives details of the exchange that Ames, in *Gilead*, has seemed to miss. In *Home*, the scene is longer and the gaps are filled in. As Kriner notes, this ends up not just relocating the reader but reconfiguring her perception of the time in which the whole episode unfolds. "In *Gilead*," she says, "from John Ames's perspective, the conversation from Jack's pointed question to Lila's brave answer takes four pages. From Glory's perspective in *Home*, closer perhaps to the massive question, time dilates, and the conversation takes a full eight and a half pages" (Kriner 136). I would add that this dilation of time then necessarily impacts the condensed time of the same conversation in *Gilead*, enlarging it retroactively and indicating those "gaps" which had really always been full, just with the elements of a conversation not yet perceived. In this sense, they are/were prefigurative as well as fulfilling, simultaneously first and final instances in a causal sequence.

This is something which Kriner touches on briefly with respect to Lila's interjection at the close of the "predestination porch scene." ("A person can change," the latter says in response to Jack, and perhaps in response to Ames, too. "Everything can change" [*Gilead* 153; *Home* 227]. It is an arresting "final say" which, bookending Jack's initial question, appears similarly unchanged in both *Gilead* and *Home*.) For Kriner, the carefully considered remark is of such force that it actually stops the flow of time. In *Gilead*, she notes, it is preceded by the simple command "no, stay," and in *Home* by the slightly gentler "[j]ust stay for a minute"—both of which seem to be inviting everyone

present, and maybe even the reader, to see time as something that need not charge heedlessly and linearly onward. Indeed, her next suggestion makes something like this very point: "...it may be that the whole of the book *Lila* is contained in the gap of silence when 'Jack sat back in his chair, and watched her, as they all did, because she seemed to be mustering herself.' In its minute way, the conversation participates in the profusion of time" (Kriner 137). This is, I think, how we are meant to take each and every moment of each and every one of these books. It is not only that this gap of silence might contain within itself the entirety of *Lila*, but also that it might contain, by virtue of fulfilling and enclosing the same pronouncement and the same conversation in *Gilead*, the entirety of that novel. And even, in relation to what is one of the central preoccupations of the novel *Jack*—the idea that the title character has never "understood the difference between faith and presumption" (*Jack* 167)—that it might also, paradoxically, contain the whole of that most recent novel, too. This is, I recognize, a rather grand claim, but it is in some respects no more than an extension of what any reader will take to be the most obvious feature of these books anyway: that each new one grants a fuller picture of a necessarily incomplete story and absorbs, as it goes, details from the work which precedes it. What is unusual is only the idea that this operation might function backward as well as forward. And in this case, it will be helpful to remember that *Gilead*, the first of the novels, is so concerned with the luminous and unfathomable implications of the ordinary and with everything which falls into the unseen "gaps" in our ordinary ways of knowing that it hints at a great deal which is not, or is not yet, there.

Nowhere are these gaps more apparent than at the close of the "predestination porch scene" in *Home*, where Lila's shockingly authoritative statement not only puts an end to the argument that is on all sides so deeply felt, but seems as well to create around itself a sort of narrative gravity well, pulling the reader briefly and almost imperceptibly out of Glory Boughton's perceptual field. First, the third-person narration shifts to inhabit the thoughts of Robert Boughton: "[h]e sensed a

wistfulness in Ames as often as he was reminded of all the unknowable life his wife had lived and would live without him” (*Home* 227). And then, momentarily, Ames: “[h]e felt a sort of wonder for this wife of his, in so many ways unknown to him, and he could be suddenly moved by some glimpse he had never had before of the days of her youth or her loneliness, or of the thoughts of her soul” (228). These shifts would be bizarre enough to suggest error were it not for their placement at the crux of such an important scene. Robinson, we know, has taken great care to craft this same episode twice, and so is unlikely to have faulted in her narration.⁴⁷ As a possible explanation for the change in perspective, Kriner offers the following insightful remark:

The significance of these perspectival anomalies is not so much that they ferret out more, or illuminate the whole of the back story. In fact, their fragmentary quality emphasizes just for a moment that these men are here, fully thinking, perceiving, being behind the brief words offered. The fullness of each man, as full as Glory or anyone else, is glimpsed in this moment, but they remain mostly inaccessible to us. In the cracking open, the transfiguration perhaps, of narrative perspective for a moment, we see that there is so much more that we could see. In fact, the visible part of both characters’ consciousness during the scene is their being given a sudden glimpse of still *other* persons’ full and mysterious richness of presence. (140)

This last point is crucial. It is of course amazing to sense, even if fleetingly, that other complex and conscious minds are engaged in the same conversation, perceiving it in different ways; but what is even more extraordinary is the fact that those minds are directed *at each other*. When we see as Robert Boughton, we see as Robert Boughton seeing Ames. When we see as Ames, we see as Ames seeing

⁴⁷ Curiously, there is a similar sort of crucial “error” in *Jack*—something which I will address briefly in the conclusion to the present study. In that latest novel, it is the whole causal chain of the narrative which comes undone; but there, too—as with *Home*—it is not the case that we are dealing with a mere mistake. It seems to me that Robinson is consciously playing with our expectations concerning things as fundamental as perception and causality, not unlike what McCarthy is doing in his Border Trilogy.

Lila. Each small moment reflects and is revealed to contain countless others, and in this is revealed the ambiguous relationship between the two scenes. That is, in a set of texts so concerned with characters, events, and images that repeat—whether literally, at the level of reference to things which have happened in the past, or typologically,⁴⁸ via those things which are connected by virtue of their stark similarities—here is a point at which our recognition of what is repeating or what has repeated becomes effectively impossible. With the reader’s momentary transportation into the mind of John Ames comes a return to the same event in *Gilead*, which is as good as saying that what ought to fulfill the earlier scene is in fact a kind of unseen cause of it, the ordinary sequence of “before and after” rendered briefly suspect.

It is this moment of temporal and perspectival fracture which I think most convincingly aligns the Gilead novels with McCarthy’s Border Trilogy books, and in particular with the latter’s spectral bell. Whereas in *All the Pretty Horses* an event occurs which has as its cause a much later moment in time—a moment, actually, which cuts across time and indicates its fullness—in *Home* an event occurs which has no obvious stable temporal frame at all, and so effects, by a similar indication of fullness and finally by the bestowal of grace, everything that comes both before and after itself. In each case the reader is confronted with a situation which ought to be impossible. When the bell tolls on the high prairie, the conclusion of *Cities of the Plain* pierces through into the journey’s beginning. And when Jack, early on in the “predestination porch scene,” asks if grace is not simply “the pleasanter side” of predestination and at bottom indistinguishable from fate (*Home* 220), he is already the unknowable recipient of it—the same man to whom Lila will soon insist, incredibly, that “a person can change” and that “everything can change.”

⁴⁸ Typological repetition is, of course, literal in some sense. I distinguish it here from the kind of repeated reference to a single event which shows up over and over again in Robinson’s Gilead novels, but there is an admitted difficulty in differentiating the two kinds of doubling. In part this is because, on close inspection, they all but fuse together. The same event described from a different angle or by a different person is, after all, a slightly different event, the time of its occurrence beholden to the effects of relativity. At a certain point, these apparently separate kinds of repetition are revealed to be one and the same.

If there is any doubt as to the extent of this formal similarity or whether Robinson really is addressing time in the same manner as McCarthy, one need only look to her essay collection *Absence of Mind*, where in an essay first delivered as a lecture just one year after the publication of *Home* we find the following: “[q]uantum physics has raised very radical questions about the legitimacy of the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. Indeed, there is now a suggestion of the pervasive importance to the deep structures of reality of something of a kind with consciousness. The elusiveness of the mind is a consequence of its centrality, which is both its potency and its limitation” (AOM 36). The significance of the remark for the Gilead novels in general and for the “predestination porch scene” in particular should be readily apparent: shifts and overlaps in perspective, as well as the pressures exerted by those shifts and overlaps on a larger, seemingly stable reality, constitute the basic architecture of Robinson’s project. In this formulation, she may as well be describing what *Home* “does” when it is held up against, say, *Gilead*. It is the consideration of “quantum physics” which complicates the matter. Suddenly, each new mind that the reader comes to inhabit and to know (Ames, Glory, Jack, Robert, Lila) changes the narrative world not in an imaginary or metaphorical sense, but really and *materially* by way of an observation which alters the world in the same way that the experimenter alters an electron’s position by measuring it. This is to say that some of Robinson’s concerns are strikingly like McCarthy’s, especially when it comes to the matters of what kind of reality might be suggested by contemporary science and what kind of time might ground that reality.

It should be admitted, of course, that there are enormous differences here, too. For one, McCarthy’s trilogy has about it an air of fatalism that really is at odds with the world of Gilead. John Grady is set on a straight track to his demise, and the reader, little by little, is made to see that this unswerving course is finally what that whole adventure amounts to (excluding, of course, the final novel’s epilogue). Robinson’s narrative world, on the other hand, makes fate into something like a

dirty word, a concept which seeks to enclose everything but which only serves to miss the point. “Fate,” says Robert Boughton in *Home*, “is not a word I have ever found useful” (221). It is supposedly as different from predestination “as night and day” (221). Yet it does persist—certainly for Jack, who continues to imagine himself stuck on the same kind of track as John Grady and bound directly for perdition. It is possible, though, that Jack has mistaken one sort of time for another: the theoretically knowable for the categorically unknowable. On one side is the time of fate, the deterministic, apparent prediction and its attendant ill-feelings, and even the obscurely retrocausal, wherein the later event might somehow precede the earlier; and on the other side is the time of election, predestination. The latter is the unknowable effect and cause rolled into one, beyond our ability to inquire. Thus, at the end of *Cities of the Plain* when the bell tolls at the moment of John Grady’s death we might speculate that it has tolled also at the beginning of his journey, but we are unable to comment on the “result” of his final prayer: “[h]elp me... [i]f you think I’m worth it. Amen” (McCarthy, *COTP* 257).

Similarly, when in the “predestination porch scene” in *Home* Lila announces that “everything can change,” we might speculate that because the grace of her statement briefly alters the novel’s narrative perspective it also reverberates backward and grants us every other story in the series—that, for instance, Jack’s totally unexpected encounter with Della toward the end of *Jack* (“[j]ust when he thought he knew something about the rest of his life, there she was” [Robinson, *Jack* 198]) is a direct result of Lila’s brave announcement in *Home*. But we are unable to answer Jack’s entirely earnest question about whether or not he is an instance of predestination. And this is perhaps the lesson in reading the Border Trilogy and the Gilead novels side by side: that there is, regardless of what is determined, always some unknowable excess which stands against it, behind it, and even in it—an observer who (not to put too fine a point on it) changes what is observed in the very act of measuring.

What finally reveals this is, as I have said, a similarity of form which binds the two works together. In the Border Trilogy, the tolling bell indicates that totality against which every other moment is to be weighed, not only because it marks the end of John Grady's life and hence the end of the story in which his life subsists, but also because it concretizes the very form of the work: the later event which fulfills the earlier is revealed to have a causal role in that which preceded it. Time here is well and truly "out of joint." In the Gilead novels, the same sort of thing happens in what is arguably that series' climactic moment: Lila's assurance that "everything can change" demonstrates, in the midst of theological deadlock, that there is more to the problem of predestination than simple determinism, and in doing so points us straight at the totality which lurks always just out of sight—other minds and other stories. But her announcement in *Home*, surrounded briefly by a warp in narrative perspective, is also in some sense *causally* linked to those other minds, not just fulfilling the same conversation in *Gilead* but actually, through an apparently impossible intervention, making it possible in the first place.

This is that same typological form which the reader finds in the Border Trilogy, and in both cases it adheres to roughly the same model proposed by Erich Auerbach in his work on "figures." "The two poles of the figure," we will recall him saying, "are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life" (Auerbach 53). In the case of biblical typology, the second, fulfilling pole is Christ, and thus the temporal relation, no less real or material or historical for this fact, is to be reconsidered. If, after all, the fulfilling event is also the divine Word of God, then it is directly responsible for what prefigures it, both as its cause and its redemption. It is this very relation which grounds the Border Trilogy and the Gilead novels, revealing itself in brief flashes before quickly receding from view. Always, though, it presses the reader to consider a world which is ontologically a work in progress, a world whose "log," to quote McCarthy, "must outdistance any possible description of it" (*COTP* 286). One might say this only a

little differently by borrowing—again—from Augustine. “The nature of God,” the latter says, “is a circle whose centre is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere.”⁴⁹ For Robinson and McCarthy, this seems to be as true of time as it is of the divine.

⁴⁹ This remark is variously attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, the German theologian Meister Eckhart, and the Neoplatonic philosopher Gaius Marius Victorinus, though Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay “Circles,” has pointed to Augustine as its source (Emerson 252). I am here willing to take Emerson at his word.

Chapter Four—Wishful Thinking: Loss and the Overcoming of Loss in *Housekeeping* and *Blood Meridian*

For a study concerned with the overlaps and meaningful contradictions emerging from scientific and religious forms, especially as those forms tend to express themselves in ways that are definitely but irresolvably material, one concept in particular will always seem to pose a problem. Evil, that mainstay of theological concern, has little in the way of scientific analogue, nor does it lend itself to that essentially scientific mode of consideration in which the components of a given system are made to provide a reasonably satisfying account of their whole. As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, our perception of evil is often enough that it is somehow acausal or autocausal, in superabundance of the material causes and effects of the world as we normally understand it—not unlike good (4). This absence of cause or accounting is offset by the extremity of another position: the idea that evil is wholly reducible to factors relating to social conditions or neurochemistry. It would seem, though, that to explain evil away like this would also be to discard the concept altogether as effectively useless. Eagleton splits the difference, claiming that while evil is metaphysical, “in the sense that it takes up an attitude toward being as such,” it does not simply “drop from the skies” (16). The problem for the current project should be clear enough already. That is, to offer a scientific “counterpart” to evil, as, for instance, the psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen does,⁵⁰ is to nullify the utility of such a concept in the first place; it is to talk about something else entirely. Thus, to talk about evil as something which exists in a form that is at once *wholly* material and *wholly* in excess of

⁵⁰ See Baron-Cohen’s book *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

the material world is not to suggest a fruitful contradiction or non-contradiction; rather, it is to talk about two quite different (but not opposing) things.

