THE CURING OF SENTIMENTS: HISTORY, NARRATIVE, AND CORMAC MCCARTHY’S BORDER TRILOGY

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Introduction

At the end of my undergraduate career, I have found that the authors I have read, the knowledge that I have obtained, and the history that I have been inducted into, have all led me to a broad conclusion that writing, and indeed most artistic endeavors, are undertaken to continue a humanistic tradition of searching for meaning. The answers have remained elusive, though, and the general consensus in contemporary times may very well be that well-defined, clear-cut meaning cannot always be found. Despite such a potentially negative outcome, however, an alternative perspective arises that the act of writing may not be a way of searching for meaning, but rather a way of creating meaning. Though this conclusion still leaves quite a void in understanding place and purpose in the beginning of the 21st century, it also heightens our role as readers. And who has not been drawn to this act of witnessing narratives, of reading, watching, and ultimately listening, as a way to exceed the limits of our own subjective experience of the world? If we have but one view of life, then reading creates windows into other lives, other stories, and the experience of life grows beyond its myopic view and becomes an aggregate of all stories. The very notions of fate and of God are parallels for seeing the world as a story: learning that we have but limited control over our own lives, we begin to see instead that this story has already been written, that we are playing out the roles given to us. If all the world is a stage, then why can it not also be a story? It is a frame of actors and observers, all of whom live out there part while simultaneously submitting their experiences that take their place within the narrative tapestry that becomes the long sought meaning. My time spent working with Cormac McCarthy’s immense and intricate Border Trilogy has led me to this conclusion.

The Border Trilogy – All the Pretty Horses (1992), The Crossing (1994), and Cities of the Plain (1998) -- could yet come to stand as McCarthy’s masterpiece. Accessible yet still full of
profound significance, The Border Trilogy tells the story of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, two young westerners who continue the search for meaning as they confront the fading the mythos that they believed would define their lives, the grand American myth of the west. Set in the mid of the 20th century, The Border Trilogy takes place in a vanishing world where the key figures of the western myth, the American cowboy, are becoming discarded cultural artifacts. John Grady’s tale in *All the Pretty Horses* is familiar, a reiteration of the young idealist setting out from the ruins of his home – marked by the death of his grandfather and the sale of the family ranch – to find again the pastoral legend of the west. It is the story of the American malcontent, who, as George Guillemin writes, leaves a society that has left him wanting for the mythic idea of the frontier, “the frontier being not the beachhead of civilization in a howling wilderness but a last stronghold against civilization” (93). With his friend Lacey Rawlins, he crosses the border of Mexico to find work as a ranch hand. And while paradise seems to be found for a while, his adventure dissolves into a nightmare as the myth crumbles under the pressures of the real world. He plays a role encoded by popular notions of history and by culture – embarking in a foreign land to re-enact a microcosm of Manifest Destiny, acting the part of the outlaw as he aids in stealing a horse, and falling in love with an unattainable paramour – and finds that his attempts to test his will against the implacability of the world only leads him to further loss. Being the stoic figure that follows the American heroic identity, he continues his attempt to forge for himself a place in the world, to write his own story, with predictably disastrous results.

Billy Parham in *The Crossing* learns a similar lesson through the failed endeavors of his story. His initial story of attempting to return a wolf he captures to her home in the mountains of Mexico mirrors the disillusionment of John Grady’s, and from it he walks away with a different
strategy for avoiding loss: to become a drifter and abandon his narrative obligation. Instead of continuing in the path of the actor, the man of action, the path that John Grady takes up again, he avoids the narrative of his own life: he becomes an observer instead of a person to whom things happen. It is in *The Crossing* that the narrative themes that define the trilogy first arise, often through the words of cryptic characters Billy meets who share with him parables that offer different perspectives on understanding the world through a lens of narrative meaning. In these meetings Billy learns that truth derives itself from what is told and that ultimately the story people want to hear becomes more real than the event itself. A blind man extolls to him what could be the central thesis to the trilogy: “Debemos escuchar” (*Crossing* 292). That we should listen, and in doing so take part in the creation of the narrative reality that is the world.

The first two novels of *The Border Trilogy* construct the dichotomy between the two protagonists: the idealism and romanticism of John Grady who continues the existentialist but ultimately futile struggle for self-created meaning, and the pragmatism of Billy who abandons the scripting of his own life and becomes instead and stand-in for the reader, the one who still remains after the tale ends, the one who must carry the burdensome knowledge of the other’s tale and by doing so gives it meaning. The tension between the different courses of the trilogy’s protagonists create the thematic cohesion of the seemingly disparate stories of *The Border Trilogy*, and the union of the two characters in *Cities of the Plain* solidifies McCarthy’s beliefs concerning the narrative construction of meaning as a superior, if resigned, method to dealing with the void of modern life over the endlessly repeated and repeatedly failed impulse to create for oneself that meaning. John Grady acts out again his tragedy, this time a dark reiteration taking place not in the pastoral beauty of ranches but in the shadows of whorehouses, and attempts to create the world of his ideals only to have his lover murdered and himself cut apart
by a pimp’s blade. And Billy, having decided to take part again in the narrative matrix of the world, observes another’s tragedy and lives on, like the reader, with the narrative meaning that he has witnesses and thus made real.

Through the repetition of stories throughout The Border Trilogy and through the juxtaposition of John Grady and Billy, McCarthy submits beneath the accessible appeal of the trilogy a complicated but poignant metaliterary observation that the forces of narrative – of creating stories and the observation of those stories by others – creates the truest meaning that can be derived by humans, the only reality that can be known in the stead of a primary, scientific reality that will always remain unknown. Another of Billy’s interlocutors gives him the maxim that “rightly heard all tales are one” (Crossing 143). This statement elucidates the familiar literary ground that The Border Trilogy covers, an act that further supports its narrative themes. John Grady is an echo of the key American literary figure that sets out from home in an attempt to find something more real than what has been given. He is Huckleberry Finn on the Mississippi, Ishmael opting for the revelations given by the life at sea, Jake Barnes fleeing throughout Europe to cope with the loss of meaning in the wake of war, and even Dean Moriarty, restless and without roots searching for an unknown “it” that will revive an enervated life. John Grady is at once both the cultural icon of the American cowboy and the literary icon of the malcontent male searching for something unknown but vitally potent in lands far from home. That his existential search ends in the same despair and further confusion as some of these literary predecessors was predestined. His bloody and intrinsically meaningless death at the end of Cities of the Plain is the same as Jakes Barnes reflecting on the ideal life at the end of The Sun Also Rises by saying “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” (Hemingway 251); the same as the final image of A Farewell to Arms with an abject and beaten Frederic Henry walking home in the rain after the death of his
wife and his newborn son. John Grady exists as this literary character that repeats the same tragedy in The Border Trilogy; this is the part he plays at the thematic level of the trilogy. Billy is his necessary other, the reader who creates meaning from the meaningless of the hero’s actions.

The following chapters will examine how each novel functions within The Border Trilogy’s thematic framework that explores the central role of narrative in human life. The first chapter depicts John Grady as a character fully seduced by the mythic appeal of history and how his initial actions are guided by manifesting the historically and culturally reinforced image of the American cowboy, and how is resolution to continue his idealistic hunt is actually a result of his role in a long human history of individuals fighting for a glimpse of beauty and meaning in a world that demands a steep sacrifice for such a modicum of peace. The second chapter will explore the narrative themes so prevalent in The Crossing and how Billy becomes the observer rather than the actor. The final chapter will cover Cities of the Plain and how Billy in this story has re-entered the narrative matrix of the world while John Grady has continued to deny any picture of reality that is not constituted by his tenacious ideals, and how the conclusion to the trilogy asserts again the viability of a narrative reality over other interpretations.

In All the Pretty Horses, Dueña Alfonsa tells John Grady: “In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not” (APH 238). By the end of The Border Trilogy, we too are cured of our sentiments, learning once again that existential endeavors for meaning, in creating space for a world of ideals, all too often end in disappointment if not despair. McCarthy does not leave us empty handed, though, disillusioned and distraught. He gives instead to fill that void a story, and from that story we learn that “all is telling” (Crossing 155): the world itself, the meaning that world harbors, and the meaning that
ultimately is not to be found, but rather created through the essential act of observing, of witnessing, of reading.
“In history there are no control groups. There is no one to tell us what might have been. We weep over the might have been, but there is no might have been. There never was. It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I dont believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God – who knows all that can be known – seems powerless to change.”

- From All the Pretty Horses

I.

Under the guise of a western, McCarthy imbues The Border Trilogy with the influence of history – of the land's past, of political bloodshed, and of family legacy – in order to further complicate the depth of one's search for place and meaning in the 20th century. Jacqueline Scoones remarks on this central tenet of the trilogy: “The journeys of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, their efforts to emplace themselves both in narratives and in terrains, reflect our struggles to define our relationships to places – not sites – at the end of the twentieth century” (137). To find meaning in place requires one to find meaning within the history of that place, too, and as cowboys, vanishing American cultural icons, the two protagonists will endure violence, hardship, and loss for this sense of self-location. The crossing of the border indicates a wealth of metaphors, but it marks more so than any the young protagonists search for an environment, a time even, that will cure their own sense of alienation and isolation in the increasingly modernized west, a landscape that is rapidly switching from the cattle industry to the oil
industry, the open plains constantly being cut apart, the old paths being soon replaced by endless highways. How one moves past such change, or not, lies at the heart of the Border Trilogy. John Grady Cole will rely on history – an idealization of the old world – in an attempt to resolve his figurative and literal homelessness. For John Grady, this dependence will lead him into the trap of history, making him a victim of experience as he dooms himself to the repetition of his tragedy. In doing so, though, he inducts himself into a human tradition of fighting for ideals that largely defines a central narrative in the story of the world.

In the highly mythologized west, McCarthy places John Grady in an environment that he only understands in terms of historically reinforced criteria. Before he adopts his identity as a lone rider, a cowboy riding off into unknown lands, he is only a boy, and McCarthy introduces him to the reader as such: “The boy's name was Cole. John Grady Cole” (APH 7). As this boy, John Grady is powerless. In his conversations with his father, John Grady has to admit his marginal role as a “boy”:

The boy watched him. You aint got no business smokin them things, he said.

His father pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on the table and looked up. When I come around askin you what I'm supposed to do you'll know you're big enough to tell me, he said.

Yessir.

You need any money?

No.

He watched the boy. You'll be all right, he said.

(APH 8)

Rebuked by his father, the narrator continues to refer to John Grady as “the boy” and he becomes
more taciturn in the conversation, losing the desire to test any of his will against the culturally enforced sovereignty of the older generation over the youth.

The hard knocks of youth continue for John Grady. In a conversation with Rawlins, the reader learns that John Grady even loses his girlfriend to an older suitor:

What do you aim to do? Rawlins said.

I dont know. Nothin.

I dont know what you expect. Him two years oldern you. Got his own car and everthing.

(APH 10)

Faced with another obstacle of being still just a boy, John Grady continues to submit, resigning to silence on the matter, knowing there is nothing he can do: “She didnt say nothin. What would she say? There aint nothin to say” (APH 10). The worst effect of his age, though, is the loss of his grandfather’s ranch, an inheritance on which John Grady had hoped to base his entire life. In an attempt to reclaim it, John Grady meets with the family lawyer to discuss his options, only to hear much of the same response:

When he'd said what he had to say Franklin leaned back and looked out the window. He shook his head. He turned back and folded his hands on the desk in front of him. In the first place, he said, I'm not really at liberty to advise you. It's called conflict of interest. But I think I can tell you that it is her property and she can do whatever she wants with it.

I dont have any sayso.

You're a minor.

(APH 16)
While it is John Grady's youth that limits his agency at home, it also spurs his stubbornness, something that will debilitate him even more after he crosses the border and adopts the historically-backed image of the American cowboy. The lawyer tries to make John Grady see the foolishness in trying to maintain the vanishing trade of the cattle rancher: “Son, not everybody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven. [. . .] If it was a payin proposition that'd would be one thing. But it aint” (APH 17). The stubbornness of John Grady's youth persists, though, as he replies curtly: “It could be” (APH 17).

John Grady begins to adopt his new identity, shedding his boyhood, early in *All the Pretty Horses*. Soon after his father gifts him with “a brand new Hamley Formfitter saddle” (APH 14) he walks out to the street to hitchhike his way home, and it is here that he is first recognized as a cowboy in the story. A driver picks up John Grady, obviously noting the saddle and thus assuming the lifestyle of John Grady: “Throw that hull up in the bed, cowboy, and get in here” (APH 14). It is the first moment in the narrative where a person recognizes John Grady as a cowboy, and from this point on he tries to move further from being just a boy and closer to manifesting this American icon. As Scoones notes, though, one of the defining qualities of the protagonists of The Border Trilogy is their lack of understanding of the cultural discourses – of the histories – that they try to join and embody: “[McCarthy's] central protagonists have no clear understanding of their directions and destinations; John Grady and Billy are part of larger narratives they only partially recognize and understand, narratives of history of politics, of laws and their construction of the borderlands as sites” (139-40). John Grady readily adopts this new identity, imbuing it with all of the myth and honor that his culture has placed upon it, while at the same time remaining ignorant of the historical implications and falsifications that this idealized icon will visit upon him.
John Grady enters into the realm of history, mainly the myths that surround the cowboy icon and Mexico, in order to aggrandize his self-image past the limitations of boyhood, a move that will ultimately push him on towards his greater search for meaning and place. Sara L. Spurgeon, though, examines implications of “the sacred cowboy” motif in *All the Pretty Horses*, first by suggesting the cultural power given to the cowboy in American history and identity: “The figure of the cowboy personifies America's most cherished myths – combining ideas of American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, rugged individualism, frontier democracy, communion with and conquest of the natural world, and the righteous triumph of the white race. The mythic West and the frontiers of legend are familiar icons on the American cultural landscape” (79). John Grady, as Scoones noted earlier, enters into this cultural narrative without fully realizing all of its consequences, yet the traits given by Spurgeon become central characteristics for him, whether he realizes it or not. He attempts to manifest this iconic character as a way of pulling himself out of the ruins of his old life – his dead grandfather and dying father, his estranged mother, and the loss of his inheritance – but he fails to realize that his new identity is just as endangered, as Spurgeon notes: “This mythic figure, however, […] is bound to crumble, for it is hollow at its core and stripped bare by McCarthy in *All the Pretty Horses*” (79-80).

The critical perspective on this reading of *All the Pretty Horses* has largely been unanimous. Scholars see John Grady attempting to re-enact the American mythos of the sacred cowboy, with, of course, the tragedy of his life being the only consequence for setting out on such a path. Spurgeon continues to assert the fallacy of John Grady's cowboy identity, which motivates his “wishes, his code of honor, his view of how the world should be rather than how the world is” (83), as the central message of *All the Pretty Horses*: “In other words, the myth of
the sacred cowboy, which demands that a worthy young man should end up with a ranch of his own, a lovely young wife, and “all the pretty horses” simply by virtue of being Anglo, male, a cowboy, and the descendant of colonizers, functions in neither world, and this is McCarthy's point” (83). Her argument concludes that myths function as a way of glossing over the real world, of imposing upon it a different image of reality, a symptom that defines John Grady throughout the trilogy: “The myth of the sacred cowboy and the structures of the national symbolic it supports are, in the end, an epistemology of death, dashing and romantic without doubt, but hollow, false, blood-stained, and too frightened of the truth to see the world as it is, or to live in the one to come” (94). John Grady's faithful following of the sacred cowboy indulges his idealism and desire to see the world as he wishes it to be.

John Cant also explores this failed myth theme in his book dealing with the whole body of McCarthy's work, Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism. Like Spurgeon and other critics, he writes that “John Grady's flight to Mexico is therefore a romantic quest to regain the lost world of the cowboy” (184). Indulging in such myths is the main engine of destruction throughout McCarthy's work, though, as Cant argues. He contends that McCarthy constantly works, in the vein of postmodernism, to disprove the “grand narratives” that drive American identity, such as the sacred cowboy myth worshiped by John Grady: “[. . .] [O]ne of the unifying themes of McCarthy's work is his depiction of the failure of the ‘grand narrative’ of American Exceptionalism” (5). McCarthy's dismantling of grand narratives supports his skeptical view of progress which is an illusion. John Grady's reliance on history, on one “of the systems of knowledge that purport to 'explain' the world” (10) which McCarthy rejects, only leads him to self-destruction; he follows a false path away from any true understanding of the world in which he lives. Myths, with history itself being one of the largest in McCarthy's works,
will destroy even the most ardenthearted of heroes, such as John Grady: “For McCarthy's heroes 'the world's dream' is the American dream, the dream that has grown out of the myth of American Exceptionalism; most are destroyed by it; one or two escape, but not unscathed” (15).

*All the Pretty Horses*, through the narrator's voice and descriptions, is replete with passages that reveals McCarthy's sense of history, that what is in the past is not as distant as one would like to think, that the present has not surpassed the failures of the past. In this way, the text, through the voices of the narrator, the characters, and the real or imagined histories of the characters, “converge to weave together past, present and future” (Chollier 16). An early passage in *All the Pretty Horses* indicates this amalgamation of time as the narrator blends the present landscape of the west together with the ghosts of its past residents, the Comanches. In a seamless transition, the narrative switches from John Grady's solitary horseback ride across the plains of west to a “dream of the past” (*APH 5*) that recalls the violence of the lives of those who inhabited these lands before Manifest Destiny:

> At the hour he'd always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only.

(*APH 5*)

With great detail and in Faulknerian style, McCarthy melts the present into the past, emphasizing the coexistence of the two and simultaneously promising that all are still “pledged in blood,” that the violence of the past only guarantees the violence in the present. The passage continues as the
narrator tells the reader that “when the wind was in the north you could hear them” (*APH* 5), making the memories of the Comanche that much more immediate to those living in the present. The paragraph concludes in an affirmation of McCarthy's distrust in the influence of the past, that all lessons will be lost and the only constant through time is human insularity and bloodshed, sharing such details as the “footslaves following half naked and sorely burdened” (*APH* 5) before ending with the “nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives” (*APH* 5). Nation and ghost of nation side by side, just as the present and the past walk together. No lesson will be learned from this dream of the past, though, as the past will be lost to the myth of history, allowing the familiar cycle to perpetuate.

This essential passage to The Border Trilogy shares McCarthy's central thesis concerning the delusions of history; as it continues, it also shows John Grady's ignorance to this cryptic message. He dismounts on a crest and “[stands] like a man come to the end of something” (*APH* 5), suggesting John Grady's sense of surpassing the ghosts of the Comanche warriors, being – as an American cowboy – the successor to their time in history. Yet what he finds there is an undeniable sign of death, “an old horseskull in the brush” (*APH* 6), the only true heir of history. Posited against this truth that John Grady will deny is what will push him against it until his own death, his stoic edge and belief in the cosmic superiority of morality: “What he loved in horses is what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them. All his reverence and all his fondness and all the learnings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise” (*APH* 6). The narrator's direct characterization of John Grady paints him in brash contrast against the historical lesson of previous page, and throughout the trilogy his faith in the ardenthearted, his will to pit himself against the mandates of history and reality in his
search for meaning and place, will lead him to the repetition of tragedy and his own death.

Foreshadowing this eventual victory of McCarthy's atemporal past over John Grady's valor, the ghosts return to continue on where the young cowboy has turned back: “He crossed the old trace again and he must turn the pony up onto the plain and homeward but the warriors would ride on in that darkness they'd become” (APH 6). Once again, the ghosts reveal a constant of loss and violence as they travel “rattling past with their stone-age tools of war in default of all substance and singing softly in blood and longing south across the plains to Mexico” (APH 6). The succession of these events and the shifts between the narrator's lucid sense of the past and John Grady's characterization construct for the trilogy its conflict over the influence and veracity of history in one's search for meaning.

The role of history in All the Pretty Horses and in the perspective of John Grady expands into the realm of family legacy. The lives of the father and grandfather who came before him and lived out their own lives look back on the young hero as some harbinger. The history of the grandfather's brothers predicts that violent and young deaths run in the family: “His grandfather was the oldest of eight boys and the only one to live past the age of twenty-five. They were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires. They seemed to fear only dying in bed. The last two were killed in Puerto Rico in eighteen ninety-eight” (APH 7). McCarthy employs a sense of generational repetition as he re-affirms it through Blevins who is also critically aware of death's presence in his family history. He fears death by lightning for death in such a bizarre manner has been a cruel trend in his family:

It runs in the family, said Blevins. My grandaddy was killed in a minebucket in West Virginia it run down in the hole a hunnerd and eighty feet to get him it couldn't even wait for him to get to the top. […] My daddy's older brother was
blowed out of a derrick in the Batson Field in the year nineteen and four, cable rig with a wood derrick but the lightning got him anyways and him not nineteen years old. Great uncle on my mother's side – mother's side, I said – got killed on a horse and it never singed a hair on that horse and it killed him graveyard dead [. . .] and I got a cousin aint but four years oldern me was struck down in his own yard comin from the barn and it paralyzed him [. . .].

(APH 67-68)

Indeed, the odd and fatal trend continues with Blevins, for it is his fear of the lightning that causes him to abandon his horse who flees with his gear in the uproar of the storm. Blevin's foolhardy stubbornness in reclaiming this gear sets him on his course of horse thieving and murder and thus ultimately to his death under the corrupt Mexican captain's command. Blevins tells John Grady that he is “double bred for death by fire” (APH 68), and likewise John Grady is bred for a young death as he himself seems to only fear dying in bed like his ancestors.

This family-instilled fate covers only one side of John Grady's coin, though, for his father's own heartbreak and disillusionment predicts his son’s. Like his son does with Alejandra and later with Magdelena, John Grady's father counters his own death wish through an idealization of his relationship with his now ex-wife:

I wouldnt be here if it wasnt for her. When I was in Goshee I'd talk to her by the hour. I made her out to be like somebody who could do anything. I'd tell her about some of the other old boys that I didnt think was goin to make it and I'd ask her to look after them and to pray for them. Some of them did make it too. I guess I was a little crazy. Part of the time anyway. But if it hadnt of been for her I wouldnt of made it. No way in this world.
He centers his world around his love, and when that ends in his own tragedy, an estranged divorce, his disillusionment mirrors the same that haunts John Grady after the end of his own relationships. Further emphasizing John Grady's abnegation of reality, though, his father comes to realize and even accept in his own defeat what his son never will, that the world is not governed by orders of virtue, that its image was a far more poisonous than that supposed by any myth:

They scarcely spoke all day. His father rode sitting forward slightly in the saddle, holding the reins in one hand about two inches above the saddlehorn. So thin and frail, lost in his clothes. Looking over the country with those sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he'd seen of it elsewhere. As if he might never see it right again. Or worse did see it right at last. See it as it had always been, would forever be.

This description of the father supports McCarthy's perspective on time used throughout the trilogy, that, as Chollier writes, past, present, and future are all woven together. A sense of time such as this one would reject any sense of progress throughout human history beyond base tenets, as McCarthy's writing most clearly does. That the world could exist in this defunct form in the father's eyes, that it has possibly always been this way and could quite possibly always be made in this way, continues the theme.

Once again, though, the narrator's characterization of John Grady shows the protagonist's inability to see the world outside of his own image. John Grady sits on his horse “not only as if he'd been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some
queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyways” (*APH* 23). Such an assertion marks John Grady's need to find “something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took” (*APH* 23). John Grady's part in the trilogy is largely defined by this search via his determined and self-destructive acts in reclaiming ill-fated loves. His tragedy rests in the fact that there is nothing for him to find that would make his world right to him, that he was, in a figurative way, born into a world without horses.

Before he leaves for his Mexican journey in search of past orders and ways, John Grady continues to remain ignorant to perspectives of the world outside of his own desires. At the theater in San Antonio where he attends one of his mother's shows, John Grady is an outsider as he maintains his image as the American cowboy, an image out of sync with the modern manners of the city: “He was not unaware of the glances that drifted his way from the theatergoers” (*APH* 21). He tries to create some sense of camaraderie between himself and others who are wearing the recognizable clothes of a cowboy: “He saw a few men in boots and hats and he nodded gravely to them, they to him” (*APH* 21). He remains fully fixed on his own world image, though, one supported by the history and myth he idolizes, and he even fails to garner any enlightenment from the art of the theater even though he watches it with “great intensity” (*APH* 21): “He'd the notion that there would be something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not. There was nothing in it at all” (*APH* 21). Completely isolated from the movement of his country away from the cowboy ethos, John Grady chooses to abandon his home and set out in search for the sacred cowboy myth in the unknown terrains of Mexico.

In *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, David Holloway attributes McCarthy's use
of history throughout his novels as a way of playing with forms of pastiche, an element of postmodernism that reiterates ideas and forms of earlier cultural items. Holloway positions McCarthy's use of pastiche, especially throughout The Border Trilogy, as the author's way of further disproving the veracity of the history and myths behind John Grady, and his definition of pastiche further elucidates John Grady's detachment throughout *All the Pretty Horses* and *Cities of the Plain*: “Resurrecting the past as a series of images that stand as substitutes for the real, pastiche is a flattened or depthless aesthetic form in which the 'original' object or identity invoked gives way to the simulation or the copy, the 'original' being consigned to a prior age that is now lost or that is thought not to have existed in the first place” (71). This definition matches John Grady's attempt to attach himself to a historical image, the sacred cowboy that is either lost (which would coincide with John Grady's own thoughts) or that has never existed in the first place, the argument that both which Spurgeon and Cant have argued. Holloway continues to discuss pastiche as a way of signifying the end of interpreting the world through a structuralist sense:

As a signifying code that therefore retreats from the naming of any 'real' referent in the world, the ironic mode of pastiche is the kind of aesthetic most fitted to a time in which representation conceived as a system of transparent and stable signs has become a thing of the past, and in which the very notion of a recoverable telos or unifying grand narrative at work in human history has been declared (by some) to be similarly obsolete.