Where evil gives way to its effects, though—to loss, suffering, and pain—there is the very real possibility of framing the problem in material terms, these effects being recognizably material in ways that the concept on its own is not. Indeed, according to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, part of the “enigma” of the concept of evil is that it concerns itself with both wrongdoing *and* suffering, and so seems to point in two quite different directions. What binds the two together, Ricoeur says, is pain—i.e., guilt on the one hand and some form of suffering on the other (250). The frayed concept, in other words, is to a certain extent unified and made comprehensible (as far as it can be) in its material manifestations.

It is for this reason that the following chapter addresses the problem of evil in both Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* without seeming to do so directly, even though the problem which it more obviously addresses—namely, the immensity of loss and the possibility of its overcoming—is necessarily bound up with what evil is and how it functions. It will be my argument here, just as it has been my argument in the preceding chapters, that this problem of loss and the suggestion of its overcoming (whether legitimate or futile) is expressed in each of these novels simultaneously at the level of content and form. In *Housekeeping*, the tragic losses related by the protagonist and narrator Ruth are consistently undermined by her imaginative constructions of “alternate” scenarios, worlds in which these losses are made up for and all suffering is eased. It is my claim that the novel is in constant tension with itself: that its succession of metaphorical images provides the impression of an unending series in which historical losses must be continually reflected and reconsidered, but at the same time out of these losses arises the possibility of their redemption in the form of Ruth’s imaginative hypotheticals. In *Blood Meridian*, instances of suffering are considerably more overt, though the focus of the work is typically

understood to be the violent causes and not their painful effects. It will be my claim that while this is on some level correct, this abundant violence is nonetheless destabilized by the novel's curiously stylized form, a form whose inverted sentences and archaic constructions require a careful and even sympathetic attention to the disastrous suffering behind the bloodthirsty momentum of the narrative. In both novels, the problem of evil (and a means of addressing it) is approached by way of its effects and the possibility of their overcoming. But also, because theodicy is here considered in terms of the particular, material effects of suffering and loss, it becomes possible to speak of a scientific "counterpart," at least by way of analogue. This I locate in the law of conservation of energy, the first law of thermodynamics—a rule whose form turns out to be remarkably similar to that of both the attempted overcoming of loss/suffering and the narrative structures of *Housekeeping* and *Blood Meridian*.

I

Because of the sheer density of Marilynne Robinson's first novel, not to mention the supposed manner of its composition, it can be difficult to say what exactly *Housekeeping* is about. On its surface, the story is concerned with the coming-of-age of two sisters in the American West, sometime presumably around the close of the 1950s (though no precise timeline is specified). The sisters are Ruth, the novel's narrator, and Lucille, her younger and perhaps more conventional companion; and the location is Fingerbone, a fictional town located on the edge of a lake which is probably an approximation of Lake Pend Oreille in northern Idaho. The girls' mother has committed suicide, and they are left to live first with their grandmother, who soon passes away, and then with their great-aunts, who finally leave them in the care of their mother's vagabond sister,

Sylvie. *Housekeeping* traces the development of this latter makeshift family and shows us the conflicting effects its new matriarch has upon the two girls: on the one hand freeing them, and on the other unmooring them terrifyingly. It would be equally correct, though, to say that the novel concerned the process of coming to terms with grief, or that it was largely about the relationship between a civilized society and an individual whose imaginings and impulses led her further and further away from such a thing—or that it was a love letter to transiency, a kind of prose-form “Song of the Open Road.” Its possibilities and possible readings multiply endlessly because the novel functions in such a way as to guarantee their instability. Each new reading only suggests another, which, in turn, suggests another, thanks in large part to a tangle of metaphors which makes up the core of *Housekeeping*. The surface and deep of the lake, for instance, is also the surface and deep of the mind, which is the interior and exterior of Ruth and Lucille’s grandmother’s house, which is not only indoors and outdoors, but town and wilderness, shelter and storm, dreamworld and waking world, domestic order and cluttered chaos. At every turn, these contrasting zones give way to others, and so meaning is, or would seem to be, forever deferred.

In part, at least, this instability looks to be the result of *Housekeeping*’s somewhat unusual origin, the story of which is related by Robinson in several different interviews with but slight variations. The following is taken from an interview with *The Paris Review*:

When I went to college, I majored in American literature, which was unusual then. But it meant that I was broadly exposed to nineteenth-century American literature. I became interested in the way that American writers used metaphoric language, starting with Emerson. When I entered the Ph.D. program, I started writing these metaphors down just to get the feeling of writing in that voice. After I finished my dissertation, I read through the stack of metaphors and they cohered in a way that I hadn’t expected. I could see that I had created something that implied much more. (Fay)

It is interesting to imagine the way in which these metaphors must have come together, each image already laden with meaning and yet turning out to contain depths which had been utterly unexpected of the exercise (or whatever it was) in its isolation. There is a fascinating parallel with a particular moment in the novel itself, when Ruth wonders, about the minute details of memory and dreams, why it is that they express precisely *this* gesture or *that* action, rather than some other one—that perhaps there might be some inherent tendency toward completion and comprehensibility in things. “What are all these fragments for,” she asks herself, “if not to be knit up finally?” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 92). It is tempting to think of the novel as containing some covert expression of its own composition: Ruth as author of the narrative world by virtue of her attempts to invest its bits and fragments with a greater coherency, say. But while this might well be worth consideration, it will be more instructive for an inquiry into the meaning of *Housekeeping* to look at the impulse *behind* Robinson’s early metaphorical fragments—which is to say, the kind of “metaphoric language” that she finds in nineteenth-century American literature, specifically in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. This kind of background will no doubt feel a bit digressive from more immediate concerns with the shape and operation of Robinson’s novel, but I can only assure that it will be of crucial importance to any understanding of it. And so, before turning to the form and meaning of *Housekeeping* more directly, I would like to look briefly at the kind of form upon which that novel is built and with which it finds itself in conversation.

In a much earlier interview on the subject of the same book, Robinson admits not only to the influence of *Moby-Dick* (“the book I admire most in the world... after the bible of course”) but to its presence as a kind of conversational counterpoint for what was eventually to become *Housekeeping*: “I was *told* that I was pointedly excluded as a woman from *Moby-Dick*, that this was a world that meant to exclude me and did exclude me, but I never felt that was true, and I thought if I could write a book in which there were no male characters that men could read—comfortably—

then I get *Moby-Dick*” (Schaub 234–235). This is an admission which should be illuminating, but which should really come as no surprise to anyone who has considered *Housekeeping*’s first line for more than an instant. “My name is Ruth,” after all, is a sort of corrective of the suggestively hypothetical “Call me Ishmael,” and its biblical point of reference is a subtle response to the name Melville has chosen for his protagonist. Ishmael, the exile, stands in contrast to Ruth, the Moabite whose devotion finally places her within the lineage of Jesus Christ. (Though, interestingly, just like the metaphors in *Housekeeping*, these roles are by no means fixed, and at the close of the novel Ruth finds herself a wanderer after the fashion of both the biblical and the Melvillean Ishmael.) In the same interview, though, Robinson seems to suggest that her novel has just as much in common with Emerson’s essay “Nature” as it does with Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and that she is indebted to a method which, although it is present in the latter, ultimately arises out of the former—the idea that, as she puts it, “reality must somehow be describable as linked through analogue” (Schaub 239). For Emerson, this was a method which took the individual’s experience of nature as a sort of emblem for a greater goodness that constituted the whole of being. For Melville, it functioned similarly, but what it finally realized was not the oneness of the individual with some plainly benevolent nature but her oneness with a vast and yawning emptiness. Robinson’s interviewer is quick to point out the discrepancy, and, in doing so, to hint at a question which it seems we ought to be asking ourselves: how can *Housekeeping*, if it is not to devolve into paradox, sensibly maintain such divergent influences?

Here, some background is required. In “Nature,” Emerson proceeds from the premise that human beings, if they are to participate truly in the fullness of being—which is to say, if they are to live well—must seek a kind of solitude which is only to be found in nature. It is there, he claims, that it is possible for one to find a sense of accord with all that is and to recognize at last a connection with divinity. Perhaps the most famous expression of his idea appears toward the beginning of the

essay, when Emerson likens the alert and solitary person to a “transparent eyeball,” newly, if momentarily, cut loose from himself: “Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (Emerson 6). The use of the word “blithe” here does much to colour one’s impression of the passage, inviting a sense of rapturous apprehension where there might as easily be one of terrified awe. Melville (among others⁵¹) seems to have accepted the former interpretation, because in *Moby-Dick*, and specifically in “The Mast-Head,” he offers a clear reply to Emerson’s apparently optimistic conception of nature and its connection to the divine. At the close of the chapter, we read the following account of a “young Platonist” who had been sent up the mast-head with the charge of sighting whales on the far horizon: “. . . lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature. . . .” (Melville 228–29). The young man is a stand-in for Ishmael himself, his experience atop the mast the very image of the narrator’s own, but we are also asked to see in this portrait of practical inexperience the “transcendentalist” in general and Emerson in particular. The vastness of the natural world is here spread out before him, the “blithe air” surrounds, and, atop this gently bobbing perch high up in “infinite space,” “all mean egotism vanishes.” Melville’s disturbing punchline follows in the form of a final warning from

⁵¹ Specifically, I am thinking of Nathaniel Hawthorne, in whose story “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” we find something which looks quite a lot like the criticism offered by Melville. In the story, Hawthorne’s protagonist, Robin, stops to rest at the foot of a church, and turning to look inside the building sees that a single beam of moonlight has fallen upon the pulpit and “the opened page of the great Bible” (105). What follows is Robin’s reflection on the scene: “Had Nature, in that deep hour, become a worshipper in the house, which man had builded? Or was that heavenly light the visible sanctity of the place, visible because no earthly and impure feet were within the walls? The scene made Robin’s heart shiver with a sensation of loneliness stronger than he had ever felt in the remotest depths of his native woods; so he turned away, and sat down again before the door” (105). Nature here becomes something isolating and unsettling, and Robin becomes the failed transcendentalist, unable to take solace in communion with the quiet of the scene or in his moment of respite.

Ishmael: “But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror,” and perhaps, he muses, “at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever” (Melville 229). It is especially pointed that the hypothetical lookout falls through air which is “transparent,” as though in fact this too had been no more than a part of his dream—a dream shared by Emerson, whose “transparent eyeball” must have been similarly fragile.

For a couple of reasons, Melville’s parody is not entirely fair. First, although Emerson is undoubtedly an essayist of considerable optimism, his awe before the grandeur of things is not without its terror or its loneliness. The following lines out of “Nature,” for instance, might as easily confirm Melville’s position as Emerson’s: “We are as much strangers in nature as we are aliens from God. We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us” (Emerson 33). Here the dispassionate experience of being “part or parcel of God” is tempered—or certainly, it looks like it is tempered—by the kind of recognition of fundamental strangeness that regularly shows up in *Moby-Dick*. Second, and this will bring the two authors much closer together, Melville, in his criticism of Emerson, is actually at work within the confines of the same method that he has set out to challenge. This is something Robinson notes in the above-mentioned interview when she is asked if Ruth, *Housekeeping*’s narrator, is not just engaged in starry-eyed Emersonian optimism when she considers that every fragment might finally be made to cohere. Robinson’s response is worth quoting in full:

What, in effect, anyone does, since no one has any options, is to cast out nets or lures or whatever they hope, that they consider are appropriate to snagging a bit of reality for them. Of course what they catch depends on what they deploy. They can never know that with a finer net or a larger net or a better lure they’d have brought in a different reality. This is something no one ever knows. It seems to me that in a way the masthead chapter is a classic

demonstration of a sort of Emersonian method which is based on the assumption of the inadequacy of the method. That's what so brilliant about it. You can create an absolutely dazzling metaphor that seems to be resolving things and pulling things together and reconciling things and making sense of things, and then you can collapse the metaphor, and what you're left with is an understanding that's larger than you had before, but finally it is a legitimate understanding because you know it's wrong or you know it's imperfectly partial. I mean, what they [Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Melville, etc.] are all trying to do is use language as a method of comprehension on the largest scale, at the same time using all the resources of language and absolutely insisting that language is not an appropriate tool.

(Schaub 240–41)

“The Mast-Head,” in other words, is a resolution against Emerson which finally reveals itself to function in precisely the shape that Emerson outlines in “Nature”—namely, a highly particular experience becomes an analogue for a larger and more general revelation about perceiving reality and its limitations. The two men are engaged in what at last amounts to the same project, even though they are working on it for different reasons, and even though they arrive at very different conclusions. Robinson's point here is absolutely crucial to an understanding of *Housekeeping*, not only because the novel is engaged in this same project, but because it is engaged in it in such a way as to draw attention to the shape of the Emersonian method. That is, when the larger metaphors in *Housekeeping* “collapse,” they are so intricately bound to each other that there can be no sense of finality, so every metaphor collapsed is necessarily and even obviously only a part of yet another metaphor.

After a lengthy digression into Robinson's literary influences, then, we might be tempted to say that the basic form of *Housekeeping* is a refusal of resolution or a deferral of closure. Let us take the following scene as a kind of test case. One winter evening, probably out of curiosity, Ruth and

Lucille find themselves following alongside a passenger train that has slowed to approach the lake's railway bridge. They plod through the snow toward the frozen lake, watching as an elegantly dressed young woman obsessively checks her reflection in one of the train's windows. "The woman," Ruth recalls, "looked at the window very often, clearly absorbed by what she saw, which was not but merely seemed to be Lucille and me scrambling to stay beside her, too breathless to shout" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 54). As the train reaches the bridge, Ruth suggests that they might follow by walking out across the lake, but Lucille refuses, and so the woman vanishes into the night. The meaning of this event is nearly impossible to pin down, for reasons which become clear when one attempts to parse the scene's multiple reflections, which in turn are only complicated by the addition of further details. For example, Ruth admits to dreaming of the woman later (and that "the dream is very like the event itself" [55]), and then, in a different context which returns us to this same event, she thinks of how "terrible" it would be "to stand outside in the dark and watch a woman in a lighted room studying her face in a window, and to throw a stone at her, shattering the glass, and then to watch the window knit itself up again..." (162–63).