(71)

The idea of pastiche, as described by Holloway, gives context to McCarthy's employment of history as deceptive in The Border Trilogy. The ideology of pastiche compliments McCarthy's
own anti-Enlightenment sense as forces in his novels deconstruct any sense of objective morality, the hegemony of rationality, or the superiority of civilization over the primal. The role of both John Grady and Billy Parham is to confront this interpretation of the world posited by McCarthy. John Grady, though, will cling to the pastiche of his cowboy fantasy.

Holloway focuses on *All the Pretty Horses* to support his view on McCarthy's use of pastiche in his novels. He looks specifically at how John Grady and Rawlins adopt “the outlaw/cowboy styling” (71), especially in their speech. Early in their journey south, John Grady and Rawlins tell people they meet that they are outlaws:

Rawlins looked at John Grady. You think he can be trusted?

Yeah. He looks all right.

We're runnin from the law, Rawlins said.

The Mexican looked them over.

We robbed a bank.

He stood looking at the horses. You aint robbed no bank, he said.

(*APH* 34)

The boys play a similar game when they first meet Blevins where they again pretend to be murderers, with Rawlins telling John Grady in front of Blevins that “I aint diggin no grave like that last one” (*APH* 40). Holloway assesses the boy's style of speech as a form of pastiche which only reconfirms the absence of the myth that they are simultaneously playing with and searching for: “If 'authentic' history and subject-status speak at all in language like this, they do so in the form of pastiche – 'speech in a dead language,' and 'imitation of dead styles' – where desire for a 'real' historical moment stresses only the inaccessibility or absence of what is sought” (72). He then concludes that such actions only emphasize the distance of the cowboy myth from the
reality of John Grady's present: “Such language merely reconfirms the kitsch deadness of the old west, its historical remoteness from the world of the protagonist's present” (72-73). McCarthy's use of pastiche continues throughout the trilogy, but Holloway's work functions here as another way of seeing John Grady's dependence on history, especially as he seeks a mythical past to escape the present reality that he will not accept.

The first part of *All the Pretty Horses* indulges John Grady in his pursuit of a false history. He liberates himself from the constrictions of being a powerless youth in a rapidly modernizing west, cuts himself off from all familial ties, and sets off for mythic Mexico with his cowboy buddy, Rawlins. They set out for Mexico with all their dreams intact “like thieves newly loosed into that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing” (*APH* 30). Together they engage in several cowboy pastiches, some already discussed, such as the stylization of their dialogue, and others, such as camping under the stars on the open plain, idealizing further the life they chose:

They sat and watched the fire and they watched the thin crescent moon above the black hills to the west.

Rawlins rolled a cigarette and lit it with a coal and lay back against his saddle. I'm going to tell you somethin.

Tell it.

I could get used to this life.

(*APH* 35)

Upon meeting Blevins, another youth trying to escape the miseries of his own life at home, the self-conscious (both on the characters' part and on McCarthy's) clichés continue as Blevins shows off his skill with a six-shooter:
You throw your pocketbook up in the air and I'll put a hole in it, he said. [. . .]
He stood with his back to the sun and the pistol hanging alongside his leg. [. . .]
You ready, Annie Oakley? he said.
Waitin on you.
He pitched it up underhanded. It rose spinning in the air, very small against the
blue. They watched it, waiting for him to shoot. Then he shot. The billfold jerked
sideways off across the landscape and opened out and fell twisting to the ground
like a broken bird.

(APH 48)

The Mexicans they meet during their journey encourage their delusions as they call them
“caballero” (APH 93), gentleman or knight, that further reinforces John Grady's distancing from
the boyhood he has left. The three boys even begin to act out their outlaw fantasy as they become
horse thieves, stealing back the horse Blevins lost in the storm, an act that will lead to their own
undoing but is done with full stubbornness on the parts of John Grady and Blevins as they
continue their fantasy. Rawlins, a more innocent and stable character, is the only one who
recognizes the gravity of the act: “Rawlins sat holding the cigarette. We're goin to die in this
goddamned country, he said” (APH 86). Nonetheless, John Grady's hunt for the past leads him to
his paradise by the end of the first section of All the Pretty Horses as they secure jobs at the
Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción. At this point, John Grady and Rawlins
believe they have been successful in returning to the past, in manifesting the sacred cowboy
myth:

This is how it was with the old waddies, aint it?

Yeah.
How long do you think you'd like to stay here?

About a hundred years. Go to sleep.

(APH 96)

The first part of *All the Pretty Horses* deliberately mimics the western portrayal of the sacred cowboy myth. Yet John Grady will continue to reach for more from the depths of this deceptive history, and in doing so he will face the true lesson of history and guarantee his tragedy.

II.

Charles Bailey's article “The Last State of the Hero's Evolution: Cormac McCarthy's *Cities of the Plain*” provides another interpretation of John Grady's perspective on his travels that broadens the theme of history's influence on the young protagonist. Bailey links the heroes of The Border Trilogy with the Byronic antihero, a model which Bailey concludes is proved incompatible with the modern setting and demands of the trilogy. The antihero employed in Bailey's argument is “the character of highly developed sensitivities, the 'wandering outlaw' intent on self-realization and personal salvation, capable of great courageous moral action in the cause of human freedom, whose unconventional impulses rise from some inherent spiritual core” (294). Bailey concludes, though, that the failure of these characters is a result of their contrast against their world: “And just as Byron became disillusioned and, in lament, debunked the previous heroes as incompatible with a world that is too much with us, so does McCarthy lament even the anti-hero, made finally irrelevant in a world corrupted and degraded by advancing science and nuclear technology” (294).

Literary history plays a stronger part here in the creation of The Border Trilogy's characters, yet it still shows how John Grady, so infatuated with the legends of history, submits himself to old patterns. Bailey sees *All the Pretty Horses* as not only a western, re-enacting the
clichés and familiar stories of that genre, but also as a romance: “All the Pretty Horses is a courtly romance. John Grady Cole, the knight-errant, wanders into the wilderness and falls in love with an unattainable lady of a distinctly higher aristocratic class. He performs for her as a knight should, displaying a God-given talent for martial skills – in this case, taming horses” (294). As All the Pretty Horses, and mainly John Grady, exhibit the traits of a romance, it continues to dig a trench around the sacred myth of history, lifting its supposed truths above those imposed by the reality of the present. Bailey's thesis that All the Pretty Horses is a courtly romance in a western guise only further shows the role of history in shaping John Grady's doomed character. Even with the purity of John Grady's intentions throughout the trilogy, his reliance on history makes him fully submissive to the world of his illusion and thus fully endangered within the context of the real world: “For all its nobility, what dooms the enterprise and, finally, what dooms John Grady himself is a completely degraded world” (298).

John Grady's historical illusion comes crashing down around him via his failed love affair with the courtly lady, Alejandra. Like his father before him, John Grady banks his entire existence on his nascent love. The two acts that rob him of paradise at Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción are both caused by his indulgence of history: his complacency in helping Blevins steal his horse back, motivated by their shared outlaw fantasy and their belief in some vigilante justice, and his affair with Alejandra, spurred by the continuation of his sacred cowboy myth and his own romantic re-enactment but barred by both social and familial restrictions. John Grady's election of a historically influenced model of the world over a more tempered and realistic understanding leads to a series of catastrophes, including the death of Blevins under the corrupt law of the Mexican captain, his and Rawlin's imprisonment where they must fight for their lives, endure terrible wounds, and even, in John Grady's case, learn to kill,
and John Grady's final and permanent disillusion after losing Alejandra. His last encounter with Alejandra, where she tells him that she cannot leave with him and must return to her old life, inflicts on John Grady the wound that will trap him into the repetition of his loss, leading him ultimately to his violent death in *Cities of the Plain*. His reliance on history, which has led him tragically awry, is replaced with a feeling that the trajectory of his life has come to an end: “He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter him like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe that it would ever leave” (*APH* 254). With such a sentence, John Grady will simultaneously elect a death wish, which will guide him through his next vengeful encounter with the captain, and a concrete need to repeat this moment in an attempt, however doomed, to repeat his own failed history.

The conflict of history in *All the Pretty Horses* finds its spokesperson in Dueña Alfonsa, the great aunt of Alejandra and the matriarch of the family. James D. Lilley likens Alfonsa's role in *All the Pretty Horses* to that of Judge Holden's in *Blood Meridian*, seeing her as a philosophical center around which the narrative, its themes, and especially John Grady, turn: “In the same way that the judge inhabits the center of *Blood Meridian*, directing the dance of the kid towards his ultimate fate, Dueña Alfonsa stands at the heart of *All the Pretty Horses*, moving John Grady around like a pawn at her chessboard” (279). This perspective on Alfonsa rings especially true in considering the role of history throughout the trilogy. After John Grady returns from prison, seeking a reunion with Alejandra, Alfonsa shares with him her own history, a history entwined with that of Mexico and its bloody revolution. Through her personal life, her views on fate, and through her interpretations of the Mexican Revolution, Alfonsa argues that the past is not a platform for the present, a teacher that guarantees a better future, but only another
reminder of the ubiquitous unknown in any attempt to interpret reality, that perhaps the only constant across the echelons of time is the repetition of past acts and violences.

Lilley's reading of Alfonso's function in *All the Pretty Horses* largely supports this argument. Alfonso continues the theme of familial trends as she discusses her family history, telling John Grady about the women in her family who have suffered in love affairs: “I can scarcely count on two hands the number of women in this family who have suffered disastrous love affairs with men of disreputable character. [. . .] One does not like to entertain the notion of tainted blood. A family curse” (*APH* 229). This history, this perpetuation of “a family curse,” is also Alfonso's, though, as Lilley notes: “Like John Grady, the dueña has been scarred as a youth – both literally and figuratively – and in the same way that out protagonist is victimized and cast out by his lover's father, so too Alfonso's love for the young revolutionary, Gustavo Madero, has been forbidden by her own father” (279). Likewise, Alfonso's reading of the events of the Mexican Revolution acted as a practice run, or a harbinger, of the political chaos that followed in the Spanish Civil War: “The political tragedy in Spain was rehearsed in full dress twenty years earlier on Mexican soil” (*APH* 230). She continues this theme as she tells John Grady the history of Mexico, a history that she uses in her reasoning in barring John Grady from Alejandra: “I will tell you how Mexico was. How it was and how it will be again. You will see that those things which disposed me in your favor were the very things which led me to decide against you in the end” (*APH* 231). In the telling of this history, Alfonso asserts that she is also telling John Grady how it will be again, supporting her belief in the repetition of the past.

Much of what Lilley concludes in his article concerning the dueña elucidates her belief in history's deceptive nature, but he argues that she acts against John Grady in order to exact vengeance against her own past. He writes: “For Dueña Alfonso, John Grady represents an
opportunity for revenge. Driven by a desire to reverse the patterns of history that have left her a pawn to Symbolic circumstance, the dueña uses her grandniece, Alejandra, to effect a vicarious revenge on history” (280). In a form of turning the tables, Lilley asserts that Alfonsa seizes the opportunity to play the commanding role, to have the power, in a repetition of her own life. Similarly, Lilley suggests that John Grady's later actions, of capturing the Mexican captain and dragging him through the same town that the captain paraded the boys, is a way of John Grady enacting vengeance on his own past. The greater message of the trilogy, though, is how to escape the repetition of such histories: this is what John Grady fails to do, to escape the influence of the past, and it is what Billy, through his own loss and grieving, attempts to do. Alfonsa, as a central character of philosophical importance, wishes also to break such cycles. Lilley assumes that Alfonsa has trapped herself in the same circuit of her history; rather, she wishes to end it and to especially prevent such an event from continuing on in the next generation with Alejandra.

The keys for this argument rest within the history that Alfonsa shares with John Grady and within what she learned from this history. Her story of the Mexican Revolution is one that doubts the power of ideas, the ability for moral justice and truths to rise above the ravages of mob rule; it also relies on how Alfonsa has changed since her naive youth. She tells John Grady of how she first began to explore the profound ideas she would later study at the university: “In the fall of that year I was invited to the house many times and it was in that house that I first heard the full expression of those things closest to my heart. I began to see how the world must become if I were to live in it” (APH 233). With such a statement, Alfonsa reveals how similar she was to John Grady in her youth, and how the ideas she was exposed to functioned for her in much the same way history works for John Grady; Alfonsa began to idealize the world and its potential and creates a conflicting image between how she wishes it to be and how it actually is,
the same problem that haunts and destroys John Grady. As the history becomes a tale of those who wish to impose their enlightened or embellished visions of the world over the ravages of what is really there, the story of Francisco Madero, then, mirrors John Grady: “At that time there was no talk of his entering of politics. [Francisco] was simply trying to implement the ideas he had discovered. To make them work in everyday life” (APH 233).