The sheer number of layers here is dizzying. Ruth and Lucille stand apart from the woman on the train, for whom the world is simultaneously dark and reflected, while on the other side of the glass any reflection is erased by the light from the train's interior. But we must imagine the possibility of the girls, too, being darkly reflected in the patches of ice before the lake, the depths of the latter surely bearing on the meaning of the event. And then there is the suggestion that the moment is to be considered as both dream and waking reality, and that the barrier of the train's window might be shattered or simply—like the surface of water—disturbed. All of these images, too, might be taken to correspond with the mind—here of either Ruth, Lucille, or the woman on the train—and that in turn might reach back outward into other worlds and encompass, or attempt to

encompass, other images. It is easy to imagine the event as an infinite series of metaphors ultimately resistant to any final decoding.

This form of the novel—its resistance to closure—is also, though, curiously at odds with one of the more conspicuous features of its narration. That is, every so often Ruth makes use of a sort of hypothetical in order to fill in the gaps in what it is that she is able to know about the world. Here is an example: “One day my grandmother *must have carried* out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring sunlight, wearing her widow’s black, performing the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith. *Say there were* two or three inches of hard old snow on the ground, with earth here and there oozing through the broken places...” (*Housekeeping* 16, emphasis added). The passage goes on to grant reality to a scene which we must know, thanks to the uncertainties inherent in “must have” and “say there were,” is a fabrication of the narrator’s vivid imagination, and yet which we come to accept as just as much a part of the reality of the narrative world as any other.

All of this is especially telling in context, for immediately prior to it Ruth is describing the apparently ordinary but actually quite troubled period following the drowning death of her grandfather. “The disaster,” she recalls, “had fallen out of sight, like the train itself, and if the calm that followed it was not greater than the calm that came before it, it had seemed so. And the dear ordinary had healed as seamlessly as an image on water” (15). Immediately afterwards, she confirms, as much for herself perhaps as for us, the meaning and importance of what she has just imagined/remembered: “So the wind that billowed her sheets announced to her the resurrection of the ordinary” (18). It is as if the entire episode is composed in order to deal with the central problem of the story that Ruth wants to tell: that it can offer no closure because it is so thoroughly a product of suffering and loss. When Ruth confronts the death of her grandfather, we might say, and especially when she confronts the supposed calm that emerges shortly thereafter, she comes to see the messiness of her own narrative and her own life. She confronts the painful and irresolvable

process of human endeavour, and it is as if in doing so she sets out to reconfigure the very form of the novel, *refusing* its refusal of resolution. In these hypotheticals, Ruth imagines the possibility of some final closure, an inaccessible moment in which all of the fragments and all of the metaphors that make up her story will be glimpsed from without and “knit up finally.”

This is the work’s central tension and its central concern. The narrative world which is offered by Ruth, and which as we have noted already is a series of linked but finally irresolvable metaphors, is periodically “interrupted” in such a way as to suggest that these metaphors might be resolved after all. The crucial point, though, is that they never are—at least, not really, and not here. It is rather that in every aspect of her tale Ruth must at last come to see the limits, inconsistencies, and multiplicities of meaning which have grown out of her own sense of loss, and in doing so she must also wonder if there is not some end to it, an “afterwards” in which meaning might be made to cohere. There is, then, a doubleness at work in the form of the novel, a simultaneous rejection and affirmation of closure. On the one hand there is an adherence to a method which Robinson has noted (in her interview) is essentially Emersonian—the long procession of metaphors which are collapsed in sequence and finally reveal only other metaphors; and on the other hand there is a periodic interjection which would seem to undo that infinity of deferral by imagining its end.

But Ruth’s hypotheticals are not merely the cessation of a sequence. In fact, they are quite nearly the opposite—i.e., the acknowledgement of that which is and must always remain unknowable by virtue of its infinity from a kind of impossible standpoint *beyond* that sequence. When she asks us to consider that her grandmother must have “stooped breathlessly in her corset to lift up a sodden sheet by its hems” (16), and that, in pinning the sheet to the lines she must have somehow come through the pain of her loss and managed to “resurrect the ordinary,” Ruth places us in an impossible position beyond the incomprehensible well of loss which has beset her family until that point. And she does this not with the suggestion of simple closure but by asking us to

imagine some respite which may well have never been, for she knows that an infinite refusal of closure must still, by virtue of what it denies, contain some hope for its opposite (that is, closure). This is the form of the novel inverted, or perhaps more accurately, momentarily glimpsed from some impossible outside. It is worth noting of this inversion (which is, of course, still a part of what we must call the novel's form) that while it does appear to step outside of the Emersonian method by offering up the hint of resolution, what it really does is provide us with a new perspective on this method by conceiving of the infinity that it implies from without—which, interestingly, is something that Emerson himself does in his later essay “Circles,” though perhaps without intending to. “Our life,” he says there, “is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature,” but, also: “[o]ur globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of facts” (Emerson 252). The allusion to his earlier image, the “transparent eyeball,” is clear enough, but here there is a new image appended to the old. Suddenly, we are made to see that for all of its transparency the eyeball is nonetheless a geometric figure which describes a limit, and that, even if it repudiates it, there is in its very shape the prospect of an enclosure and a wholeness.

In *Housekeeping*, Ruth's hypotheticals must function in a similar way. Though her story is presented to us in the form of a huge and interconnected metaphorical series, occasionally she arrives at a moment in which that series reveals itself to her to be the product of a great sequence of losses; and it is then, on the precipice of that infinitely replicating loss, that she glimpses the opposite which must be contained therein: a kind of infinite repair. Anthony Domestico, who has rejected (as I would like to, but with an asterisk) readings of *Housekeeping* which take the novel to be engaged in some affirmation of “indeterminacy,” emphasizes the fact that Ruth's hypotheticals are always imperative. “[I]t is precisely this feature,” he claims, “that helps turn Ruthie's hypotheses into stable points within the novel, moments where Ruthie and the reader jointly proclaim a truth that far exceeds any factual detail or historical record” (Domestico 98). The statements, he says, function as

creeds, uniting reader and narrator in an act of affirmation which operates much like the Christian Apostles' Creed, even going so far as to mirror its repetitions. While this is a convincing and fascinating argument, though, I wonder if it does not leave open the question of a kind of origin *in* indeterminacy. Which is to say, these imperatives, whether or not they can be called “credal,” seem to me to affirm something which is still contained in their opposites, in a sort of lack. There is something to be said about this doubled form—both indeterminate and determinate, infinitely lost and infinitely repaired—that Domestico does not quite approach here, namely, that *Housekeeping* looks to be a novel which is finally and impossibly *both* determinate and indeterminate, even if it is its eventual determinacy (its affirmation) which emerges most fully and clearly.

I would like to claim, then, that the form of this novel, as well as what we might say *Housekeeping* is about, consists in an overcoming of suffering and loss—that is, a process of recognition and repair which acknowledges an insurmountable obstacle, but which sees simultaneously and in that same object the means of its unfolding process of overcoming. In being so constituted, the novel stands as a kind of unlikely theodicy, engaging seriously with the problem of evil by way of its effects in ways which I hope will become clear in a moment. Admittedly, this is a difficult and abstract claim, and I am well aware of the danger here of embarking on increasingly unstable theoretical ground. So I turn now to a couple of examples which I hope will prove illuminating: the first from the text itself and from what might well be its most enigmatic chapter; and the second from *Paradise Lost*, a source which should go some of the way to shoring up my argument about what it is that *Housekeeping* is doing, and what it is, consequently, that *Housekeeping* is about.

Perhaps the closest that Ruth gets to revealing what her narrative is up to is, strangely, in that chapter where she appears most absent. This is the novel's tenth, which begins not with any sort of obvious continuation of the tale but rather with the following biblical image: “Cain murdered Abel,

and blood cried out from the earth; the house fell on Job's children, and a voice was induced or provoked into speaking from a whirlwind; and Rachel mourned for her children; and King David for Absalom" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 192). This dark reflection on the nature of time and mourning continues for two pages before Ruth's narrative voice is restored, and it is only after her return—which is to say, after the return of the "I" which lets us know that our subjectivity is hers—that the long reflection arrives at what may easily be called its epiphany. "Memory," muses Ruth, "is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it. God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell, or so the story goes. And while He was on earth he mended families" (194). The account continues with a brief description of Christ's time on earth and of His death before finally arriving at the outcome of such a loss: the hope for its opposite, for the mending which might follow from such a catastrophe if we would only have the strength to look for it. Ruth considers this possibility and takes it a step further:

There is so little to remember of anyone—an anecdote, a conversation at table. But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming, habitual fondness, not having meant to keep us waiting long. (194–95)

Her wish here takes on much the same form as her hypothetical formulations elsewhere in the novel, albeit without those imperatives noted by Domestico. A loss, or the memory of a loss, grows overwhelming and is considered with such careful attention that it eventually yields up the opposite which it has always contained. When Ruth turns hope in the abstract into the highly particular image of a person walking "through the door" and "strok[ing] our hair with dreaming, habitual fondness,"

she offers up yet another example of that same response to loss which is so tightly bound up in *Housekeeping's* form. She imagines the impossible outside of grief.

But this outside is not really an outside at all, because according to Ruth's description, the transgressive act (her mother's suicide, say) or the act which issues in loss and suffering must also contain the desire for repair which follows from it. In her description, the original moment of human sin—the Fall of Man—becomes such a fall that it opens up a vortex through which God is pulled, not, presumably, because an irresistible current has been formed, but because God, by virtue of being God, must have felt the loss infinitely and considered, in His infinitude, the possibility of its repair. Thus, from the very first, grief and loss might be said to have contained all that they had not yet arrived at and looked to defer infinitely. Always there was the hope of redemption. This, I claim, is how we ought to read those passages in *Housekeeping* where Ruth offers up hypothetical reconfigurations of past events and invites us to “imagine” some alternate reality where everything is forgiven, redeemed, or “knit up finally.”

To “imagine” or to “say that” in these cases is less to presume the existence of that which is not there—or not yet there—than it is to recognize that these so-called hypotheticals and imaginings constitute a reality as-yet-unseen but nonetheless “real” in measure equal to that which gave rise to the utterances of these hypotheticals in the first place. When, in order to make a point about loss and its effect upon the ordinary, Ruth “imagines” that her “mother had come back that Sunday, say in the evening, and that she had kissed our hair” (195), she envisions a beautiful reconciliation that never was. Yet contained within the actual loss of her mother is a demand of such magnitude that it gives rise to a level of attention to detail which makes possible the dream of reconciliation. Had she not vanished, Ruth notes, her mother would have remained more or less ordinary: “We would have known nothing of the nature and reach of her sorrow if she had come back. But she left us and broke the family and the sorrow was released and we saw its wings and saw it fly a thousand ways

into the hills..." (198). The hypothetical, then, which would seem to be an exercise in the expression of some absent but desired whole is in fact a part of the very thing it looks to overcome. Which is as good as to say that the whole *already* exists.

This would be well and good but for the fact of the particular suffering out of which that whole must be taken to emerge. Indeed, it would be wrong to ignore the sense which we get in reading *Housekeeping* that Ruth's hypotheticals are really just that, and that primarily this is a novel about a family fractured and a loss which unfolds (and will continue to unfold) historically. Here we encounter a familiar aspect of the problem of evil: that suffering which is, by appearance, undeserved. Ruth's grandfather, a "watchman, or perhaps a signalman" (5) with the railroad, is killed when his train derails and sinks to the bottom of the lake; Ruth's mother, Helen, kills herself almost calmly by "sailing" her car from the top of a cliff into that same body of water which had taken her father; Ruth's aunt Sylvie—the girls' only remaining guardian—is discovered one day in the middle of what looks quite a lot like a suicide attempt of her own, perched atop the railway bridge in the driving wind.⁵² These images, among others, would seem to ground the book principally in sorrow and darkness, and this is not something which should be taken lightly. There is, though, the very real possibility that this is something which Robinson considered, and that what looks to be a futile struggle against the conditions imposed by a creeping and effectively endless loss is in fact an attempt to *reckon* with the problem of suffering, and thus the problem of evil, by way of an engagement which only seems imagined. That is, *Housekeeping* presents us with a legacy of deep sorrow in the form of a first-person narration and asks us to recognize the absolute impossibility of the narrator's attempts at overcoming that sorrow by means of her imaginative acts. *But*, it

⁵² There is a certain amount of ambiguity to this last event. Sylvie's insistence that she "always wondered what it would be like" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 82) seems to refer to the experience of walking out onto the bridge to feel the full force of the wind in her face, but Ruth and Lucille cannot help but connect it to their own mother's death: "We were very upset, all the same, for reasons too numerous to mention. Clearly our aunt was not a stable person" (82). Suffering here is suggested both in the form of Sylvie's potential suicide ideation and Ruth and Lucille's distress at the thought of losing another mother (or mother-figure).

simultaneously affirms the necessity of its historical losses—the deaths, the floods, the accidents, etc.—for the care and attention which are devoted to those imaginative acts. And what is more: in doing so it paradoxically presents the acts (Ruth’s hypotheticals) as more than imaginative. They become constitutive of a greater reality, and they become bound up in the moments of loss themselves.

In this respect, the form of the novel as overcoming-of-suffering-and-loss represents not only an interesting meditation on the nature of types of infinitude, but a kind of theodicy as well. Ruth’s imperative statements build anew out of particular losses, but her constructive imaginings are only made possible in the first place *because of* those losses. This is, curiously, not unlike the expression of divine love which John Milton relates in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, when God, having recently been set upon by and then having repelled Satan’s army, considers the possibility of a lingering consequence of the evil act: that although the assault ended in failure, and although the loss of the rebel angels did little to damage the strength of heaven, it might be that Satan yet rejoices for what he takes to be a wound inflicted upon creation and hence upon divinity. Milton’s God frames the problem, as well as its solution, in the following terms:

But least his heart exalt him in the harme
Already done, to have dispeopl’d Heav’n
My damage fondly deem’d, I can repaire
That detriment, if such it be to lose
Self-lost, and in a moment will create
Another World, out of one man a Race
Of men innumerable.... (Book VII, 150–56)

The “reparative” act—the creation of Adam and by consequence the whole of humanity—is here performed not to make up for the numerical loss of heavenly beings whom Satan had recruited to

his own purposes, but rather it is performed as a kind of counter to the presumption that any wound against divinity might have been possible in the first place. We must imagine that, in addition to anger, there is sorrow here, extended from God to His enemy who has set himself against heaven to his own “detriment.” Here Satan’s freely willed “self-loss” has issued in its opposite: divine attention to a particular loss, and thus the free and loving act of creation which would “repair” it—though what is repaired is not, strictly speaking, a wound but the faulty notion that some final wounding was possible at all.

We see something similar happening in chapter ten of *Housekeeping* when Ruth describes what she takes to be the circumstances surrounding the primordial murder. Cain, who has murdered his brother Abel in a fit of jealousy, is imagined to be a sort of darkly creative figure whose unprecedented act of violence is, in reality, not unprecedented at all, but instead an awful reflection of the original act of divine creation. But the totality toward which Cain strives in this violent act is finally a false totality because it would do away with creation and leave only himself, a finite part of it. The consequence is that, just as in *Paradise Lost*, God grieves for a loss which must already contain some suggestion of its own repair. “Cain,” says Ruth, “the image of God, gave the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow, and God Himself heard the voice, and grieved for the sorrow, so Cain was a creator, in the image of his Creator” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 193).

This passage in its entirety makes for a bizarre and fascinating take on the problem of evil, not least because it appears to attribute it to the creative act of God. Consider, for instance, the following: “In the newness of the world God was a young man, and grew indignant over the slightest things. In the newness of the world God had perhaps not Himself realized the ramifications of certain of His laws, for example, that shock will spend itself in waves; that our images will mimic every gesture, and that shattered they will multiply and mimic every gesture ten, a hundred, or a thousand times” (193). It is but shortly after this that Ruth suggests Cain’s act might have been a

mimetic one, and that his murderous impulse might have been not only fated but in some sense encouraged by the initial act of creation. “God troubled the waters where He saw His face,” she says, “and Cain became his children and their children and theirs, through a thousand generations...” (193). Of course, to read the passage in this way, knowing what we know about the rest of the book, and even to a certain extent about Robinson herself, is to misunderstand something crucial about it—namely, its central metaphorical conceit, the idea that although the creative act is itself perfect, its reflection is not.⁵³ The destructive act—the evil act—aims not at a kind of naïve reproduction of creation but at its wholly selfish opposite: the erasure of what is and the installation of the individual in place of the creator. But what this must lead to at last is the destruction of that same individual, who can now only destroy.⁵⁴ This means that Cain’s action, like Satan’s in *Paradise Lost*, is less a challenge to God than it is a cause for His enormous sadness at having lost a piece of His beloved creation. In this respect, the “shock that spends itself in waves” refers not to some necessary act of destruction, but to the vast and tragic consequence of the destructive act which arises freely. And it is this which we must believe, along with Ruth, draws God’s attention and so ultimately comes to contain the possibility of its own repair.

Formally, this is exactly what is going on in *Housekeeping*. When Ruth asks us to “imagine” something that is not, she is doing so in order to draw our attention to the possible outcome of a yearning that issues from loss. Her attention in these moments indicates a higher order of attention

⁵³ In a recent interview with Rowan Williams, Robinson discusses some of the less familiar historical connotations of the word “depravity,” which often gets linked to (and is not infrequently used to vilify) John Calvin. Depravity, she says there, “meant something ‘warped’ ... And when you think of the importance of mirrors for him [Calvin], and the fact that at that period it would have been very difficult to make a truly accurate mirror or lens—I mean, it seems to me as if the idea of depravity, of warpedness, has everything to do with that very modern conception that he has that yes, indeed, we perceive brilliantly and yes, indeed, there’s always a major flaw in what we perceive...” (Williams, *TLCP*). It is in against this sort of backdrop, I think, that we ought to consider the metaphorical reflection in *Housekeeping*.

⁵⁴ This is something that C. S. Lewis, in his book-length “preface” to *Paradise Lost*, notes of Milton’s Satan. “Throughout the poem,” says Lewis, “[Satan] is engaged in sawing off the branch he is sitting on, not only in the quasi-political sense already indicated, but in a deeper sense still, since a creature revolting against a creator is revolting against the source of his own powers—including even his power to revolt” (96–97).

which, if we grant its capacity for reconciliation, must provide some hope for a more complete version of reality that is as yet unseen. As a treatment of the problem of evil, though, this might seem to be a bit lacking, in part because it does only address one aspect of the problem. That is, although we can be absolutely sure that *Housekeeping* is concerned with the suffering of its characters and with their historical losses, there is little mention of the kind of active malice which we might wish to attribute to Cain or to Satan. (The only real exception lies in a short passage which describes the denizens of Fingerbone and some of the different ways in which they have been “given to murder” [177], but this suggestion of violence turns out to be just that.)

According to Paul Ricoeur, the “whole enigma of evil” rests with the fact that it purports to describe *both* wrongdoing and suffering, categories he takes to be heterogeneous (250). If there is any kind of bridge between the two, he notes that it is to be found in “pain”: “...punishment is a form of physical and psychical suffering, whether it involves corporal punishment, some deprivation of liberty, shame, or humiliation. This may be why we speak of guilt itself as a *poena*, that is, as a ‘pain,’ a term which bridges the gap between evil committed and evil undergone” (Ricoeur 250). The guilty party, of course, need not always feel pain in his guilt—or even, really, recognize his guilt at having committed some evil act. But the very fact of the action is inextricable from the pain that it causes, first outwards in the form of the suffering it engenders in the world, and second inwards in the form of a perhaps unnoticed (though this is irrelevant) and perhaps even gradual destruction of the self. Ricoeur notes, too, that there is an unlikely interpenetration of sin and suffering which comes from our most basic inability to discern causes:

On the side of moral evil, first the experience of guilt entails, as its dark side, the feeling of having been seduced by overwhelming powers and, consequently, our feeling of belonging to a history of evil, which is always already there for everyone. This strange experience of passivity, at the very heart of evildoing, makes us feel ourselves to be victims in the very act

that makes us guilty. This same blurring of the boundaries between guilt and being a victim can also be observed if we start from the other pole. Since punishment is a form of suffering allegedly deserved, who knows whether all suffering is not in one way or another the punishment for some personal or collective fault, either known or unknown? (250)

In either case, we must imagine that there exists the same degree of divine attention and lament, which is to say an attention that is complete and always concerned with that which might still issue in goodness and reconciliation. All of which means that just because *Housekeeping* is not dealing in any obvious way with what we might think of as evil acts, it is nonetheless dealing formally—and even in some sense explicitly—with the problem of evil itself.

It does happen, though, that the formulation of the problem as it appears in the novel is a highly particular one, and while we never encounter the kind of violence which is enacted by Cain and Satan⁵⁵ in the person of, say, Ruth or Lucille, we cannot say for certain that it is not very much a part of this story. Indeed, if Ricoeur is to be taken seriously, then the whole problem of evil should be presumed to cohere in every act or instance of suffering, as well as every act or instance of sin. An interesting question, then, might be something like, “how far are we willing to extend the boundary of what constitutes ‘suffering’ here?” Clearly the novel is steeped in it—this much is evident not only in Ruth’s hypotheticals (or, if we like, her imperatives), but in the kind of thing which always precedes those narrative shifts. In one of the book’s better-known passages, Ruth and Sylvie, having crossed the lake in a boat in the early morning, arrive at the remnant of an old settlement on the edge of the woods—a special place which Sylvie had been eager to share with her niece. Ruth’s initial reaction is almost one of disappointment. “It’s pretty,” she says, when prompted

⁵⁵ We might, of course, make an exception here for the violent act of self-destruction that is Ruth’s mother’s suicide. This is almost exactly the kind of thing, it is surely possible to say, that Satan and Cain are up to at bottom: the presumption of superiority over being—which presumption can only and finally result in the annihilation of the self as well.

by Sylvie, “but I don’t know how anyone could have wanted to *live* here” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 151). A short time later, they return to find the same clearing transformed by sunlight, and Ruth notices that where the frosted valley had “before seemed barren and parched as salt” (152) it is now quite the opposite. Here her narrative undergoes a familiar shift into the imperative mode: “Imagine a Carthage sown with salt, and all the sowers gone, and the seeds lain however long in the earth, till there rose finally in vegetable profusion leaves and trees of rime and brine. What flowering would there be in such a garden?” (152). It is a question which arises out of an image so specific, and so specifically one of want and lack (i.e., a whole valley of salt), that it bespeaks an attention to what might well be contained in it as possibility. Unusually, though, this specific image reveals itself to Ruth as both lack/suffering *and* fulfillment before and after it is illuminated, suggesting two different things: one, that this very real material location is in some sense a part of the same suffering reality as that of Ruth herself, the fact of it containing or revealing some loss; and two, that this external material lack *also* contains the “imagined” reality that is the overcoming of that lack. With this in mind, it becomes possible to speak of not just Ruth and Lucille and Sylvie but of the entire material reality of *Housekeeping* as emblematic of a suffering to be overcome.

The meaning of some of the novel’s more overtly “material” passages changes significantly when we read them in this way. For instance, there is a moment earlier on in *Housekeeping* when Ruth recalls Sylvie going about the house with a broom, and, in her own way, bestowing a kind of order on the place. This is an order—a housekeeping—which resists our expectations of what ought to make for a well-kept house. “[T]his was the time,” Ruth remembers, “that leaves began to gather in the corners. They were leaves that had been through the winter, some of them worn to a net of veins. There were scraps of paper among them, crisp and strained from their mingling in the cold brown liquors of decay and regeneration, and on these scraps were sometimes words” (84–85). Ruth’s suspicion is that Sylvie, in her domestic labours, might have taken care not to trouble these

bits and scraps, having perhaps sensed in them “a kind of Delphic niceness” (85). There is a temptation to read this passage, in which is presented a curated and cared-for heap of inert fragments, as yet another defense of the novel’s refusal of closure. The words, after all, scraps of letters and pieces of old newspaper, are mingled with the withered leaves in such a way as to suggest the equality of these two things, the words somehow bits of material in the same way that the leaves are and so equally a part of a world whose boundaries are always in flux. The consequence of such a reading might be our admission that words, themselves finally no more than material, are unsuited to the task of ordering the world because they are just another part of it. This reading would render Ruth’s hypotheticals entirely wishful because it would bind them up in the same cycle of material tumult as that which they looked to master. But there is another way of reading this passage, one which inverts this point and emphasizes not the *mere* materiality of words but the immensity of what it means to speak of anything as material—not that words are somehow less hallowed for finding themselves a part of the world of things, but that the material world is enlarged by the addition of language. This, perhaps, goes some of the way to accounting for the care that Sylvie devotes to these little piles of detritus, as well as Robinson’s use of the word “Delphic” in describing their appearance.

There is also a hint of that same suggestion we have encountered already with the image of Ruth’s grandmother putting out the washing (a “resurrection of the ordinary”), or of Ruth herself coming into the dewy clearing in the sunlight to find it transformed (a “Carthage sown with salt”): that a given object or event, noticed at the right moment and in the right light, might yield up to an observer that which it may have been and that which it may yet be. And although Ruth’s hypotheticals are in some sense just “imagined,” they do point to the possibility of some unseen reality—some hope for loss redeemed that must be taken to inhere in every person and every thing within the bounds of *Housekeeping*’s narrative world. The mingled piles of dried leaves and paper

scraps that Sylvie perhaps so carefully avoids really *are* Delphic, at least inasmuch as they indicate (and, paradoxically, *because* they are so carefully considered by Sylvie and by Ruth) some hidden reality in which they are fulfilled. And we must say the same of every “material” element in the novel’s world, from the frosted clearing to the fluttering laundry to Ruth herself, and, finally, to the very words which compose all of this.

The form of the novel, then, and what that form *does*—what it is that we might say at last that *Housekeeping* is about—are one and the same. The narrative is concerned with the overcoming of suffering and loss, and it extends this possibility (and it must remain, for us, merely a possibility), almost unbelievably, beyond its grieving characters and into the material world which contains them. The result is a consideration of the problem of evil which, while engaging with its material effects, nonetheless avoids the impulse to erase the concept that is typically associated with such a move. Clearly, some of the implications of this point will require elaboration here, and so I would like to turn now to a passage which seems to me to offer an excellent starting point for doing so: Ruth’s final reflection and the novel’s conclusion. I will also, at last, suggest the possibility of a scientific “counterpart” or analogue for what is happening at the level of form in Robinson’s novel—something which I have deliberately avoided doing until now.