Dueña Alfonsa's account of the Mexican Revolution to John Grady then serves as a warning to his idealistic heart. She continues to share her infatuation with the excitement of their ideas, their desires for a better world: “I was seventeen and this country to me was like a rare vase being carried about by a child. There was an electricity in the air. Everything seemed possible” (APH 233). These emotions, though, are often followed by disillusionment, as was the case with the dueña: “I thought that there was thousands like us. Like Francisco. Like Gustavo. There were not. Finally in the end it seemed there were none” (APH 233). The facts of the history continue to unfold, as do the parallels between Madero's own idealistic nature and John Grady's. “[Francisco's] trust in the basic goodness of humankind became his undoing” (APH 237), Alfonsa tells John Grady, and one remembers the early characterization of the protagonist as believing in the ardentheartedness of men. Alfonsa finishes her history with the gruesome murder of Francisco before a mob, the people he believed in being the ones to turn on him, to destroy him. She concludes by telling John Grady that Francisco did not understand Mexico, his environment, his time, his world:

   In later years I came to see how alike were he and Gustavo. Who was never meant to be a soldier. I think they did not understand Mexico. Like my father he hated bloodshed and violence. But perhaps he did not hate it enough. Francisco was most deluded of all. He was never suited to be president of Mexico. He was
hardly even suited to be Mexican.

(APH 238)

At the end, she visits upon John Grady her clearest warning concerning those who are led astray by the powers of ideas, of ideals, of idealized history: “In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting” (APH 238). Madero's history, the history of the Mexican Revolution, is John Grady's future, yet Alfonsa continues to doubt even the significance of her warning before the temptations of history's allure, that to know history is to prevent repeating it:

In history there are no control groups. There is no one to tell us what might have been. We weep over the might have been, but there is no might have been. There never was. It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I dont believe knowing can save us. What is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God – who knows all that can be known – seems powerless to change.

(APH 239)

As the philosophical core of All the Pretty Horses, Dueña Alfonsa here gives voice to McCarthy's pessimistic view on history, that there is no avoiding its repetition. This basic idea gives shape to the trilogy and guides it to John Grady's own demise as he rejects, no matter how fervently, this assertion. Alfonsa does not separate John Grady from Alejandra in an act of revenge; rather, it is her attempt to cure him of his sentiments, to break the cycles of history that he is doomed to revive.

The dueña also shares with John Grady two parables that further elucidate McCarthy's
perspective on history in The Border Trilogy as they both further diminish John Grady's agency within the influence of the past. They also support the ultimate unknown within the upper hierarchies of rationality, logic, and cause and effect. One parable is of the coiner at his bench from whom all actions follow his simple task of forging a coin:

My father had a great sense of the connectedness of things. I'm not sure I share it. He claimed that the responsibility for a decision could never be abandoned to a blind agency but could only be relegated to human decisions more and more remote from their consequences. The example he gave was of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed, cara y cruz.

(APH 231)

This parable supports a vast network of cause and effect, spreading from the most menial of actions. In the context of history, in this argument and in John Grady's case, it sets up a cyclical pattern of cause and effect that gives one explanation for the repetition of history, that the construction of historiographies, events, and idealizations of the past invites their repetition. Alfonsa doubts her father's interpretation, though, as it presumes that one could know the origin of a chain reaction: “My father must have seen in this parable the accessibility of the origins of things, but I see nothing of the kind” (APH 231). The other parable is closer to Alfonsa's own thinking and her own doubts in knowing the origin, and as such presents an interpretation of human action and history as a process that plays out ultimately through the hands of unknown forces, in the hands of other puppets: “For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in
the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on” \textit{(APH 231)}. She continues to assert that these strings, this unknown sequence of history and action, are the cause of ruin: “In my own life I saw these strings whose origins were endless enact the deaths of great men in violence and madness” \textit{(APH 231)}. Lilley agrees that these two parables support “a view of history in which the present is driven by an endless process of repetition” (281), going along with McCarthy's views, but they also act as further warnings to John Grady. His pursuit of the sacred cowboy myth presumes an ideal at the end of the puppet strings, but their endless origins will lead him to his own fatal end, another great man lost in the violence and madness of his unchecked idealism.

The Border Trilogy, though, is ultimately about how one chooses to interpret the world, and whether one way leads to dangerous consequences becomes a moot point, especially in the case of John Grady. To suggest that he is ignorant to the implications of his chasing of history and the hollowness of such a pursuit, and to further suggest that he learned nothing from his first trip into Mexico, that he foolishly re-enacts his tragedy in \textit{Cities of the Plain}, would severely belittle his significance in the trilogy. By the end of \textit{All the Pretty Horses}, John Grady has learned the deception of the sacred cowboy myth, the deceptions of history. On his trip back to America, full of the despondency that follows him after leaving Alejandra, he experiences a revelatory moment after witnessing the death of a doe he has just shot. In this moment, he reflects on the death and loss that has defined his journey, that has marred his idealism:

\begin{quote}
When he reached her she lay in her blood in the grass and he knelt with the rifle and put his hand on her neck and she looked at him and her eyes were warm and wet and there was no fear in them and then she died. He sat watching her a long time. He thought about the captain and he wondered if he were alive and he
\end{quote}
thought about Blevins. He thought about Alejandra and he remembered her the first time he ever saw her passing along the ciénega road in the evening with the horse still wet from her riding it in the lake and he remembered the birds and the cattle standing in the grass and the horses on the mesa.

(APH 282)

The doe, dying without fear, introduces John Grady to a different understanding of the world, one based more in nature than in the whims and worries of his own mind and will. His memories devolve back past the recent events that haunt him and back to his basic love of nature, the landscape of the ranch and the presence of horses. As the dead doe blends into the landscape, becoming just one more thing among endless things, further reflection reveals to John Grady a primal philosophy of “blood and stone,” the stripping away of superficial ideals and the realization of the true cost of beauty:

The sky was dark and a cold wind ran through the bajada and in the dying light a cold blue cast had turned the doe's eyes to but one thing more of things she lay among in that darkening landscape. Grass and blood. Blood and stone. Stone and the dark medallions that the first flat drops of rain caused upon them. He remembered Alejandra and the sadness he'd first seen in the slope of her shoulders which he'd presumed to understand and of which he knew nothing and he felt a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child and he felt wholly alien to to the world although he loved it still.

(APH 282)

Here his delusions leave him as he takes in an immediate awareness of his world; he comes face to face with his present, his reality. He finds that he knew nothing of Alejandra's sadness for his
own myopic vision filled with the myth and history he was pursuing blinded him to the social realities that barred Alejandra from him. He feels a loneliness of a different type, like that of a child facing the wide world alone for the first time, further indicating John Grady's figurative rebirth after this revelation. Even in the wake of these cataclysms that have altered his worldview, though, he chooses to still love the world, and with such love he will pursue beauty, even as he realizes the sacrifice this new pursuit will demand:

He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower.

(APH 282)

John Grady does not ignorantly repeat his own history; rather, he tries to gamble again with Magdelena in Cities of the Plain against the “diverging equity” of violence and beauty. The truth of blood and stone, that the present is all he has, frees him of his infatuation with the cowboy myth. Rather than perpetuating that history, though, John Grady realizes that the core of such repetition is the endless pursuit for some beauty, some modicum of peace and happiness, among the ruins of time's violence.

John Grady's growth through All the Pretty Horses is not redundant; he changes from a boy into a young self-molded hero in search of the legends of the past, and what he learns from the trials of this search reveals to him the only thing that will grant him a sense of place in the present world he must accept. As foolish as it might be to some, John Grady repeats history for the same reason Madero played his part in the Mexican Revolution, to salvage some beauty from the cost of violence and loss. Opting for this quest even in the wake of his recent tribulations,
John Grady, at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, enters himself fully in the ranks of history, accepting both the frivolity and grand significance of his purpose as he becomes like the dream of the past of the Comanche warriors at the beginning of the book:

> The indians stood watching him. He could see that none of them spoke among themselves or commented on his riding there nor did they raise a hand in greeting or call out to him. They had no curiosity about him at all. As if they knew all that they needed to know. They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish.

*(APH 301)*

John Grady takes part in this eternal engine not to follow the trails of myth, as it was at the start of the book, but rather to continue the desperate plea for beauty that has defined human history as much as the violence that mirrors it. As such, John Grady, in the final lines, “passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come” *(APH 302)*, some future broken from the cycles of history where beauty and truth have been found and made manifest. Perhaps no more attainable than the cowboy myth, it is still enough to lead John Grady on further towards his role of perpetuating the key narrative of a hero struggling indefatigably for a better, if forever nonexistent, world.

As the trilogy concludes, John Grady's quest, refined as it has been from its original delusional purpose, still ends in his own violent death. John Grady's story juxtaposed against Billy, who denies the cycle and tries to abandon it completely, constructs the tension of the trilogy and must, in a way, reflect McCarthy's mind as he tries to justify the hero's role in a world that no longer has much to do with such characters. Nonetheless, *All the Pretty Horses* reveals
both the cost of relying on history's influence and the core truth of what perpetuates the endless repetition of history's tragedies, a promise of beauty, the vision of a single flower.
Chapter II

Observer or Huérfero: Narrative Meaning in *The Crossing*

“For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them. So everything is necessary. Every least thing. This is the hard lesson.”

- From *The Crossing*

I.

McCarthy employs the theme of history's repetition in the separate volumes of The Border Trilogy, consciously making the three stories echo each other in their events, progressions, and tragic ends. As such, *The Crossing* is much like *All the Pretty Horses*: young heroes, lost, orphaned, and estranged from their homes, set out across the border to find some redemption, some piece of meaning that might reconstruct their shattered lives. Billy Parham, the lead of *The Crossing*, holds, for a while, the same ideals that John Grady carried with him into Mexico: a sense of morality that shields against the grimness of the world as it appears, a simple hope in justice's constancy after the ugly facts of cruel nature. After facing a revelatory catastrophe, though, Billy's story parts from John Grady. Unlike the first hero, Billy chooses to flee the binds of history, to abandon any quest for good or beauty that John Grady commits himself to through the trilogy. He shies away from the spotlight of history's continuous show, becoming instead an observer, a listener, a collector of tales and experiences. Ultimately, the
course of *The Crossing* erodes Billy, leaving him wretched and distraught, a heretic fleeing John Grady's noble if quixotic quest. Through Billy, McCarthy reveals another route around the trap of history and tragedy, one that elects the power of narrative – of shaping reality and the influence of the past through tale and personal interpretation – over endless repetition. Abandoning personal agency and the pressure of being, as Dueña Alfonsa says in *All the Pretty Horses*, a person “to whom things happen” (*APH* 240), Billy elects another role as the observer, the drifter who avoids further loss by fading into the background of history and thus narratives.

What gives shape to *The Crossing*, more so than the actions of Billy and, more importantly, his brother Boyd, are the various tales that Billy encounters during his travels through Mexico. While the grievous events that happen to Billy – the violent death of his totemic wolf, the murder of his parents, and ultimately the loss of Boyd – push him away from any want of retaining community with humanity, it is what he learns from the various tales, from his act of listening, that instills within him an alternative way of interpreting reality, one that gives him a network that tries to define the reason, if there be any, behind the cycles of loss that haunt him. As Billy suffers to learn a new way of interpreting reality, John Cant asserts correctly that “the predominant theme of *The Crossing* [is] the role of narrative in structuring culture and thus the mediation of our experience in the world” (194). Just as history leads John Grady to his fate, the power of narrative will guide Billy throughout the trilogy. The tension between these two interpretations of the world creates the thematic lifeblood of The Border Trilogy, dividing the similar stories of John Grady and Billy and thus leading them to their own conclusions.

Before this moment of diverging tales, though, the first part of *The Crossing*, and especially Billy's actions in his first trip into Mexico, acts as a variation on the plot of *All the Pretty Horses*. Billy mirrors John Grady in two key ways in the first part of *The Crossing*: his
role as an agent of action, devising plans that will fulfill his wishful ambitions, and his devotion and idealization of wolves parallels John Grady's love for horses, emphasizing some bond both boys hold with a more natural, immediate relationship to the world that favors a simple past over their modern future. The text elucidates these two points early as the first paragraph ends with a younger Billy plotting his and his sleeping brother's lives, acting as a thesis to the book that will be painfully disproved throughout the course of the pages: “In the new house they slept in the room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and listen to his brother's breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have” (Crossing 3). This early indication of Billy's character is what will be eroded throughout the events of the book, though, and as Dianne C. Luce writes, it shows Billy's efforts to rule his own life, to, as John Grady does, test his own will against the strict limits and impositions of reality: “Billy attempts what almost everyone attempts, to script his own life. But each destination he sets for himself in pursuit of his sense of rightness or justice – returning the wolf to Mexico, recovering his father's horses, retrieving Boyd's bones – brings unforeseen consequences and calamitous loss” (197).

*The Crossing* also begins with a parable of Billy's early encounter with a pack of wolves. Their mystical description imbues them with the magical quality that Billy will cherish in wolves throughout the first part of the novel:

They were running on the plain harrying the antelope and the antelope moved like phantoms in the snow and circled and wheeled and the dry powder blew about them in the cold moonlight and their breath smoked palely in the cold as if they burned with some inner fire and the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire.
To the young Billy, the wolves seem part of a different world. His relationship with the she-wolf he tries to save will hinge on this early encounter as he, like John Grady, tries to find that world where wolves still ran free, a world where they had not yet vanished from the landscapes of the modern west.

Through his first crossing into Mexico, as he attempts to return the captured she-wolf to her home in the mountains, Billy embarks on an adventure much akin to John Grady's as his trip manifests his own search for meaning and place. Even as he sets out to trap the wolf, he begins to feel a closer intimacy with his world. As Billy fixes the traps, he works “like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world” (Crossing 22). The narrator, in McCarthy's cryptic tone, already introduces doubt into the ability of Billy to find such meaning, even as it links him with the past and older practices that exhibit humanity's kinship with the natural world:

> Crouched in the broken shadow with the sun at his back and holding the trap at eyelevel against the morning sky he looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. [. . .] Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. If there be such a place. If it be knowable.

(Crossing 22)

Nonetheless, Billy's ambitions to capture the wolf impart on him some sense of purpose, and this purpose casts him as something different in a world with no use for people of will and intent. As he rides out of his home to inspect his traps once again, Billy and his horse “looked new born out of the hand of some improvident god who'd perhaps not even puzzled out a use for them” (Crossing 31). With this distinction, Billy rides out “with his heart outsized in his chest”
(Crossing 31), a description that links him back to the ardentheartedness, and thus the idealism and naiveté, of John Grady as his quest for the wolf aggrandizes his soul, his new found role as wolf trapper and then protector granting him the purpose and meaning he needs as a guiding light in his young life.

With Billy's relationship with the wolf constructed in this manner, the theme of the destructive power of myths continues in the trilogy. While Billy's pursuit of myth may not be John Grady's sacred cowboy myth, his goal with the wolf is still to attain some primal, immediate understanding of the beast and thus its natural world. Cant writes that “[i]t is the unmediated apprehension of reality that Billy Parham seeks in his emulation of the wolf in The Crossing” (8). Yet, he continues to write that the purpose of this attempt to understand reality in such a way is specifically to show that it is impossible: “That the ideal remains unrealizable is made plain by Billy's experience, the fate of his 'doomed enterprise,' shown by McCarthy to be an aspect of the seductive, but ultimately pernicious myth of the pastoral” (8). Just as McCarthy dismantled the sacred cowboy myth in All the Pretty Horses, he dismisses the myth of the pastoral through Billy and the wolf.

Unlike All the Pretty Horses, though, The Crossing never indulges Billy's myth: from the beginning, it holds a much more pessimistic edge against the protagonist through the narrator's tone. As Billy, Boyd, and their father inspect an array of scents created by the famed wolf trapper Echols, the narrator lapses into a dark description of humanity's eternal enmity with the natural world:

In the jars liquids. Dried viscera. Liver, gall, kidneys. The inward parts of the beast who dreams of man and has so dreamt in running dreams a hundred thousand years and more. Dreams of that malignant lesser god come pale and
naked and alien to slaughter all his clan and kin and rout them from their house. A
god insatiable whom no ceding could appease nor any measure of blood.

*(Crossing 17)*

It is a description that would seem more at home within *Blood Meridian*, yet the narrator's
declaration against humanity's violence is fitting amidst a gallery of wolf organs used to lure
other wolves into similar fates. This characterization of man as a “malignant lesser god” who no
measure of blood can appease will be germane throughout the first part of *The Crossing*. The
wolf-baiting scene attests to man's endless need for blood as “a strange egality of witnesses”
*(Crossing 113)* from all ranks and backgrounds gather together for the same event of the wolf's
slaughter. Through this scene, the narrator's earlier pronouncement is made manifest and Billy's
enthrallment with the pastoral myth comes to a bleak end.

Likewise, the first philosophical speaker Billy meets tells him much the same of the
incompatibility of humanity and nature. These philosophical speakers emerge throughout *The
Crossing*, and can be recognized as such because of the profound insights or tales they tell to the
young protagonist. These characters create the thematic frame around the surface narrative of the
book; their knowledge helps Billy turn away from the narrative of his own life. Of these would
be prophets – characters including the apostate Mormon priest, the ciego, and the band of
gypsies towards the end, among others – the old Mexican wolf trapper Don Arnulfo, decrepit and
alone in the dust of his house, rises as the first cryptic voice to Billy. Billy comes to ask him
about trapping wolves, but what the old man shares is a pronouncement of the wolf’s otherness
completely outside of and beyond the capacity of human knowledge:

Me dice que el conoce lo que sabe el lobo antes de que lo sepa el lobo. But the old
man said that no man knew what the wolf knew.
Finally the old man repeated his words. El lobo es una cosa incognoscible, he said. Lo que se tiene en la trampa no es mas que dientes y forro. El lobo propio no se puede conocer. Lobo o lo que sabe el lobo. Tan como preguntar lo que saben las piedras. Los arboles. El mundo.

(Crossing 45)

The old trapper tells Billy that the wolf is something unknowable, that what is in the trap is nothing more than teeth and fur, that the wolf itself and what the wolf knows no one can know. It would be, the old man continues, as if asking what stones and trees know, the world itself. The old man tells Billy that humanity itself can never understand any true sense of how the world works, an anti-Enlightenment pronouncement that will follow Billy as he continues to lose faith in the human community and its possibility for benevolence.

Don Arnulfo continues to tell Billy of the impossibility of true experience, a philosophical stance that further distances Billy from the stoic and moral-driven lifestyle of his counterpart, John Grady. His speech concludes in a warning to Billy to ward him away from an attempt at living seriously:

He said that men wish to be serious but they do not understand how to be so. Between their acts and their ceremonies lies the world and in this world the storms blow and the trees twist in the wind and all the animals that God has made go to and fro yet this world men do not see. They see the acts of their own hands or they see that which they name and call out to one another but the world between is invisible to them.

(Crossing 45-46)

The trapper here echoes Alfonsa's sentiments regarding the possibility of human influence, and
the trapper shares her views, too, as he tries to inform Billy about the great disconnect between humanity and any sense of the real, true world. This stance is not nihilistic, but follows McCarthy's recurring theme throughout his works that there is a supreme order to the universe, but humanity, entertained by its own conceits, remains wholly insignificant in the workings of the world. Just as history created John Grady's character, the narratives of the people Billy meets throughout *The Crossing*, their subjective experience of the world, will form his: words will prove more influential to him than actions. And after the failed endeavor of his rescuing of the wolf, Billy will abandon the heroic model of John Grady completely and fall back on the warnings that these narratives have imparted on him, warnings against the pursuit of meaning, of attachments, of ideals.

Just as in *All the Pretty Horses*, the young protagonists remain mute throughout these dense conversations, and their responses to these claims only surface later through their actions and choices. The consequences of Billy's conversation with the trapper are subtle yet powerful, encapsulated best in his slow sinking throughout *The Crossing* in response to the losses that he endures. Through foreshadowing, too, the conversations Billy has, especially with the trapper and later with the Mormon priest, predict Billy's condition by the end of *The Crossing*. Don Arnulfo’s housekeeper issues her warning to Billy concerning the heretic state of the old man, creating a further dynamic between the two protagonists of the trilogy. She tells Billy how the old man is ostracized, seen as a sinner and a witch: “They say he is brujo. They say God has abandoned this man. He has the sin of Satanás. The sin of orgullo. You know what is orgullo? [. . .] He thinks he knows better than the priest. He thinks he knows better than God” (*Crossing* 48). The old man's own disillusionment over humanity's limitations has made him an outcast, and the housekeeper warns Billy, “It could happen to you” (*Crossing* 48). And indeed, throughout *The
Crossing, Billy becomes more of the brujo, the heretic, the orphan alone, holding his face in his hands, weeping in the middle of an abandoned road. Before he leaves, though, she tells him “La fe es todo” (49), a cliché that faith is everything. It is John Grady, though, who will uphold this cliché and crash his life against the indomitable will of the world in an attempt to salvage something beautiful. Billy, on the other hand, will become the rootless drifter, sacrificing this faith to avoid further loss.

With the death of the wolf, Billy comes to a revelation that parallels the blood and stone revelation of John Grady. Like John Grady, Billy realizes the terrible cost of beauty, but with narrative informing him rather than history, his revelation also echoes the words of Don Arnulfo and his assurance that humanity will forever be separate from a true comprehension of the world. Billy's final moments with the wolf before burying her is his last attempt at connecting himself to the essence of the wolf, that which knows what humanity cannot, but it remains as fleeting as it is powerful: “He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh” (Crossing 127). The revelation continues to attest to the importance of this energy in the fabric of the world, but returns again to remark on its intangibility, its infinite distance from human hands and hearts, remarking that it is “what we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it” (Crossing 127). The single flower at the end of John Grady's vision is for Billy the wolf and the essence of the wolf. But what he had attained, been ordained by his own moral subjectivity to protect, he has lost. By losing the wolf and never coming to understand it, he also fulfills Don Arnulfo’s warning of humanity's blindness towards
the real world, and Billy finds himself forever removed from his own pastoral myth. From this point, Billy's shared history with John Grady ends and he takes on the path of the disillusioned. McCarthy marks the gravity of this loss and its resulting change in Billy as he starts the next section of *The Crossing*: “Doomed enterprises divide lives forever into the then and the now” (*Crossing* 129).

After the first part of *The Crossing*, Billy separates himself from the agent of action he once was as he naively set out to return the wolf to the mountains of Mexico; instead, Billy, while remaining the protagonist, will begin to fade as he self-consciously tries to turn away from the hero's course. He becomes a wanderer, and even his subsequent trips to Mexico, the first set out upon to retrieve his father's stolen horses, are unplanned and more important to Billy simply because it gives him a direction to move. Dianne C. Luce remarks in her article “The World as Tale in *The Crossing*” that Billy's life melts away to mere, meaningless motion between trials of loss: “Billy's experiences raise the question of action in the face of unexpected, specifically unforeseeable and yet inevitable loss, and at times for him life becomes mere motion, having no meaning beyond the living of it from moment to moment, from one experience of pain and thwarting to the next” (198). Both protagonists of the trilogy are poised against a question of action in response to tragedy, and while John Grady keeps up the good fight, Billy will sink away from meaning and try to distance himself from further pain, “to escape unforetold disaster by drifting” (197). This drifting, as Luce writes, represents Billy's abandonment of his own agency: “Such drifting constitutes his abdication of the authoring of his own life in response to his recognition of the limits the world places on his will” (198). Billy and Boyd's search for their father's missing horses is in many ways a facade for Billy's drifting, for as he realizes the limits the world has put on his will, this time through the impotency of their proof of ownership over
the horses, Billy is ready to abandon the quest to avoid another tragedy, telling Boyd where this endeavor will lead them: “You don’t want to use common sense. We come too far down here to go back dead” (Crossing 248). It is Boyd, though, who is still lured by history's promise to the cowboys, the heroes, as he responds: “You think there is a place that far?” (Crossing 248).

Thus, the rest of The Crossing details Billy's avoidance of agency as he becomes an observer of the story's action and a listener of tales and narratives while, at the same time, Boyd continues the main action of the story as he, a figure cut from the same cloth as John Grady, pursues the stuff of legend. As Edwin T. Arnold writes, the course of The Crossing and the tales he encounters throughout confirm this trend and warn Billy that “he himself stands in danger of becoming a figure with no meaning, a Bartleby-like symbol with no connection to the rest of humankind” (“Go to Sleep” 59). What causes this change, as argued here and supported by Arnold, are the tragedies beset on Billy, most strikingly the death of the she-wolf, that dismisses the simpler ideals of his youth and fills that void with a grimmer but deeper understanding of human nature: “The naïve, magical joy of his first vision of the dancing wolves is forever replaced by a darker, more profound understanding of human vanity” (“Go to Sleep” 63). As such, Billy begins his slow fading from the heroic role, becoming even less than an anti-hero and only a man of the road, “un hombre del camino” (Crossing 414).