At the very end of *Housekeeping*, sensing the imminent imposition of the law in their unorthodox family of two, Sylvie and Ruth flee town. They light the house on fire and set out on foot across the railway bridge at night. It is an act which is in some sense final: they have divided themselves from the town, and especially from Lucille; and Ruth has at last opted for the kind of life which she had glimpsed through the actions and quirks of Sylvie—the life of a vagabond. Indeed, Ruth herself notes the massive significance of the event: “I believe it was the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally” (215). And yet this boundary crossing, which ought to make an end, and which, certainly for the now-abandoned Lucille, must look quite a lot like accidental death or even

like the vanishing of her own mother years earlier, is not final at all. What follows from it is an acknowledgement, from Ruth, of the utter inadequacy of “fact,” which, she says, “explains nothing” and instead itself “requires explanation” (217). Each fact—one of which is the “vanishing” of Sylvie and Ruth—contains in its apparently stable material expression an enormity of connections, reactions, desires, and kinds of attention. Which is precisely the point that Ruth makes before gradually offering up one last long hypothetical at the close of the story:

I pass again and again behind my grandmother’s house and never get off at the station and walk back to see if it is still the same house, altered perhaps by the repairs the fire made necessary, or if it is a new house built on the old site. I would like to see the people who live there. Seeing them would expel poor Lucille, who has, in my mind, waited there in a fury of righteousness, cleansing and polishing all these years. She thinks she hears someone on the walk, and hurries to open the door, too eager to wait for the bell. (217)

We must imagine that Lucille, wherever she is, has had similar thoughts emerge out of similarly ordinary objects, populating them with her desires for the overcoming of this tremendous loss. With this in mind we might say that these ordinary objects are hugely more than what they seem to be at the level of “fact” or “material,” at least in the ways that we commonly understand those terms to function. Ruth even goes so far as to imagine this for her sister, whom she “sees” in her grandmother’s house years after the night of the fire. “If Lucille is there,” Ruth says, “Sylvie and I have stood outside her window a thousand times, and we have thrown the side door open when she was upstairs changing beds, and we have brought in leaves, and flung the curtains and tipped the bud vase...” (218). The point here is that for every ordinary fact there is an extraordinary possibility—that perhaps the lack which inheres in that thing will be overcome and what has been destroyed will be made anew. And, as we see here, this is not a desire which occurs once and in one direction, but through uncountable reflections and permutations, toward a reality which is not unreal

but only of a different order. For when, asks Ruth earlier in the novel, “do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it?” (152).

To conceive of material being in such a way and still to characterize it as “material” is something of a challenge, but what it does, rather than merely mock the category of the apparently stable physical world, is reveal an extrapolation of a fairly basic physical principle—namely, the law of conservation of energy, which famously states that the energy within a closed system must remain constant and so may not be created or destroyed.⁵⁶ In one of this principle’s typical illustrations, a given object is acted upon such that the action seems to result in a “loss” of energy. I kick a ball, for instance, and the ball soon rolls to a stop. The law of conservation of energy tells us that while this looks to the casual observer as if something has been wholly lost (because of the ball’s slowing down), in fact a portion of the ball’s kinetic energy has been *transformed* into heat and sound.⁵⁷ The system’s energies are accounted for, though some of them now exist in unexpected forms.

In its most abstract sense, this is reminiscent of the kind of thing which I have said is happening in *Housekeeping*: Ruth perceives a given object or collection of objects—the woods behind her grandmother’s house, say—as the site of some former loss, but imagines ways in which that “loss” has only been a sort of transformation. The “loss” of Lucille toward the close of the story is never framed in such a way that it becomes a final vanishing, even, we might say, if Lucille’s “true” fate *is* a final vanishing, that is, if it is death. What is lost here is really not lost at all, but only assumes other forms: the attentions of Ruth and Sylvie, their lament for the relationship which has been tarnished, and so on. This is something which Ruth spends a great deal of her narrative

⁵⁶ A more or less straightforward description of the concept—which is to say, one which is accessible to a lay-audience—appears in Richard Feynman’s collection of lectures *Six Easy Pieces*. There, Feynman describes the conservation of energy as a law which “states that there is a certain quantity, which we call energy, that does not change in the manifold changes which nature undergoes . . . it is a mathematical principle; it says that there is a numerical quantity which does not change when something happens” (69).

⁵⁷ The “forms” of energy Feynman lists as available to any discussion of the concept are “gravitational energy, kinetic energy, heat energy, elastic energy, electrical energy, chemical energy, radiant energy, nuclear energy, [and] mass energy” (71).

working through. When, for instance, she remembers the day of her mother's disappearance, she recalls a set of intensely particular details which would never have presented themselves for consideration in other circumstances. "[I]f she had simply brought us home again," Ruth wonders, "to the high frame apartment building with the scaffolding of stairs, I would not remember her that way" (197). Analogically, at least, this picture of loss functions quite like the simple illustration of the law of conservation of energy. The kicked ball, which only moments before had been flying at great speed through the air, now seems to have run out of energy. Something appears to have been lost. But, of course, "lost" turns out to be a less accurate descriptor than "transformed," which is what we might say as well of Ruth's mother and of Lucille.

For a more immediately material example of this kind of loss-as-transformation, we need only look to Ruth and Sylvie's return voyage by boat from the clearing on the far side of the lake. Ruth, lying in the bottom of the boat "like a seed in a husk," momentarily considers the possibility that they might capsize:

Say that water lapped over the gunwales, and I swelled and swelled until I burst Sylvie's coat. Say that the water and I bore the rowboat down to the bottom, and I, miraculously, monstrously, drank water into all my pores until the last black cranny of my brain was a trickle, a spillet. And given that it is in the nature of water to fill and force to repletion and bursting, my skull would bulge preposterously and my back would hunch against the sky and my vastness would press my cheek hard and immovably against my knee. Then, presumably, would come parturition in some form, though my first birth had hardly deserved that name, and why should I hope for more from a second? The only true birth would be a final one, which would free us from watery darkness and the thought of watery darkness, but could such a birth be imagined? (162)

This imagined scenario is so strange perhaps because it manages to resist being merely horrifying. Against all odds, this image of Ruth's ghastly—and, one must imagine, painful—death is ultimately one of conservation. Which is to say that out of this nightmarish vision, which evokes the drowning deaths of both her mother and her grandfather, comes “parturition,” an unusual word meaning both birth and creation. In other words, what seems to be lost here is not lost at all but gloriously changed, some new birth arising out of death. This, we know, is the real material state of things: a human body that dies and decays does not simply vanish, but rather continues to interact with its environment in new forms. The decaying body gives off heat energy just as the kicked soccer ball does—which is a considerably less elegant way of stating the terms of that curse which God places on Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return to the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (*KJV Bible*, Gen. 3.19). But there is a figurative sense in which this death-as-birth functions, too. The loss or the destruction is not finally *only* some loss or destruction; it is the loss *and* what it means to the person or people for whom it is significant. This situation which Ruth imagines is only possible at all as a consideration of the similar losses which she has experienced. That is, this whole scenario is constructed from the details contained in the losses of her mother and grandfather, details which could only have demanded such careful attention by virtue of issuing from such damaging moments.

At the level of the figurative, this connection to the conservation of energy would seem to be finally no more than a curiosity. That destructive “energy”—or a destructive act—establishes some significant loss or instance of suffering for a person, and so results in their attention and intense desire to overcome that loss, is a useful philosophical or theological point, but it hardly gets us closer to an elaboration of the connection between the form of the novel and its material world. This is because it is nearly impossible to imagine an easy correspondence between the loss of energy

as heat or sound in a closed system, and the loss of, say, a loved one to suicide. And yet there *is* a connection here at a fundamental level: in each instance, energy has moved from one form to another; it is just that in the case of the loved one there is an enormously complex series of consequences beyond the immediate physical act—consequences which reverberate through time and even across generations. What is so fascinating, though, is that if we consider the loss of the loved one to be a physical act in the same way (rather crassly, of course, and for the sake of argument) that the loss of energy when the ball is kicked is a physical act, then it quickly becomes clear that the only real difference here has to do with the level of complexity at which we take the system to function. That is, the consequences of the loss of the person are vastly greater because our consideration of those consequences introduces a huge number of new variables that we just would not think of with respect to the kicked ball. So, really, the exchange of energy in the case of the human loss—in the case of Ruth’s loss of her grandfather, her mother, and, at last, her sister—is not figurative at all, but involves a series of calculations and accommodations which exceed our ability to comprehend them. “The only true birth,” says Ruth, “would be a final one... but could such a birth be imagined?” (162). The answer must be “no,” because such an imagining would need to account for every possible variable. The closest we can get to that is to do what Ruth, as narrator, does in *Housekeeping*: not to imagine every conceivable consequence that issues from a loss, but to know that *this* particular loss must also contain within it the desire for its overcoming. Lament, in this case, is as good as parturition.

There is, I think, a case to be made for just such a collision of apparent opposites in the terms of the law of conservation of energy, though it does involve a rather unusual interpretation of those terms. In his book *The Order of Time*, the physicist Carlo Rovelli notes that “[i]n the frenzy of thermal molecular mingling, all the variables that can possibly vary do so continuously”—all of them, that is, except for “the total amount of energy in an isolated system” (134), which is closely

bound to time. “Between energy and time,” he says, “there is a close bond. They form one of those characteristic couples of quantities that physicists call ‘conjugate...’” (Rovelli 134). What is interesting about this relation for the purposes of an examination of *Housekeeping* might suggest itself right away: that where there is some loss, there is also the memory of it. That is, there is a fixation on that which is lost, there is a desire for its return, and there is, consequently, a kind of dwelling within the damaging moment so as to imagine how it might be overcome. “Memory,” as Ruth tells us, “is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 194), which is as good as saying that memory is an *effect* of loss that simultaneously “moves on,” by in some sense gaining the energy to consider the lost object in the first place, and moves backward, by obsessing over the initial moment in time. Any loss, then, would seem to pull in two different temporal directions.

Curiously, Rovelli suggests something which is not too far removed from this tentative conclusion when he discusses the way in which we tend to make sense of macroscopic states of equilibrium (a still glass of hot water, for example). “The usual way of interpreting the relation between time and state of equilibrium,” says Rovelli, “is to think that time is something absolute and objective; energy governs the time-evolution of a system; and the system in equilibrium mixes all configurations of equal energy.... [T]o define the macroscopic state, we first need to know the energy, and to define the energy we first need to know what is time” (135). This relation is typical, but he notes that it is not the only possibility, and that we might instead read the relation *in reverse*. “That is, to observe that a macroscopic state, which is to say a blurred vision of the world, may be interpreted as a mingling that preserves an energy, and this in its turn generates a time” (Rovelli 136). In other words, it is possible that what he calls our “blurred vision” of a macroscopic state (blurred because it cannot see or make sense of particles at the level of ordinary reality) selects a variable which it has deemed important at its own level of scale, and from there proceeds as though that variable were an obvious point from which to determine a macroscopic state. But the relation has

already been established in reverse, and time has shown itself to be not a universal ground but a dependent variable.

There is a great deal more to Rovelli's argument, of course, than it will be possible to cover here—the role of entropy in the “flow” of time, for one. But suffice it to say that his conclusion, for our purposes, will remain more or less the same: time is the effect of a “blurring” which aims to make sense of a given macroscopic state. For the closed system that is the kicking of the soccer ball, this means that energy is still transferred in the same way, but that what we take to be the obvious movement of time is in fact only the result of our position “outside” of that system as observers at a particular level of scale. The whole “event” is only an event at all because we have perceived it as such. For Ruth in *Housekeeping*, it means that the desire for overcoming which issues from loss and which, in her hypotheticals, seems so absolutely futile, is not necessarily just a yearning which takes place after the fact: it may well contain precisely the overcoming which she imagines. What is unknowable here is time. That is, if the movement of time is the effect of a perspectival blurring, then it is impossible to say that at some considerably more minute level of scale there is not some yet-unknown operation at work—one which would make possible the sorts of repair that constitute the most basic form of the narrative of *Housekeeping*: the world, as Ruth imagines it, “made whole” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 152).

It is possible, then, to think of the losses which shape Robinson's novel, and which we have so far framed in terms of their paradoxical effects (i.e., that a loss compels an all-consuming attention which desires the overcoming of that loss), in *material terms*, as well as figurative terms. By which I mean that there is something in our apparently figurative extrapolation of the law of conservation of energy which is not really figurative after all—or, at least, not *only* figurative. To lose something, in *Housekeeping*, is to become bound up with that thing in such a way that there can be no escaping its orbit; it is to enter along with it into a kind of closed system where the loss and the

dogged consideration of the loss become one and the same thing. As Ruth tells us toward the close of the novel, she has “never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming” (215). This is perhaps because both her thoughts and her dreams have been bent toward the same objects and the same ends: the historical losses which both she and her family have long endured. And in those very real losses is contained the seemingly imaginative and therefore impossible overcoming of them. But the point of the novel, which we learn finally from its narrative form, is that this boundary is not a simple one, and that there is a sense in which what is lost really *does* contain (by virtue of the demands it places on the sufferer) the potential for its overcoming, in the same way that the destructive act—the evil act—suggests the lament which is to follow it.

In material terms, this same doubling, this same paradox, exists as well. On the one hand, the energy in a closed system is not to be destroyed, only changed, so what is lost is never really “lost” but only takes on a different form, which for the purposes of analogy might be the sustained attention that Ruth devotes to her mother’s final moments after the fact. In that sense, the “loss” contains the expression of its overcoming in the form of Ruth’s imaginative hypotheticals. On the other hand, though, this whole relation, as Rovelli tells us, only functions because of the way in which we conceive of time as stable and necessary. At the level of the microscopic, time as a privileged term begins to come apart, and so although it is not exactly possible to say that we might discard notions of cause and effect entirely, it *is* possible to say that the flow of time at another level of scale is no longer monolithic. Which means that Ruth’s hypothetical scenarios, which look for moments of repair and closure and, effectively, return, are far from merely wishful thinking. Rather, they constitute a tremendously important kind of thinking about the innumerable instances of potential contained within the flow and exchange of energy. Just as they constitute, simultaneously, another tremendously important kind of thinking: the work of imagination which issues from loss and lament—the work of the overcoming of suffering which is, at its most basic, an engagement

with the problem of evil. This is mourning and care and hope, and, perhaps most importantly, it is, impossibly, two opposing things at once. It is wishful thinking. And it is wishful thinking.

II

If there is a single work of fiction from the last fifty years which would seem to dramatize the annihilation of precisely the kind of hope which shows itself in *Housekeeping's* unusual narrative form, then that work of fiction is Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Undoubtedly, the latter constitutes an engagement with the problem of evil in its own right—in large part through the looming figure of the absolutely terrifying Judge Holden—but its answer (if “answer” we can call it—for what manner of question does the novel ask?) looks to be nothing like what Ruth is up to in her own attempts at overcoming entrenched suffering.