If John Grady feels pushed by history to repeat his quest for love and beauty, then the fates also conspire to push Billy towards his abject insularity, and The Crossing turns on its own foreshadowing axis as it predicts the man Billy will become before he even knows it. Don Arnulfo’s housekeeper already issued her own warning to Billy concerning the brujo and the totality of faith, and likewise an indian Billy meets after losing the wolf, after his time spent in mourning and self-exile in the wilderness, warns Billy of how he must not lose his community
with humankind. In a book of predictions, the indian already knows what Billy does not: that he is an orphan, un huérfano. The indian is surely speaking figuratively, but the prediction remains the same as Billy's parents have been murdered while he was away with the wolf. The indian's warning tries to keep Billy from becoming the drifter he is fated to be, a transformation that will keep him forever separate from others and finally from his own heart: “He told the boy that although he was huérfano still he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself” (Crossing 134). What he offers Billy as consolation is a counterargument to Don Arnulfo’s assurance of humankind's total isolation from the real world, placing in its stead a subjective take on one's understanding of reality that depends wholly on one's communion with others: “He said that the world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts. For while it seemed a place which contained men it was in reality a place contained within them and therefore to know it one must look there and come to know those hearts and to do this one must live with men and not simply pass among them” (Crossing 134). Finally, he tells Billy that this will redeem him and will weave him back into the tapestry of the world from which he feels to be missing: “He said that while the huérfano might feel that he no longer belonged among men he must set this feeling aside for he contained within him a largeness of spirit which men could see and that men would wish to know him and that the world would need him even as he need the world for they were one” (Crossing 134). Indeed, the indian's speech will ring true for Billy's life, and this brief passage in The Crossing beautifully exhibits the intertextuality McCarthy imbues within the seemingly disparate but deeply entwined novels of The Border Trilogy: The Crossing will continue to depict Billy's downward spiral towards being the heretic and the huérfano, while Cities of the Plain shows Billy's attempt at
redemption, at rejoining the community of humankind that contains the world. The narrative of
The Border Trilogy acts just like its perspective on history: it falls back on itself and leaps ahead,
repeats itself and warns the protagonists of their own futures even as it plots their pasts.

II.

The importance of narrative, thematically and within the structure of the trilogy itself,
carries through the rest of *The Crossing*, traveling beside the brothers as a shadowy yet greatly
influential third rider. With Billy set on the path of the huérfano, his part of *The Crossing* creates
the philosophical and mystical aspects that make it, as Arnold writes, “the dark center of the
trilogy” as its “profound mystery [. . .] gives foundation to the more conventional stories that
bracket it” (58). Indeed, the mystery that *The Crossing* becomes holds the key to understanding
the trilogy as a whole: Billy forms the perfect brotherhood with John Grady, existing as his dark
other as he responds in his own way to the traps of tragedy, and witnessing the events of Billy's
youth explicates his role, personality, and character in *Cities of the Plain*. In McCarthy's usual
fashion, Billy's deeper significance to the trilogy is explained through a cryptic and otherworldly
wise speaker, the Mormon priest at Huisiachepic. He instills within Billy the awe of narrative's
power, making him the observer as he witnesses the Mormon's tale, a parable that is itself the
story of Billy's life. Through the Mormon priest, too, McCarthy supplies the alternative answer
to John Grady's plight with history as he distinguishes the act of storytelling as that which gives
life meaning.

The priest's conversation with Billy continues to deconstruct humanity's rational order of
the world that Billy has already become suspect to after the loss of the wolf. In addition, the
words of the priest will carry all the more weight for Billy as the priest, like Don Arnulfo, is
another shade of what Billy is becoming, “a heretic fleeing a prior life” (*Crossing* 141). Like
Billy and the wolf, the priest's original intent was to find some trace of reason in a world of seeming chaos, telling Billy that he “was seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world” (*Crossing* 142). He never sought miracles of love and beauty, though, but rather, since he “had come to believe that hand a wrathful one” (*Crossing* 142), he searched for “miracles of destruction” (*Crossing* 142). He came to the ruined church at Huisiacheptic, destroyed in an earthquake, to find such a miracle of destruction. What he sought, though, was nothing that would lead to a logical conclusion, an explanation of destruction, but rather “something unforeseen” (*Crossing* 142), telling Billy that “causes only multiply themselves” (*Crossing* 142) and that “they lead to chaos” (*Crossing* 142). By prefacing his tale of the man of sorrow with an explanation of his own origins, his own search for God's destructive hand amidst the chaos of divining tragedies, he dismisses the notion of answers, of conclusions, in defining the world.

What replaces this model of interpreting the world is a hierarchy of narrative made by people and made real through other people, a hierarchy of storytelling that gives reason and order to that which has none. The priest finds in his search the tale of a tragic man, and he shares with Billy how the value of stories surpass that of things for, in his encompassing philosophy of narrative power, the story becomes the world:

> Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes. Of a certain size and color. A certain weight. When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer have even a name. The story on the other hand can never be lost from its place in the world for it is that place. And that is what was to be found here. The corrido. The tale. And like all corridos it ultimately told one story only, for there is only one to tell.

(*Crossing* 142-43)
This belief presents for the priest a domino effect in the construction of the world where meaning builds from one tale into the next, a matrix where each subjective narrative works its way into the weave of the world, becoming one tale and one world, and that ultimately one's sense of reality dissolves into this fabric of narratives:

What does Caborca know of Huisiachepic, Huisiachepic of Caborca? They are different worlds, you must agree. Yet even so there is but one world and everything that is imaginable is necessary to it. For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them. So everything is necessary. Every least thing. This is the hard lesson.

(Crossing 143)

The priest here echoes the indian who tells Billy of the world's need for him within the human community as it too introduces a holistic view of the world that takes each blessing and catastrophe, each tale, into its essence, each tale becoming the next, each person's own narrative, own life, blending into the next person's. To the distraught Billy, who will remain resistant to these lessons as he foolishly pursues the writing of his own tale through his further doomed enterprises into Mexico, this mystical interpretation of the world should act as an analgesic, especially as the priest's tale reflects fully Billy's tale. The priest again asserts that “[r]ightly heard all tales are one” (Crossing 143), yet Billy will not learn this hard lesson until the end of the trilogy after suffering further despair.

The priest's tale of the man of sorrow is indeed Billy's own tale. He tells Billy of this man that “the particulars of his life are strange particulars” (Crossing 144), and that while it seems
like a story of sadness, the end is not yet known, much like Billy's: “This is a story of misfortune. Or so it would seem. The end is not yet told” (Crossing 144). The Crossing will be Billy's story of misfortune, but its real end will not be known until Cities of the Plain with the end of Billy's life, the true end of his story. The condition of the man, who has survived two catastrophes through his life, one which took his parents in his youth and a second that takes from him his son, has made him into a heretic figure, described by the priest in a similar manner to the indian's warning to Billy of the huérfano:

Such a man is like a dreamer who wakes from a dream of grief to a greater sorrow yet. All that he loves is now become a torment to him. The pin has been pulled from the axis of the universe. Whatever one takes one's eye from threatens to flee away. Such a man is lost to us. He moves and speaks. But he is himself less than the merest shadow among all that he beholds. There is no picture of him possible.

(Crossing 146)

The priest finishes this passage by emphasizing the fading such a figure has from the narrative matrix that constructs the world in his philosophy, telling Billy that “the smallest mark upon the page exaggerates his presence” (Crossing 146). The man of the priest's tale continues to reflect Billy's encroaching state, further describing the man's alienation from the rest of humanity and his detachment from the framework of history and narrative: “In his sparing he found himself severed from both antecedents and posterity alike. He was but some brevity of a being. His claims to the common life of men became tenuous, insubstantial. He was a trunk without roots or branch” (Crossing 147). The man's descent into sorrow ultimately visits upon him a terrible vision, yet a vision that attests once more that no person can escape entirely the matrix of the world, God's tapestry of creating and undoing, an image that reiterates the repetition of history
central to the trilogy: “Who can dream of God? This man did. [. . .] The man could see Him bent at his work. As if through glass. Seated solely in the light of his own presence. Weaving the world. In his hands it flowed out of nothing and in his hands it vanished into nothing once again. Endlessly. Endlessly” (Crossing 149). The dream vision of the man reveals to him the truth of his nature, that he was a part of that tapestry, but his dissent from the world had made him a part of its undoing: “Not chaos itself lay outside of that matrix. And somewhere in that tapestry that was the world in its making and in its unmaking was a thread that was he and he woke weeping” (Crossing 149). As Billy tries to avoid the road of his life, its story, he wishes, like the man, “that the world would forget him” (Crossing 148), but as grief continues to pull him in, he will learn that it will not, for in the priest's words, “God could not” (Crossing 148). Echoing again the significance of history in one's meaning, the man became to other people “a man without history” (Crossing 150).

The priest's tale serves to urge Billy back to both the community of lives he is abandoning and the matrix of narratives that holds within itself the world, as the priest asserts, and that the act of witnessing – of taking part in or listening to another's narrative – is the only way of affirming one’s sense of reality, one’s sense of place within the world. All events, all actions, in the priest's philosophy, only come into being through the witness, not the agent: “Acts have their being in the witness” (Crossing 154). With the act alone, meaning gets lost in the chaos of cause and effect, becoming meaningless through the never-ending ascension of Dueña Alfonsa's puppet strings. In the interpretation of reality, only the witness stands with any sense of truth:

He saw the world pass into nothing in the very multiplicity of its instancing. Only the witness stood firm. And the witness to that witness. For what is deeply true is
true also in men's hearts and it can therefore never be mistold through all and any
tellings. This then was his thought. If the world was a tale who but the witness
could give it life? Where else could it have its being?

\[(Crossing\ 154)\]

Thus, the priest imparts upon Billy the significance of witness, of observing the lives of others,
of listening to their tales, of the executor of their meaning not resting with the experience of an
act, but rather of its telling: that the event itself means nothing until it is entered into the matrix
of narratives that is the world. The results of the man's raging against God lead him to the terrible
truth that reason and understanding, and indeed God himself, can never be understood, for it
stands without a witness: “And he began to see in God a terrible tragedy. That the existence of
the Deity lay imperiled for want of this simple thing. That for God there could be no witness.
Nothing against which He terminated. Nothing by which his being could be announced to Him.
Nothing to stand apart from and to say I am this and that is other” \[(Crossing\ 154)\]. A difficult
lesson to learn, but for Billy it signifies the impossibility of his finding reason behind the
tragedies of his life – that if these miracles of disaster are God's attempt at finding a witness, the
cruel truth is that this act cannot be witnessed, that the ways of loss and grief of the world will
continue and find their purpose not in the sufferer's experience of them but in their transition to
narrative, becoming solid only in the witness's reification.

The ideas here mirror the complexity of the priest's tale as meaning becomes relegated to
narrative. This dismissal of personal agency and influence in finding one's own meaning, though,
rests as the essential point of \textit{The Crossing}, as dense, erudite, and mystical as it is. Luce
elucidates McCarthy's intent with this novel, writing that the suggestion here is that humanity's
propensity for narrative is how it strings together its own meaning:
The Crossing suggests that rather than any physical sense, the human capability for narrative – not for language, which is another kind of artifact, but for formulating the tale that carries our past, gives meaning to our present, and right intention to our future – is our primary means of accessing and perhaps communicating the thing itself: the world which is a tale.

(208)

The priest affirms this, that all becomes telling, as he summarizes his tale to Billy:

The task of the narrator is not an easy one, he said. He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one. Always the teller must be at pains to devise against his listener's claim – perhaps spoken, perhaps not – that he has heard the tale before. He sets forth the categories into which the listener will wish to fit the narrative as he hears it. But he understands that the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside of its purview. All is telling. Do not doubt it.

(Crossing 155)

The Border Trilogy itself tells the same story over again through the parallel journeys of John Grady and Billy, and especially with the repetition of John Grady's loss in Cities of the Plain. This is done, though, to strip away the protagonist's search for meaning not only in their lives but the meaning behind their suffering. Their lives, as stories, have no meaning in the grand scheme of the world – a nihilistic conclusion, without doubt – yet they impart meaning to the witness, the listener. This conclusion resounds into the realm of metaliterature as McCarthy continues his exploration of the role of narratives, asserting that the reader, not the author, gives the story
meaning, and that this whole relationship exists beyond the page, too, in the weaving of the world's tapestry, the weaving of its meaning.

Indeed, McCarthy was concerned with the role of narrative while he was writing The Border Trilogy and especially while he was writing *The Crossing*. Edwin Arnold shares in his article “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Stonemason*: The Unmaking of a Play” a discussion McCarthy once had with Douglas Wager about narrative where he told him “how narrative is basic to all human beings, how even people who are buried alive go over their life stories to stay sane. Verification of one’s story to someone else is essential to experiences themselves [. . .]; our reality comes out of the narrative we create, not out of the experiences themselves” (Arnold, *Stonemason* 121). Luce also comments on this conversation, adding that “McCarthy was thinking about the role of narrative in our lives and had done some reading in Hegel that seems to have influenced his ideas at least by Fall 1991” (“The World as Tale” 202). She concludes that this was around the time that he had begun working on *The Crossing*: “At this time, it was likely that McCarthy had substantially completed his drafting of *All the Pretty Horses*, which was published the following spring, and was beginning to turn his attention to *The Crossing*” (202). The Border Trilogy, within its undercurrents of thematic complexity, thus became a conduit for McCarthy’s exploration of the role of narratives in human life.

This complex frame for not only the trilogy itself but for the thematic and philosophical significance McCarthy imbues within these stories assigns to the protagonist's their roles in the world of narrative. John Grady, in his stubborn but noble perpetuation of the false history behind him and, simultaneously, history's constant tale of humanity's search for ideals, will maintain his part in the narrative, acting the role of the hero, and even as he dies in what could be a meaningless death, meaning lives on with those who witnessed his life, his narrative. Billy, as his
other, will, throughout *The Crossing*, try to evade the narrative construction of the world and act as the observer, though his attempts at avoiding further loss are futile as narratives, especially that of Boyd's, continue on with or without his participation to their own often tragic ends. Both of these paths taken by the protagonists are spurred by their initial disillusionment, a lesson enforced by the hard fact that “John Grady and Billy cannot reverse the world by running to Mexico or returning the wolf to her natural habitat” (Wegner 86), that the ideal world of their imagination does not exist, and that for Billy his attempt to script is own life only leads him to further catastrophes.

III.

Diverging from Billy's anti-narrative is the fulfillment of another narrative, Boyd's, whose trail Billy follows as he tries to piece together the relationship between history and narrative. Boyd is like John Grady: his sense of moral justice survives through the tragedy of the murder of his parents, and his need to do what seems right will result in further complications and his eventual death. Unlike Billy, Boyd never learns the hard lessons that have led Billy to his confrontation with narrative meaning. The ganadero observes this peculiarity in Boyd while speaking to Billy: “Your brother is young enough to believe that the past still exists, he said. That the injustices within it away his remedy” (*Crossing* 202). He continues with another reiteration of Dueña Alfonsa's puppet parable, the idea of chaotic consequences that spears itself against the early idealism of the protagonists: “You do not know what things you set in motion, he said. No man can know. No prophet foresee. The consequences of an act are often quite different from what one would guess” (*Crossing* 202). Boyd, still holding to the past in the same way John Grady does, will not recognize what he sets in motion. The accident with the jefe, where the confusion of the boy's confrontation with the riders from Babícara leads to him falling
to his death from his horse's back, snowballs into the people's corrido of the güerito, and the transformation of this event demonstrates both the power of narrative and the truth that rises not from the experience of the event but from its telling, its witnessing.

As Boyd's exploits against the jefe and the gentry of the Babícora are aggrandized as people spread the story, Billy's authority in telling what had really happened pales before the strength of the truth that the narrative itself has garnered. Whereas Billy becomes confirmed as a man of the road by the end of The Crossing, Boyd becomes “a man of the people” (Crossing 317). And as a man of the people, Boyd's legend grows within their hands. As the event becomes corrido, the people invite the notion of divine intervention in the case of Boyd's recovery, telling Billy that “only the hand of the Virgin could have sustained him through such a terrible wound” (Crossing 317). Billy hears from the people who had helped save Billy, those who had pulled him into the bed of the truck, what the story has become:

The workers had believed that his brother had killed the manco in a gunfight in the streets of Boquilla y Anexas. That the manco had fired upon him without provocation and what folly for the manco had not reckoned upon the great heart of the güerito. They pressed him for details. How the güerito had risen from his blood in the dust to draw his pistol and shoot the manco dead from the horse. (Crossing 317-18)

Even as Billy tells them what really happened and that “the accounts of the conflict were greatly exaggerated” (Crossing 318), the people still take what they want, what they need, from the tale: the miracle of Boyd's youth and courage and the belief that this young boy had made evidence of justice's reality in the world, something, ironically, the brothers had set out to Mexico to find. The narrative, surpassing the limits of the true history, becomes something greater, something
more real in the hearts of the people who take credence from Boyd's corrido, an affirmation that there is justice in the world, as one worker tells Billy as he rides away: “Hay justicia en el mundo, he called” (Crossing 218).

Indeed, the narrative created by the people becomes the word of the world. The witnesses create the meaning from Boyd's life, when for Boyd himself his act had no meaning and was simply a freak accident in the middle of a confused and tense conflict. The significance of the corrido is born in no small part because it is a narrative that has been told before, one that the people have heard and will always hear, for it is a story of David and Goliath, the small and meek conquering the powerful and cruel, as told this time to Billy by the nameless girl that attaches herself to Boyd as a surrogate sister: “Finally she said that the word was abroad in the country. That all the world knew that the güerito had killed the gerente from Las Varitas. The man who had betrayed Socorro Rivera and sold out his own people to the Guardia Blanca of La Babicora” (Crossing 322). Billy responds to her as he did to the workers, telling the true account for “he himself has seen it happen” (Crossing 322), yet she does not even respond and the truth of the narrative proves to be impotent. Boyd's narrative weaves itself into the tapestry of the world, a world contained in all narratives, and Quijada reveals the eternal primacy of the legend that Boyd has become, even though his acts do not merit such status and his later exploits are purely murderous:

The corrido tells all and it tells nothing. I heard the tale of the güerito years ago.
Before your brother was even born.
You dont think it tells about him?
Yes, it tells about him. It tells what it wishes to tell. It tells what makes the story run. The corrido is the poor man's history. It does not owe its allegiance to the
truths of history but to the truths of men. It tells the tale of that solitary man who is all men.

(Crossing 386)

Billy's exposure to the power of narrative reveals what had deceived John Grady, that the truths of men, of the creation of a fitting narrative, persist while the truths of history remain mute and powerless against the will of the narrative. Quijada concludes the above passage by telling Billy that the corrido is the lie that lives beyond the passing of the truth: “[The corrido] believes that where two men meet one of two things can occur and nothing else. In the one case a lie is born and in the other death” (Crossing 386). Boyd becomes the stuff of legend as he lives out the role of the hero in Mexico, and while it leads him to his death, his meaning lives on through the people's witnessing of his life, even if they never witnessed the truth. For Billy, the tragedy of losing his brother is coupled with the trauma of the implications of his revelation regarding narrative: that if narrative is what gives meaning to life, that narrative is also false and hollow, built on the needs of what people need the narrative to be, not what it is.

For these reasons, Billy ends The Crossing in his deepest despair yet. Even as he tries to escape his agency over the course of his life, all paths still lead to further loss, and with this loss he also observes the weak strings that hold the narrative of the world together through the transformation of Boyd's exploits into the people's corrido. Billy gains a terrible enlightenment through his continuing disillusionment and his despair before the seeming meaningless of it all, especially in the wake of the Trinity test's false sunrise that mimics the artificiality of narrative meaning, closes the book: “After a while he sat in the road. He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. He sat there for a long time and after a while the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade
sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction” (Crossing 426). The cycle continues, no matter how hard Billy tried to escape it, and his defeat at the end of *The Crossing* is profound.

Billy, as the observer, must stand to witness these tragedies, though, and his role as such stands as the central metaphor to *The Crossing* as McCarthy explores the role of narrative in people's lives. Billy's confrontation with the power of narrative shows him, in a way, what he and John Grady are searching for: justice, some trace that moral truths exist. And for the people, the corrido that they created from witnessing Boyd's exploits gives them that, even if it is an untrue story, a facade. It is a question of how much metaliterary commentary McCarthy wanted to introduce in *The Crossing*, but the complexity of the novel cannot help but invite all interpretations. John Grady, realizing the cost of that single flower, continues the endless toils of history against the crueler realities of the world to find some peace, some beauty: in doing this, he will re-enact a familiar narrative, a familiar history, and meet a familiar end. Billy, having shaken himself from the network of narratives in *The Crossing* and thus the vital community of humanity that creates the world, will wander alone for some time bearing his heretic truths, living as the huérfano he was doomed to be. He is also the observer, though, the storyteller, existing beyond the realm of the actor, the one to which things happen, and through his witnessing he gives meaning to those who have sacrificed themselves for some nonexistent meaning, as he will for John Grady in *Cities of the Plain*. Through this complex relationship, McCarthy dulls the edge of his pessimistic, if not nihilistic, perspective on the world that The Border Trilogy shares, and in answering the question of reason that has been plaguing the minds of writers and thinkers since the modernists, if not since all time, he suggests that storytelling, the act of writing itself, creates meaning in what is quite possibly a meaningless existence. If one must acknowledge then that this written meaning itself is a fabrication, then they will be like
Billy, heretic and huérfano, closed off from the world completely.

Chapter III

The Reader Remains: Metaliterary Themes in *Cities of the Plain*

“Each man is the bard of his own existence.”

- From *Cities of the Plain*

I.

In many ways, *Cities of the Plain* is almost an ornamental conclusion to The Border Trilogy, and I do not mean this to slight it of its importance or its elegiac beauty. Thematically, though, the trajectories set upon by John Grady and Billy in their respective novels tell the tale of *Cities of the Plain* before it is even read, and if “all tales are one” (*Crossing* 143), then this should be true. John Grady, defying the exhortations of Dueña Alfonsa in *All the Pretty Horses*, will continue his quixotic battle for a better world and, spurred by his revelation of the steep sacrifice demanded for a modicum of beauty, will continue working within the historical trend of the idealists and dreamers. And as history is doomed to repeat itself, the young hero's efforts will again deceive him into tragedy, though this time one that ends with his own violent death. Billy, likewise, will lose another brother, this time John Grady, to the siren song of love and legends, the bait of history's trap. Playing again the part of the observer as he witnesses John Grady's story, Billy will be forced again to relearn the hard lessons he suffered in *The Crossing*. The repetition of these familiar and grievous events and how the protagonists evolve through them, the fact that the story in *Cities of the Plain* created the momentum for McCarthy's writing of the previous two novels of the trilogy, and the epilogue's further metaliterary exposition of the role
of narrative in human life finalize The Border Trilogy's central focus of how meaning is derived from the creation of tales, the transformation of lives, however beautiful or brutal, into stories born to be witnessed.

The Border Trilogy began with what became the last book, *Cities of the Plain*. McCarthy wrote it first as a screenplay that never found production due to the controversy of John Grady’s love affair with a young prostitute, a detailed history of the story’s creation noted in a rare interview with McCarthy by Richard Woodward: “The book is, in fact, the first volume of a trilogy; the third part has existed for more than 10 years as a screenplay. He and Richard Pearce have come close to making the film -- Sean Penn was interested -- but producers always became skittish about the plot, which has as its central relationship John Grady Cole's love for a teen-age Mexican prostitute” (Woodward). Edwin T. Arnold gives a summation of the screenplay version of *Cities of the Plain* in his article “First Thoughts on *Cities of the Plain,*” where he concludes that much remained the same between screenplay and novel. John Grady still takes the central plot, though Billy, in the screenplay, played a lesser role: “In the screenplay, neither John Grady nor Billy is given a family name, but both are obvious prototypes. [. . .] As Woodward noted, John Grady is the central figure; Billy is an important secondary character but has nothing like the stature he obtains in the book” (222). Arnold concludes that much remains consistent between the two versions, though the fact that *Cities of the Plain* was the foundation for what became the entire trilogy raises important questions concerning the structure and overall purpose McCarthy had in mind with the trilogy.

*All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing* serve as background stories for their respective characters, but in an interesting inversion, it is *All the Pretty Horses* that repeats the action already established in the screenplay version of *Cities of the Plain*. Arnold notes one possible
explanation for this plot duplication as being a lazy transplant of plot points between the original story and the background story that came later: “It is possible 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 used much of the same material” (“First Thoughts” 228). Arnold continues, though, to dismiss this idea, writing that McCarthy “had the overall plan of the trilogy in mind” (228), and considering both McCarthy’s caliber as a writer and the narrative themes so important to the trilogy, seeing the repetition of plot as a product of creative lethargy would be an egregious error on the critic’s part. The central idea of history’s inescapable repetition, a theme that animates all of McCarthy’s works through his concern with an atavistic return, would be enough to dissuade this argument. Instead, the repetition of plot plays into John Grady’s stoic if foolhardy loyalty in participating in this very cycle of history. As McCarthy expanded the screenplay of *Cities of the Plain* into The Border Trilogy, John Grady’s character became the perfect prototype for depicting someone so motivated by history and myth, a belief in his ability to make for himself a place in the world of his choosing and desire, that he would repeat heartache and bloodshed regardless of warnings and past traumatic lessons.