For one thing, McCarthy's novel appears to revel in violence, drawing out passages in which, to use only a few of *Blood Meridian's* more memorable examples, a man is decapitated while he smokes by the fireside, a pair of infants are swung against “a ring of midden stones” in the cruelty of a warlike raid, and a company of men is set upon by a group of Comanches who proceed to eviscerate, emasculate, sodomize, and scalp them. Against such a backdrop theodicy becomes a sort of muffled question, which is to say that the reader of McCarthy's book has to do a great deal of work and undertake considerable interpretive acrobatics before even beginning to trace the outline of a stable category like “evil.” This is because we are, from the very first page, treated to a vision of a world that is violent first and foremost, that is “mindless” in its violence, and that will proceed along these lines inexorably despite our objections or the objections of any human being who may wish to have it otherwise. In the novel's first line the reader is invited (or commanded) to “[s]ee the

child” (McCarthy, *BM* 3) who will grow up to become *Blood Meridian*’s central figure, “the kid.” And see him we do—what he is, what he will be, and perhaps even what he was always to be: a force of violence, a vector of ill-will. McCarthy’s description of him, finally, and to disturbing effect, invokes William Wordsworth: “All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” (3).⁵⁸ The destructive, then, does not lie upon a continuum of good and evil or loss and reconciliation, but rather is bound up in the proper order of things, as much a part of the world as its rocks and its trees.

While there is a sense of this kind of cold uncaring in the narrative world of *Housekeeping*, it is never really presented as an immutable law. I am thinking here of something like Robinson’s description of the early morning darkness at the close of the night that Ruth and Lucille spend by the shore of the lake. “The absolute black of the sky,” notes Ruth in that moment, “dulled and dimmed and blanched slowly away, and finally half a dozen daubs of cloud, dull powder pink, sailed high in a pale-green sky, rust red at the horizon. Venus shone a heatless planetary white among these parrot colors, and earth lay unregenerate so long that it seemed to me for once all these blandishments might fail” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 117). The instant of menace here subsists in the possibility of an “unregenerate” earth, in the notion that the brilliant lustre of dawn might well give out and plunge the world into endless darkness. What such a possibility reveals, though, is its equally unlikely alternative: that Ruth should have the opportunity of greeting yet another “ordinary day,” a

⁵⁸ The reference is to Wordsworth’s poem “My Heart Leaps Up,” which is short enough to include here in its entirety:

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety. (160)

Note McCarthy’s inversion of the poem’s critical moment: The “Child” remains the “father of the Man,” but now it is violence, and not amazement and/or gratitude, that grounds their reconfigured relationship.

day made suddenly extraordinary for its avoidance of what just as well might have been the case. For such an image to appear in *Blood Meridian* (and there is something about its simultaneous menace and telescoping of scale which suggests that it would not be out of place) would be for it to renounce this distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary altogether, finding instead perhaps within the image of earth unregenerate the simple fact of decay and degradation which appears everywhere else within its bounds. The sunrise, in other words, would be no defence against the encroachment of an inevitable darkness;⁵⁹ nor would either eventuality alter the essential makeup and rule of the world. Here, it seems, is the fundamental difference (though, of course, there are innumerable differences) between the worlds of these two works: where *Housekeeping* sees in its losses the basic shapes of their simultaneous overcoming, *Blood Meridian* finds its order in loss, and conceives of all existence as a kind of product of it.

To say that the novel's violence and destruction are evil, then, is to suggest a set of terms which is not really there, because it supposes a frame of reference beyond that of the carnage which is so much a part of the fabric of the world that it becomes constitutive—even, finally, ordinary. That is, the reality of *Blood Meridian* is violent, but it is also violent to such an extent that everything else can come to feel as if it is excluded, transforming violence into a sort of mundane background or environment. Consider, for instance, the novel's plot: "the kid," who has run away from home at fourteen (McCarthy, *BM* 4), connects with a band of scalphunters led by the brutal and in at least in some sense historical⁶⁰ John Joel Glanton (though it is, of course, Glanton's supposed second-in-command, Judge Holden, who is the group's true and terrible axis). They ride across the expansive

⁵⁹ In fact, the sunrises in *Blood Meridian* are frequently malevolent in their own right. Consider, for instance, the following breathtaking description of the breaking day: "They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them" (McCarthy, *BM* 46–47).

⁶⁰ John Emil Sepich reveals some of the novel's historical sources, as well as some of its historical context, in his excellent essay "What Kind of Indians Was Them?: Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*."

territories of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States taking part in all manner of raids, murders, and confrontations, before a final violent engagement at a river crossing in Yuma, Arizona destroys the group once and for all, and the kid flees to California.

A great deal of critical attention has been paid to the fact that for the length of this story, and for its extensive detail, *Blood Meridian* seems to concern itself very little with plot. Even here, for instance, I have suggested that the kid is the novel's protagonist, though really it is only that he appears to the reader first and so offers an easy through-line for any discussion of the text which would hope to proceed in an orderly fashion. We might as easily take Judge Holden to be the novel's protagonist, for he flickers in and out of the story to nearly the same extent as the kid.⁶¹ Generally, the plot of *Blood Meridian* is taken to be subordinate to the momentum of its violence and to the unrelenting procession of its violent events—which, by virtue of their repetition and regularity, come to fulfill an expectation that the novel establishes early on. Lee Clark Mitchell, for example, notes that the book is “offered as mere peregrinations stitched together by the phrase ‘they rode on’—as if ‘plot’ were less pressing for McCarthy than isolated events and the language describing them” (149). These events, which are often horrendous, come to blend together with the monotony of the in-between, and so at last they assume something like the same significance as those simple images of riding. As Steven Shaviro so wonderfully puts it, “*Blood Meridian* is a book, then, not of heights and depths, nor of origins and endings, but of restless, incessant horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings, topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert. There is only war, there is only the dance” (147).

⁶¹ Actually, Bernard Schopen, one of the few critical voices who insists that *Blood Meridian* in fact *does* have an intricate plot—one which is divided up into “three separate sections” that constitute a “dramatic structure that some readers perceive or intuit” (183)—makes an interesting case for Glanton as the protagonist of *Blood Meridian*. The latter, Schopen says, is the key figure in the novel’s “central, fictional, tragic plot” (185) in large part because we are made to care about him (which, Schopen admits, is something of a feat): “[T]he narrator goes to some lengths to ensure that Glanton, despite the evil of his actions and enterprise, becomes the object of our concern” (185).

If this is true, though, and the plot of the novel is something that simply ebbs away before near-interchangeable images of horrific violence and monotonous riding, and if, at last, all is swallowed up by the monstrous sameness that is war, how can we make sense of the immense power that the work exerts? Why, if the book is merely repetition and, finally, *expected* atrocity, are we drawn to read it at all? One possible response is that we read it voyeuristically, that although the violence does repeat itself, each instance constitutes a new and exciting act from which we gain some perverse pleasure. This is something which Shaviro suggests: that there is something oddly consuming in the act of reading *Blood Meridian* which implicates us in the terror and savagery of its world because it places us amongst its offenders. With each page turned in anticipation of some new violent possibility, we permit, and thus become complicit in, the carnage which we would claim only to observe. “The scariest thing about *Blood Meridian*,” Shaviro says, “is that it is a euphoric and exhilarating book, rather than a tragically alienated one, or a gloomy, depressing one” (156). Of course, to accept these terms is to accept a contradiction of sorts—i.e., that there could be something frightening about such a reading of the novel already implies a framework which does not whole-heartedly accept the benefits of reading in this way. It is one thing, for instance, to say that we read on because of the titillating possibility of new violence, and even that in reading on we are thus affirming the very movement and momentum of a novel that organizes itself according to that kind of violent process, but it is quite another to say that this “reading on” is frightening. If the “scariest thing about *Blood Meridian*” is that it is “euphoric,” then surely the process of reading it cannot be *only* euphoric—surely there is then some tension in the apparently joyous bloodlust which drives the reader forward. If what moves the reader through the repetition of violent acts is a pleasure taken at the observation of (and complicity in) the differentiated acts of violence themselves, it is also a fear for what this might yet mean, and for what kind of narrative world might yet appear as a result of mere observation.

What Shaviro reveals in his statement about the novel, then, is crucial to an understanding of how it is that we eventually come to read *Blood Meridian*. That is, even if it is the reader's perverse pleasure rather than the book's plot which *first* drives *Blood Meridian* forward, this joyous impulse quickly gives way to a sense of horror before the consequences of that curiosity. This appears to be especially true when one considers the form in which the novel is presented to its reader—those peculiar linguistic inversions and archaisms which are so reminiscent of biblical language. Far from sanctifying the kinds of repetitive violence which are on display in the novel, the unusual cadence and construction of its sentences serves to slow the reader down so that she might more carefully come to terms with the effects of reading/riding on. This is not a work which moves quickly from scene to scene, and this, I think, is because we are asked to take time to consider the simultaneous gravity and—oddly—beauty of what is lost from moment to moment. Certainly, there is an element of the darkly pleasurable in our experience of the depravity of this narrative world, but any desire to gaze upon newer and increasingly unexpected acts of violence must be tempered by the speed at which it is even possible to move through the text. Mitchell offers a wonderful preliminary list of some of the words (to say nothing, yet, of the longer constructions in which they are contained) that stand out—words, he says, which “[affront] even an erudite reader’s sense of vocabulary” (157). Here are a few of his examples: “argosy, ciborium, ossuary, thaumaturge, ristras, devonian, chartvail, catafalque, surbated, tonkawa, thews, pauldron, merestone, baldric, katabasis...” (Mitchell 157).

These words and others, similarly unfamiliar, pepper the text in such a way as to demand that the reader pause to consider (at the absolute least) what it is that is happening at each instant. And the lilt and order of McCarthy's sentences only serves to amplify the effect. Consider, for instance, the following passage which describes the movement of the filibusters with whom the kid sets out in the early novel:

The dust the party raised was quickly dispersed and lost in the immensity of that landscape and there was no dust other for the pale sutler who pursued them drives unseen and his lean horse and his lean cart leave no track upon such ground or any ground. By a thousand fires in the iron blue dusk he keeps his commissary and he's a wry and grinning tradesman good to follow every campaign or hound men from their holes in just those whited regions where they've gone to hide from God. (McCarthy, *BM* 46)

Leaving aside the alarming narrative shift into the present tense, something which happens not infrequently throughout the book, we will note that there are a number of significant stumbling blocks in this short section of the text alone. First, there is the unexpected inversion in “no dust other,” which suggests right away that the reader will be required to alter her reading of what follows; next, there is the introduction of the “pale sutler,” who, aside from requiring a serious reconsideration of the scene itself (until this point, we have read only of the filibusters riding forth in the morning dark), asks that the reader pause to determine what a “sutler” is; and finally, there is the peculiar use of the word “good” in the second sentence, which once again demands that we pause and, in all probability, reread.

Here is the strangely doubled work of *Blood Meridian's* form, which mirrors the suggestion that the “euphoric” experience of reading the novel is also the “scariest thing” about it. On the one hand we have a series of violent events, set out in such a way that they arrive very nearly at the expense of plot—a series of violent events which, although they are in some sense repetitive, enthrall us with the promise of ever-more exciting occurrences. It is these new horrors which, one might say, compel a desire for more by appealing to that which the novel so convincingly shows us is fixed in being. “War was always here,” says the judge. “Before man was, war waited for him” (259). On the other hand, the experience of reading *Blood Meridian* also pulls us in the opposite direction. By using archaic words and forming unusual sentences, McCarthy forces a slowing down

that is at odds with what we might take to be the primary impulse behind the reading of such a violent and plotless masterpiece—namely, an eager fascination with newer and more outlandish expressions of the terrible. But rather than creating a set of conditions in which the reader might simply have the time and room to relish the details of a narrative world which has given itself over to war and violence, what this slowing down does is command another kind of attention, one which momentarily revels in creative possibility and thus paradoxically undermines the destructive momentum of the world in which it does so. It might well be that it is this conflict which leads to Shaviro's assertion that the novel is "exhilarating" *and* that we are finally frightened by such a thought, our fear arising out of the attentive space which is also provided.

There is another possibility, too, which Mitchell suggests while arguing against the idea that *Blood Meridian* merely and finally equates the human with the non-human in a kind of writing which has been termed (based on a quotation from the novel itself)⁶² "optical democracy." His contention is that this kind of writing, which McCarthy truly *is* engaged in at some level—and which would flatten the relationship between things, creatures, and people into one that emphasized only the "democratic" interplay of bits of matter—ought to leap to the fore "at moments of vivid violence, if only because a process of stylistic selection appears then less likely" (Mitchell 160). We could perhaps expect these moments, Mitchell leadingly suggests, to proceed in a chaotic fashion and so leave off the privileged position of the human in favour of some wholly equal material tumult. "Yet what undermines the assumption," he says, "is the realization that any presentation of barbarous behavior need not itself be unenlightened or anti-humanist" (160). To demonstrate his point,

⁶² The relevant quotation from *Blood Meridian*: "In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole of some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships" (McCarthy, *BM* 258–59). Mitchell notes that this term ("optical democracy") gets bound up with a reading of McCarthy that, he says, is "actively anti-humanist" (Mitchell 160).

Mitchell gestures to one of the novel's better-known scenes, in which an enormous number of Comanche warriors descends upon and routs the American filibusters, who only moments before had been so sure of their imminent victory over what they presumed was no more than a "parcel of heathen stockthieves" (McCarthy, *BM* 53). The scene is too long to include here in its entirety, but the beginning of it, in which the warriors emerge from behind a great herd of cattle and at last come into view, should provide some sense of both its rhythm and its terrible force:

A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of crane feathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo.... (55)

Rather than a chaotic jumble of images that ranges the human indiscriminately alongside the non-human, Mitchell notes that this scene is finely ordered in such a way as to communicate, through its stylistic choices, a stunned emotional response—specifically horror. The "reiterated 'h,'" he says, for instance, "comes to evoke as much a horrified heaving of breath gasped in full-throated, full-throttled explosives, as in any descriptive tone" (Mitchell 161). So, the "ghastliness" of the scene finally comes "not from any 'optical democracy'... but from the opposite—from the dramatic failure to shield individuals in peril and from the sympathy unavoidably evoked by such failure" (161).

Another way of putting this might be to note that while *Blood Meridian* does regularly elicit our fear—both at its content and at its insistence on our joyous complicity with its content—it also periodically elicits our sympathy as a kind of force in competition with what the book seems to demand. And it does this in the same way that it compels our fear: through the meanderings and

inversions of its form, which rests on tricky linguistic constructions reminiscent of those in the King James Bible, and on the use of archaic or unusual words. It thus becomes possible to suggest that the novel's violence might be something more than merely "mindless"—that it might command our attention in a twofold sense, in two competing directions: first, away from the present moment and on to the next (and perhaps desired) violent encounter; and second, toward the present moment so as to feel its ruinous effects in the form of fear or guilt or sympathy. Here, then, the form of *Blood Meridian* is revealed to be at odds with itself in a fascinating way, and in a way which should suggest a remarkably unlikely connection with Robinson's *Housekeeping*. Where the latter novel, though, indicates a number of losses in which are contained the very seeds of their overcoming in the form of a desire for repair or reconciliation, the former *enacts* its losses in such a way that the reader's position with respect to them changes dramatically. In some respects, to note this difference is to do no more than mark the obvious tonal disjunction separating these two very different works, but what is so interesting is not that these novels are dissimilar (which they clearly are), but that in their likeness they express two distinct versions of the same problem: that loss or lack or even suffering comes to contain, by virtue of an attention that it commands, its own reconciliation or fulfillment or easement. In *Housekeeping*, because this is something that Ruth notes about her own world and thus imaginatively constructs, we are led to experience the same apparently impossible hope that she does—a hope which, because of the particularity of the desires it contains, ends up expressing some new and unseen reality that always was there. In *Blood Meridian*, something like this same unlikely doubling occurs, but because of our own position with respect to it—i.e., because we are here complicit in the losses as well as in the act of recognizing that those losses elicit our sympathies—we are kept from experiencing our eventual sympathetic impulses as anything more than too little or too late. If the novel, then, is truly tragic—and I think that it is—this might be the source of that tragedy.

It is worth noting, of course, that the reader's experience of *Blood Meridian* is not exactly the same as what *Blood Meridian* does. Just because we are made complicit in the violence of the novel's world, and are thus in some sense responsible for its terrible progress, does not mean that the form of the novel is any less suggestive of the simultaneous expression of suffering and the overcoming of suffering that frames the problem of evil; it only means that our position with respect to that problem becomes shaky because we ourselves get bound up in the acts of evil that are carried out in the book. Recall, for instance, that Ricoeur talks about the "strange experience of passivity, at the very heart of evil-doing" which "makes us feel ourselves to be victims in the very act that makes us guilty" (250) and you have a fairly compelling account of what it is that is so frightening about the experience of reading *Blood Meridian*: that the reader becomes at once the agent of violence and its victim. Yet there is another role here which would undercut the first two but which finally cannot undercut the first two because of the reader's complicity—namely, that of the lamenting witness, the observer who sees the atrocities of the narrative world and who attends to them in such a way as to suggest the possibility of their overcoming.

To pause over the novel's obscure words and difficult sentences is to take the time that is required of lament, and it is to begin to imagine, however briefly, the kind of compassion which is almost never on offer in *Blood Meridian*. In one terrible moment in the early novel, for instance, the kid is taken by some soldiers and marched through the plaza of a small town and past a number of unusual things which, when they are taken together, make up a sort of nightmarish bazaar: "stout willow cages clogged with vipers," still others containing "great limegreen serpents from some more southerly latitude" or "bearded lizards with their black mouths wet with venom," and a "reedy old leper" holding up "handfuls of tapeworms from a jar for all to see" (McCarthy, *BM* 73). It is the final oddity, though, which shocks, for that item to which the kid is ultimately led is the severed head of his former captain, set on display in a "glass carboy of clear mescal" (73). He is forced to

look upon it and the reader is left to consider his reaction, which seems almost unthinkably callous: “He looked about at the villagers and at the soldiers, their eyes all upon him, and he spat and wiped his mouth. He aint no kin to me, he said” (73). The disavowal, we know by this point, is genuine. The kid appears to have no real allegiances or relationships and proceeds according to his own brutal mechanisms of survival. But while the novel expects us to see this right away, and even in some sense to demand that the kid act according to these mechanisms, it also slows us down just enough in the moments prior to the kid’s statement to allow for a reaction that is *simultaneously* sympathetic.

To pause in order to feel this sympathy, in practice, can be an enormously difficult part of the reading of *Blood Meridian*. Withdrawn from its context (which is to say, the context of the novel and the whole experience of reading it from beginning to end), the moment in which the kid disavows his captain is easy enough to forgive: this, after all, is just a boy, in all likelihood terrified by what he has recently witnessed and sure to say anything to keep from meeting with a similarly grotesque fate. To read the scene *in* context, though, is to experience it differently because it is to be bound up in its violence and horror as, really, one of the responsible parties. So, the desire to have things some other way is a desire to undo the work’s atrocities, which is antithetical to the movement of the text itself. And while, strangely, *Blood Meridian* does contain the conditions for such desire within itself formally, the reader cannot help but experience that as a terrible guilt and fear at continuing to read the book at all. If we were thus to appraise honestly the hope contained within the work—and many have done so⁶³—then we would be forced to note that there was nearly none, and that the proper ethical stance toward *Blood Meridian* would simply be to put it down. A reply that

⁶³ Harold Bloom, for instance, suggests that the kid’s confrontation with the judge at the close of the novel is potentially a source of light: “To have known Judge Holden, to have seen him in full operation, and to tell him that he is nothing, is heroic” (262). This may well be as close as one can come to a heroic, and thus hopeful, act in the overwhelmingly dark book.

Franz Kafka is supposed to have given to his friend and editor Max Brod when the latter asked if there were not some hope yet in a vision of the world that marked it as no more than one of God's "bad moods" seems appropriate in this respect: there is, he is supposed to have said, "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us" (Benjamin 116). The same is true of McCarthy's novel: what is hopeful about the work is a form which functions as an elucidation of the problem of evil, but which can only be experienced as an indictment of the work itself. The light, then, if there is light at all in such a menacing book, is, as Kafka put it, "not for us"—which is to say not *for* the reader but only to be recognized *by* her as something issuing forth from the wreckage of a world that the very act of reading has produced.

The saving grace here lies in paradox. That the same conditions produce the novel's seemingly endless violence as produce its capacity to induce guilt, fear, and even sympathy does little to detract from the horror that is the world of *Blood Meridian*, but nor does it diminish the lament that exists as a consequence. And it is only in reading this novel, and in some sense setting in motion—by way of a desire that becomes complicit with its murderous advancement—its awful inevitabilities, that the possibility of some redemption, however limited and however dim, can present itself. Which is not to excuse the act of reading. It is only to recognize the truism that the overcoming of suffering requires for its coherency suffering itself. There is a well-known moment toward the end of the novel in which the judge, seated by the fireside as is often the case, holds forth on the subject of war. "War," he says, "endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way" (McCarthy, *BM* 259). The language of determinism here, which forms the violence of the gang's collective life into a kind of necessary precondition for human being, already suggests the terrible conclusion to which the judge is headed: that "war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the

will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (261). However we choose to look at this formulation, there is a frightening truth in it. War really *does* force the unity of existence insofar as it will not be ignored and insofar as it finally bestows order on competing entities by eliminating one of them. Herein lies the fascinating case for reading the novel in the first place, and for continuing to read it once it is begun: to find out where this unity lies and to see who will finally triumph. But the novel also resists this reading by using its form—its idiosyncratic language, its puzzling words—to force our attention in a competing direction, which by analogy we may as well say is toward something like the remnants of war: the manifold unseen outcomes of the work’s seemingly straightforward violence, which is in fact undermined at every turn.

What undermines *Blood Meridian’s* violence, if ever it has a chance to do so, is the enormous trail of losses to which the reader must remain mostly indifferent, but which the form of the novel continually works to emphasize. They are nearly impossible to consider seriously, because to do so would be to demolish the whole narrative world. Every Comanche scalped, every child murdered, animal blown up, rider beheaded, every crossroads strewn with bodies in every conceivable posture and attitude constitutes an instant in which “optical democracy,” if we but pause to think, must give way to an absolutely huge influx of lament and regret, not only on the part of the guilty reader, but for the imagined relations of these specific, individuated victims—and their relations, and so on in rather the opposite direction of “the unity of existence” proposed by the judge. Of course, there is an incentive to read on past these lamentable moments as if they were no more than the preordained casualties of a war whose monstrous will would crush them out of existence. The judge suggests as much in a frightening conversation with the kid at the end of the novel—a conversation which occurs some thirty years after the events of the earlier work, and which finds the judge in excellent

health, apparently not a day older than he had been thirty years before. The two men stand in a bar observing its patrons. “This is an orchestration for an event,” says the judge. “For a dance in fact. The participants will be apprised of their roles at the proper time. For now it is enough that they have arrived. As the dance is the thing with which we are concerned and contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well” (342). Here again is the judge’s insistence upon the violent contest which will finally force a unity on existence: war as the dance. Here, too, is his certainty that such a unity will unfold as it was always meant to, indifferent to any claims of individual resistance or will. And yet this unity is something which has been presumed from the outset, which has, in some sense, been *willed*. It is, after all, the dance “with which we are concerned” and not the individual dancers, presumably because all but one of these dancers will finally be eliminated by the determined course of things. But even in some hypothetically precast future where the great majority of dancers is destroyed, the simplicity of such destruction can only have been an illusion—a trick of that individual perception which would look only to the dance itself as “whole,” ignoring what would become of its parts.

Putting this another way, we might note that the “unity of existence” about which the judge so eloquently speaks, and which he notes is the consequence of war, is only the appearance of unity to one who would imagine destruction to be some final act. His point about war is terrifyingly convincing—as are his points about the inevitability of history and the “dance”—but the model by which it operates overlooks (or refuses to acknowledge the worth of) the significance of the losses which the road to supposed unity leaves behind. When one man kills another, it is not only the case that there is a victor remaining, but also that there is the memory of the vanquished, in which a great deal of attentive and mournful and guilty and desiring energy must still be expended. Even where that memory appears to be expunged, we cannot know in what other forms the destructive act will

have been absorbed and considered by the remaining parties. When one member of the gang is carried off by a “lean blond bear,” for instance, his compatriots track the animal for three days before the trail is lost and the man is finally given up for dead. The conclusion to the event is characteristically harsh: “The lost warrior’s horse stood saddled in the caballado as they had left it and they took down the bags and divided his estate among them and that man’s name was never said again” (144). Far from a forgetting, this act of erasure must be taken as its own kind of mourning, a transfiguration of the loss into some form that is here unnameable. We can presume that the same kind of thing is happening throughout *Blood Meridian* at nearly every moment, because nearly every moment of the text is burdened by a loss of some kind. It is just that any serious consideration of these losses requires an attention that, although it is embedded in the form of the novel, runs counter to the sort of reading that the novel compels—namely, an urgent and almost prurient interest in the brand of finality that the judge has presented to us as “god.” We, like the judge, are in some sense excited to bring about the unity of existence which is expressed at last in war, but we—and he—are like Milton’s Satan in wishing it: presuming, wrongly, that the destructive act must be final by overlooking its eventually generative capacity. It is the latter which issues from the lament and the desire for repair that comes from each loss; and it is the latter which marks the judge’s intent to emerge as the last and singular “dancer” as not only terrifying, but also, if we are willing to look closely, lamentable.

It is here, once again—just as with Robinson’s *Housekeeping*—that the idea of the conservation of energy provides a way into what the text is doing in its moments of violence and enacted suffering. Though in the case of McCarthy’s novel, the reader is required to do a little more work in order to see how destruction is not merely final. We might well chalk this up to our position with respect to the novel’s moments of loss: that even where we are required to slow down and look in horror and (to borrow again from Mitchell) sympathy at its calamities, we are also strangely bound

up in them as agents. This is never really a concern in *Housekeeping*, where the reader's position is Ruth's position and her desires are our desires, and where loss is something which should obviously be overcome and not, say, revelled in. But formally, we are once again presented with the same set of problems—which is to say that both *Housekeeping* and *Blood Meridian* offer up vivid instances of loss which demand to be considered in material terms. In Robinson's novel this means a strange sort of look at object permanence and what it might mean for everything lost to be suddenly returned, as if an individual's desire for repair could be coextensive with the reality of that which had been destroyed or that which had vanished. In McCarthy's, this means taking in an appalling number of horrendously violent interactions and asking, at last, whether these destructive episodes do not merely paint a picture of a world in which "optical democracy" is the rule and each moment unfolds as the equal of every other—some theatre for the play of chaotic forces. If this is the way in which we read McCarthy's novel (and I have suggested that *Blood Meridian's* language poses some difficulties to this easy equation of man and stone), then we must also consider that the pride of place afforded to the practitioners of war is made problematic by the way in which their destructive acts truly unfold—i.e., by ultimately ushering in some *change*, rather than, as we might suppose, a final and annihilating destruction. Everything which seems to be lost in *Blood Meridian*, in other words—every town sacked, person murdered, or child defiled—only appears to the reader in such a way because we are drawn along in its current. In actuality, though, these losses have their own currents, and just because the novel never returns to the scenes of its crimes (so to speak) does not mean that those scenes are simply scoured from existence. In many instances we must imagine that there are survivors or affiliates for whom the losses are absolute in their constitution of new worlds, and thus new desires for redemption, retribution, or overcoming.

At one point in the novel the reader learns something about the meaning of the judge's notebook, which he has been carrying around and writing in at every available opportunity. Each

new sketch, we discover, is accompanied by the corresponding erasure of its model in the world. An ancient “footpiece from a suit of armor,” for example, is “sketched in profile and perspective” before being crushed “into a ball of foil and pitched... into the fire” (146). His purpose, it turns out, is even more malevolent than it seems: “A Tennessean named Webster had been watching him and he asked the judge what he aimed to do with those notes and sketches and the judge smiled and said that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man” (147). It is a kind of selfish collection, and perhaps reconfiguration, of the world. What is not made clear here, though, is the fact that this act of erasure is itself consequential in a number of ways, not the least of which is that “expunging” something from “the memory of man” is a tremendously memorable event: for the reader, for Webster, and for anyone who may have known anything about the existence of the “footpiece” in the first place. And then there is the more immediate material consequence of the action—that the object is crumpled and burned and thus is transformed, to some extent, into heat energy. The further consequences of the event, its distal consequences, are more difficult to speculate about because the variables would simply be too numerous to entertain, but the idea remains the same: that that which appears to be destroyed and so lost forever is in fact only in the process of taking on other forms. It is the case, then, that war, which goes hand-in-hand with destruction, is the “forcing of the unity of existence” (as the judge puts it) at only one level of scale, where it would appear to grant the victory of one individual over another. At different levels of scale, it is no more than a participant—that is, no more than a part of that greater unity which must remain unknowable by virtue of its infinitely telescoping variables.

Considered in this sense, the crushed and burned footpiece, which in its remains is no more than a shrivelled husk, becomes the locus of an attention which has been stoked into being by its being crushed and burned in the first place. Its “loss” finds a kind of repair in the consideration which we are willing to grant it. Materially, it is simple enough to describe the energy exchange

which takes place at the event's most obvious level of scale: the thin, ancient steel, which is "shelled with rot," breaks down to some extent in the fire and is transformed into heat and sound. As soon as the closed system under consideration is enlarged beyond the flames themselves, though, the exchanges of energy (which we know are not destroyed, only changed) grow more complex. To what extent, for instance, is it possible to say that the destructive act has invited the thoughts of those in attendance at the judge's little ritual? And how might we account for the origins of those thoughts? Such questions only grow more complex when what is destroyed is not an ancient object but a person or even an entire town. The "energy exchanges" in the latter cases must be enormously complex, as we have already seen to a certain extent in *Housekeeping* with Ruth's desiring and imaginative hypotheticals arising out of the losses she has encountered in her life: her mother, her grandmother, her sister. These are losses which, it becomes possible to say, contain their own overcomings by commanding a wishful attention after the fact—an attention which would not have been possible were it not for the losses themselves. For Ruth, this is a twofold wish: on the one hand an impossible desire for that which is no longer accessible in this world; and, on the other, a compelled desire which is in some incalculable sense constituted materially out of the object at its moment of loss. It is this second sense which is so fascinating, especially because, as we noted before (borrowing from Rovelli), the operation of time might not be quite so linear and straightforward as it seems, but rather the result of a perceptual selection of some macroscopic state. Which is to say that the desire to overcome a loss and the loss itself might not be so distinct as would be supposed, even when examined in rigidly physical terms.

These, of course, are the very terms which *Blood Meridian* supplies, though there is little time or room in the novel for anything like the kind of lament and imagination that makes up so much of Ruth's narration in *Housekeeping*. Instead, the violent encounters are framed as collisions drawn up in advance. "Everybody dont have to have a reason to be someplace," says the kid to the judge late in

the novel (342). The judge is quick to put his remark in perspective: “That’s so.... They do not have to have a reason. But order is not set aside because of their indifference.... If it is so that they themselves have no reason and yet are indeed here must they not be here by reason of some other?” (342). Yet this order, which always tends toward violence, is tempered by the book’s form, which frames for us the simultaneity of violence and a fear of violence/a sympathy for its victims. It is an order predicated upon our eager desire to see the novel’s violence enacted, but, curiously, the novel also turns us in the opposite direction and asks momentarily that we consider its remainders. What this consideration leads us toward is the revelation (if we are willing to take the time to look) that the perspective which grants *Blood Meridian* its terrible order is and has been our own, and that there are innumerable others for whom—like Ruth—order is assembled out of loss. For these countless and unseen others who function on the novel’s margins there are other closed systems and other macroscopic states which have been selected according to other principles. There are, we might imagine, instances of “wishful thinking” which regularly look to unthinkable losses and ask for their repair. This is the hope which *Blood Meridian* simultaneously contains and prohibits—an infinite amount of hope, but not for us.

Conclusion—On *Jack* and “The Passenger”

Combing through the novels and essays of Marilynne Robinson and Cormac McCarthy in search of the kinds of formal peculiarities which I took to be worth exploring further—the kinds of formal peculiarities which I have here claimed are not only crucial to our understanding of these two authors’ works, but which constitute in themselves a means of coming to understand contradictions that are effectively not contradictions at all—I found myself wondering, perhaps greedily, whether or not new books were on their way. This is one of the problems with studying the works of living authors and coming to love and depend upon their writings: eventually, you can only hope that there will be more, new stories and worlds and ideas to inhabit. Yet at the same time you must wonder if that which is new, when it inevitably arrives, will validate what you have said or thought about the older work. That this was something I might need to contend with remained in the back of my mind for the majority of this project, and, indeed, it is something I am still thinking about. For as long as both of these writers were still actively working on new books and new essays, there was the possibility (however unlikely) of some radical disavowal of earlier methods or convictions, or even of some subtle shift in attitude or engagement. This, of course, would not change the basic shape of my own argument, though it might well transform it into a reading that turned its selected authors “against themselves”—at least, to a considerably greater extent than it already has.

About halfway into the writing of this project, Robinson released her much-anticipated fifth novel (the fourth in the “Gilead” series) to somewhat mixed reviews. *Jack*, it seemed, was not destined for anything like the literary success of *Gilead*, but it was, without a doubt, powerful and beautiful in its own right. “If *Jack*,” wrote one reviewer, “feels somehow less like a world and more like a morality tale or thought experiment than her other novels, that is perhaps because its central

character is so ill-tethered to the world” (Kisner). This was no indictment, but rather a careful reader’s attempt to come to terms with the strange fact of a novel which ought not to have existed in the first place. That is to say, by Robinson’s own admission, Jack, who was the narrative center and grounding consciousness of this most recent novel, was never supposed to have been a candidate for the position of storyteller: we were never “meant” to have access to this man’s inner life. As far as I can tell, the reasons for this decision—one which Robinson finally walked back—had to do with the theological content of the whole series, or at least with what we might say constitutes a significant portion of it, namely, the “problem” of predestination. When Jack was a character perceived from without, we could accept that the hard possibility of his being consigned from birth to eternal damnation was at odds with an inner life which had its own beautiful internal consistency. We could be convinced of the fact that Jack was hell-bound because of his actions (or, perhaps, that his hell-bound-ness preceded those actions), and yet still accept a certain dignity which consisted in his sorrow. And thus, we could cling to the possibility of a salvation or resolution which we could never hope to understand. The character’s tumultuous inner life was off limits to us.

With the appearance of *Jack*, though, this inner life was blown wide open, and the effect upon the reader was precisely that sense of unmooring from the world which is noted in the above review. This much should hardly be surprising. Here, for instance, is what Robinson had to say about the character during an interview in 2008: “...I would lose Jack if I tried to get too close to him as a narrator. He’s alienated in a complicated way. Other people don’t find him comprehensible and he doesn’t find them comprehensible” (Fay). What vanished in the attempt, however, was not Jack but that world from which he had always been alienated. Hence that bizarre feeling of placelessness which accompanies the reader as she attempts to make sense of the novel. And hence the further alienating effect of those occasional shifts outward, suddenly, into the world: all at once

it becomes possible to lose all assurance that this Jack is the same one who appears in *Gilead* or *Home*.

There are a couple of different ways to read this estrangement, and I have not yet settled on which, if either, I take to be the more convincing. Which is to say that I find myself needing more time with this novel, but also, perhaps, that *Jack* might well be Robinson's most challenging work. As a result, I have included it to a limited extent in chapter three and left my larger and more speculative thoughts for this conclusion. They are as follows. First, it is possible to take Robinson's abandonment of her earlier insistence as a kind of knowing experiment: some curiosity to engage with the inner life of a character whose inner life must have contained incentive enough to overcome the damage it was all but certain to do to the story-world. As Robinson says, she would "lose Jack" by attempting to get too close to him, and one does get the sense at various moments throughout the novel that its narrator or its world are in real danger of drifting out of focus. Here we run the risk of painting *Jack* as an effort which has failed, even if it has done so nobly. If Robinson has moved closer to the consciousness of Jack Boughton in the name of illuminating something like the qualia of damnation—or supposed damnation—her doing so has also enacted at the level of narrative that feeling of being cut off which we must ascribe to Jack. Because he is not at home, neither can we be. This, I think, is a somewhat overly dramatic reading of the novel. But there is a second reading of its choice of narrative centre which makes *Jack* into something considerably more complex, and which transforms its compositional effort from one of dogged curiosity into one of necessity. That is, if there is anything which is likely to convince us that Jack is a living "instance of predestination" (Robinson, *Home* 225) it is a glimpse of the way in which he experiences that suspicion from within; but, at the same time, if there is anything to then undermine our increasing sense that such a thing is possible it is Jack's fallibility as a reporter—his inability to accurately provide an account of causes and their effects in his own life. Which is precisely, and bizarrely, what

happens in Robinson's newest novel: the timeline of the relationship between Jack and Della, as well as those events which fill in the gaps, does not follow a linear causal structure. The couple's first date seems to follow after events which occur a full year later than that same first-date evening (an evening which we read about at the beginning of the book). This confusion suggests one of two things: either Robinson has made an error here in plotting out her book, or she has deliberately (and brilliantly) undermined the central problem with having Jack "tell his own story." Here, again, is the potential expression of a crucial contradiction (which finally does *not* contradict) within the form of one of Robinson's novels, though this particular case will require further elaboration elsewhere.

McCarthy's newest work is, strictly speaking, "The Kekulé Problem," which I have addressed at some length in chapter one, though he is rumoured to have been at work on a new novel for quite some time now. An excerpt from this book (titled "The Passenger") was read out at a Santa Fe Institute event in 2015, but in 2009 McCarthy had already discussed aspects of it in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. Its plot—then as now, presumably—would concern the life of a young woman who was both a mathematician and a musician, but who would ultimately take her own life for reasons which the larger novel was sure to reflect upon and complicate. One can imagine that much like language in "The Kekulé Problem," paranoid schizophrenia (the young woman's disorder) in this new novel was bound to be treated in ways which were at once rigorously scientific and probing of the limits of present claims to scientific certainty. Indeed, a cursory description of the unpublished work reveals its thematic concerns to be McCarthy's most overtly scientific yet, and, if they were suddenly to appear in the form of a new published work, then they would be his most overtly scientific since that recent essay. What astounds, though, about this apparently new line of inquiry (and I hope I have made clear that there is nothing new about it) is that it does not seem to be a product of this same biographical moment. As Diane Luce points out in a recent essay on the subject, McCarthy has been working on some version of "The Passenger"

since at least 1980, and probably for even longer than that (Luce 86). To put it into perspective, this means that the new novel would have been in consideration, whether seriously or implicitly, during the composition of *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain*, *The Stonemason*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road*, and *The Sunset Limited*—and, in all likelihood, *Suttree*.

What *this* means must in some respects remain no more than a matter for speculation, though Luce does a wonderful job of moulding the available information about the book into a coherent picture of what it might one day look like, and, as well, of providing some sense of the kinds of things McCarthy seems to have been thinking over at its earliest stages. She notes, for instance, that in 1980 he confided in a friend that “the novel was to open at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain on the north side of New Orleans, where the mentally fragile but extraordinarily talented jazz clarinetist Leon “Rapp” Roppolo (1902–1943) ‘threw his clarinet’” (Luce 86). The project’s central concern with the conflict between mental illness and creative potential was present from the very start. But Luce does wonder whether McCarthy’s encounter with the physicists and mathematicians at the MacArthur Foundation (after his being awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1981) might have had some effect on the novel’s ultimate direction. “Perhaps,” she writes, “the company of the MacArthur and Santa Fe scientists became an unanticipated influence on ‘The Passenger,’ prompting McCarthy to shift his suicidal character’s creative talent into the realm of mathematics and physics” (Luce 94–95). If we take this to be true, is it not then also reasonable to suppose that such a shift might transform the project into a considerably more difficult endeavour and account for (some of) its delay? And might we not suppose, too, that this new influence would settle into the background of the author’s more general considerations, insinuating itself to such an extent that it became a critical part of the novels which were to be published in the interim? It seems to me that this is a fairly acceptable speculation, even if that is all it can be.

It is tempting here to begin drawing out some of the suspicions which I have concerning these two works—the one with which I need more time, and the other which does not exist yet—perhaps because of some impulse to get out ahead of the inevitable talk about how they constitute wholly new expressions or phases in the bodies of works of their authors. In the case of Robinson, this kind of judgment might easily be appended to a novel which has taken for its basic narrative form something effectively antithetical to an earlier unspoken rule: that we should not be allowed into the mind of Jack Boughton. To break this rule would be to demolish the mystery behind Jack's motives and predilections and “lose” the character by losing the world against which we are able to see him in relief. For McCarthy, this new phase, identified by one of his Santa Fe Institute colleagues as mathematical and analytical, “full-blown Cormac 3.0” (Martinez), is already identifiable by the curious fact of his having published an essay in the science magazine *Nautilus*, let alone by the apparently new thematic bent of “The Passenger.”

In each case, though, there remains a consistency which I hope I have gone some of the way to identifying in these chapters—a consistency which arises out of the continual and nested contradiction(/non-contradiction) of form and content, both within and beyond the text. This unlikely overlap, which I have traced to elements of the poststructural and the Christological, is everywhere in the works of these two authors. It is in their attention to a material world which can never quite remain stably or “merely” material, it is in the narrative forms in which this attention is presented to us, and it is in the dramatic difference which would seem to exist between and across their separate works. To break with what has come earlier, then, is precisely in keeping with what has come earlier: it is both radically new and a continual return to the formal, ontological, theological, and scientific stakes of the earlier works. And while these newer novels will require far closer attention than I have been able to grant them here (particularly if, and when, “The Passenger” appears as a completed novel), I hope that I have at least suggested why and how they might resist

any final statements which we may wish to apply to them. To borrow at last, and one final time, from Robinson's *Gilead*, that brilliantly endless source of illumination: "To conclude is not in the nature of the enterprise" (Robinson, *Gilead* 152).

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