Billy’s increased role between the screenplay and novel versions supports McCarthy’s aggrandizement of the theme of narrative meaning in The Border Trilogy. John Grady’s plot alone would make for a fine movie, and a critical evaluation of his half of the story would still reveal some thematic traces of the hero’s diminished role in modern society and the existentialist plight of creating one’s meaning. In the combined light of Billy’s story, though, and in the shade of the immensity of *The Crossing*, which has already delivered deeper messages concerning the role of narrative by “invert[ing] the structure by making the adventure story of secondary
importance to the metaphysical and theological meditations that form the beating heart of the novel” (Arnold, “First Thoughts” 221), the completed *Cities of the Plain*, fleshed out by the previous two novels that have set the characters towards this denouement, focuses solely on completing John Grady’s death wish and subverting any possibility of a successful existential search for meaning beneath the power of narrative meaning. John Grady’s story still creates the momentum for *Cities of the Plain*, but just as in *The Crossing*, Billy’s presence as the observer and his growing importance within the novel suggests that the act itself, the experience of the event, is less real and has less meaning than the more important witnessing of the act, which itself creates something real – a narrative – out of nothing. It is as if in shaping the trilogy around *Cities of the Plain*, Billy, acting as a ghost that runs beside the main plotlines, stole the spotlight from John Grady, and his role as the observer became more important to McCarthy. Arnold notes this switch between John Grady and Billy and their significance to the overall message of the trilogy, a switch that resulted from McCarthy’s creation of their background stories:

> As *Cities of the Plain* continues, however, McCarthy reveals to us that earlier Billy, and one might argue that the novel becomes, in fact, more Billy Parham’s story than John Grady Cole’s, that in creating the background histories to these two characters, McCarthy found himself pulled closer to the older, wounded man than to the young, impulsive boy. And perhaps this explains why John Grady’s story is so little changed from the screenplay to the novel, while the additions to Billy’s are ultimately more profound and provide the novel its soul.

(“First Thoughts” 227-28)

*Cities of the Plain*, as a screenplay, was solely John Grady’s story of a stoic’s resolve to beat tirelessly against implacable forces for love’s survival. As that story grew into *The Border*
Trilogy, though, John Grady became but one example of an entire history of people trying to test the limits of an indifferent world, and Billy’s role -- as the observer, the witness, the reader -- became more significant as a way to find a piece of meaning that exists within a network of narratives, made through the central ability of humans to create stories.

The screenplay that began The Border Trilogy has become the novel that finishes it, and as it continues upon the trajectories established in the previous two books, the pastoral land and the dreams it had promised dissolve into a barer world that depends on simpler things than love and justice. Arnold, in another article, is accurate in describing *Cities of the Plain* as “a novel built on sighs” (“Go to Sleep” 65). Taking place between the tired MacGovern ranch, soon to be bought by the military, and the sunken retreats of Juárez, the novel serves as the swan song of a moribund way of life, the final end to the cowboy myth that prompted John Grady away from his home at the start of *All the Pretty Horses*. Considering the apocalyptic ending of *The Crossing* with an abject Billy weeping in the wake of the Trinity nuclear test -- a fitting way to mark the end of what the west was -- the opening scene of *Cities of the Plain* in a Mexican whorehouse shows the reader what has become of the idyllic west so celebrated in the first two novels. The novel opens with a Mexico now marred with the tawdriness of cheap entertainment, made all the more striking in its degradation by the rain: “Out in the street the rain slashed through the standing water driving the gaudy red and green colors of the neon signs to wander and seethe and rain danced on the steel tops of the cars parked along the curb” (*COP* 1). Instead of a grand ranch or the humble but earnest home of Mexican peasants, sights seen already in the trilogy, the reader walks into a rundown whorehouse: “The whores in their shabby dishabille looked up from the shabby sofas where they sat” (*COP* 1). The city outside reflects the same antithesis to the cherished pastoral as shades of grey color everything in a dull light, peddlers with cheap wares
appearing instead of the culturally rich travelers so pronounced in the trilogy: “They walked up Ignacio Mejía to Juárez Avenue. The gutters ran with a grayish water and the lights of the bars and cafes and curioshops bled slowly in the wet black street. Shopowners called to them and streetvendors with jewelry and serapes sallied forth to attend them at either side” (COP 7). Even the metaphorical significance of the crossing between the two nations—an act of such importance to the characters in the previous novels—has been diminished to a drunken stroll through a turnstile, and the separate worlds of the United States and Mexico are now only held together by trolley tracks:

The trolleys had quit running and the streets were all but empty of trade and traffic. The tracks shining in the wet lamplight ran on toward the gateshack and beyond to where they lay embedded in the bridge like great surgical clamps binding those disparate and fragile worlds [. . .]. They crossed the bridge and pushed through the turnstile each in turn, their hats cocked slightly, slightly drunk, and walked up south El Paso Street.

(COP 7)

This introductory scene ends with Billy, John Grady, and the other ranch workers on their weekend retreat making this empty crossing, and in this way, McCarthy introduces the bleaker world of Cities of the Plain, where the protagonists’ earlier hopes of a pastoral Mexico, where the past is still alive, drift away into sighs.

Just as scholars have questioned the repetition of plot in The Border Trilogy, others have taken a critical view on this erosion of place and substance in Cities of the Plain. The dramatic shift between the adventure tales of the first two novels, where the young heroes moved across wide sweeps of land for ostensibly moral reasons, and the sedentary nature of the concluding
book coupled with the frequent boorishness of the characters, does raise the question of *Cities of the Plain*’s purpose within the framework of the trilogy. J. Douglas Canfield goes as far to say that the third book is a farce of the first two, where baser representations reduce the ideals and actions valued in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*:

> Then *Cities of the Plain* replays John Grady’s and Billy’s tragedies as farce, wherein the capturing and taming of wild horses or the trapping of a wolf degenerates into the capturing and violent decapitating of wild dogs. The aristocratic Alejandra has degenerated into the epileptic whore-with-a-golden-heart, Magdelena (whatever else her name may signify). Crossing into the exotic has become a trip to a Juárez whorehouse. Great schemes have dwindled into a hut, a dog, a woman, and a day’s wages. Tragedy has dwindled into country music.

(263)

To suggest that everything has been degraded in *Cities of the Plain* is too harsh, though, and would completely evade the point of the novel’s place after the grandiose adventures of the previous books. *Cities of the Plain* takes the two protagonists where they need to go after finishing their separate stories: it is a story of settling, of grounding oneself in a livable reality, or, in John Grady’s case, the continual denial of accepting a reality outside of one’s ideal making. It is a book of learning hard lessons, and Billy, again taking the spotlight from John Grady’s action, illustrates how the world as given must eventually be the world taken. A conversation held between John Grady and Billy over Billy’s disillusionment with his younger notions of the cowboy life shows the division between the two protagonists that defines the tension of The Border Trilogy:
John Grady pulled the latigo on his catchrope and retied it. You think you’d of liked to of lived back in the old days? he said.

No. I did when I was a kid. I used to think rawhiding a bunch of bony cattle in some outland country would be just as close to heaven as a man was likely to get. I wouldn't give you much for it now.

You think they were a tougher breed back then?

Tougher or dumber?

(COP 77)

John Grady tells Billy that he would still choose that life, a response Billy attributes to John Grady’s trademark youth and ignorance before sharing his preference for the luxuries of the settled life and the wisdom his age has awarded him:

I could live here, John Grady said.

Young and ignorant as you are you probably could.

I think I’d like it.

I’ll tell you what I like.

What’s that?

When you throw a switch and the lights come on.

(COP 77)

Billy’s experiences have led him to a cynical, if slightly humorous, stance against the beliefs he held during his youth. Most importantly, though, he, unlike John Grady, has learned from his earlier tribulations. His desires have changed: “If I think about what I wanted as a kid and what I want now they aint the same thing. I guess what I wanted wasnt what I wanted. [. . .] Hell, he said. I dont know what I want. Never did” (COP 78). He ends the conversation by telling John
Grady how one changes from imagining an ideal path for his or her life – of scripting their own lives, which Billy found the futility of in The Crossing – to simply trying to avoid further loss: “When you’re a kid you have these notions about how things are going to be, Billy said. You get a little older and you pull back some on that. I think you wind up just tryin to minimize the pain” (COP 78). If the grand schemes of the previous two books have given way to the pursuit of a simpler life, then it can only be a result of learning the cost of those grand schemes. Cities of the Plain may be a farce of its predecessors in many ways, but Billy, in minimizing his pain, has settled for the easy joy of electricity.

The striking change in Billy between The Crossing and Cities of the Plain is itself a main cause for the rift that, at a quick glance, exists between this novel and the previous two. Arnold writes that the “young, melancholy Billy Parham of The Crossing initially seems worlds apart from the garrulous, folksy cowboy” (“First Thoughts” 227) of the screenplay version of Cities of the Plain, and the same can be said for the Billy in the novel version. Billy’s presence in the beginning of Cities of the Plain supports this bewilderment: when last seen he was lost and abandoned, completely alone and weeping. Now he is in a whorehouse, easily socializing with friends and speaking crassly, a drastic change considering how little he spoke even in The Crossing. He takes part in telling John Grady about their old friend’s past trip to the house where, when they caught him in the act, they told him “he looked like a monkey fuckin a football” (COP 5) and his evaluation of the whores comes easy and crude: “Get that one I had. She’s five gaited or I never rode” (COP 6). The silent and morose Billy Parham would have been at a loss in this setting, but the new Billy is at ease, far removed from the sad figure that ended the prior novel.

Scholars have offered several interpretations for this change in Billy. Nell Sullivan,
approaching the trilogy from the critical perspective of gender studies, suggests that Billy adopts a masculine model – of crass speech and displays of bravado – to mask his feminine side: “The fluidity of gender identity and its existence primarily as performance are underscored by Billy’s modeling of ‘masculine’ behavior at the beginning of *Cities of the Plain*” (240). Arnold, in a less harsh evaluation of his character in the final novel, agrees slightly with Sullivan in suggesting that Billy’s machismo serves as a buffer for his emotional side that was so prevalent and beaten in *The Crossing*:

> As noted earlier, our first encounter with Billy in *Cities of the Plain* must be disturbing to anyone who has read the earlier book. Rather than the quiet, sad boy we know from *The Crossing*, we at first get a boisterous, coarse cowpoke joking about fucking fat whores. It’s a shock, and an unpleasant one. [. . .] But we learn quickly that much of Billy is show, bluster, a way to keep more sensitive emotions under wraps.

(“First Thoughts” 232)

While both evaluations offer a provocative way of understanding Billy, his behavior in *Cities of the Plain* is more so a testament to what he has learned in *The Crossing*. Bluster it may be, but the new model of his personality is above all Billy’s attempt to heed the indian’s warning to him concerning the huérfano early in *The Crossing*. Completely abject by the end of that book, Billy has worked himself back into the community of humankind and thus the world, accepting that “he contained within him a largeness of spirit which men could see and that men would wish to know him and that the world would need him even as he needed the world for they were one” (*Crossing* 134). The friendships he has made at the ranch have reintroduced him to the narrative matrix that creates meaning, and thus he is saving himself from utter estrangement, from other
people and from himself. Billy’s behavior in *Cities of the Plain* might seem strange and ugly compared to what he had been, but it is an example of the intertextual intricacy of The Border Trilogy: a warning heard years ago has become a saving grace for Billy. And if a defining distinction between Billy and John Grady is their ability to learn from their past tragedies, then this is another point where Billy succeeds where John Grady fails. Billy tells Troy in *Cities of the Plain* that “you need to find you a hole at some point” (*COP* 19). In *Cities of the Plain*, Billy has found his hole, his place, at the ranch, a place where his coexistence with others can create meaningful narrative substance in his life.

John Grady has not been as good of a student, though, and has stayed on the same path he set upon during *All the Pretty Horse*, making him the cultural icon he desired but also a stranger in a familiar place. He has become, as Billy calls him early in *Cities of the Plain*, “the all-American cowboy” (*COP* 1), but his status as such makes him more so an object of derision than of respect. Billy, while obviously being fond of John Grady, still refers to him as this legendary figure sarcastically, as he does in the opening and as he does as he sings a mocking corrido about John Grady: “John Grady was a rugged old soul, Billy sang. [. . .] With a buckskin belly and a rubber asshole” (*COP* 76). The other ranchers, men living the life John Grady dreamed of for himself, find him odd and out of place, too. JC asks Billy “What’s wrong with him?” (*COP* 9) and they watch him work with the horses with heavy skepticism:

What is that thing he’s got on its head?
It’s called a cavesson halter.
What’s wrong with a plain hackamore?
You’d have to ask the cowboy. [. . .]
He aint trainin it for the circus is he?
John Grady, even in his ideal environment, is still out of place. The opening scene, where Billy and the others feel right at home, John Grady is still distant and unsure of himself, telling the others to just go on with their nightly plans without him: “You all go on, said John Grady” (COP 5). Even though he has become the cultural icon, he still finds himself estranged from the world that is not the world of his ideals and therefore the people in it: “There were half a dozen soldiers from Fort Bliss there, young recruits, their heads all but shaved. They eyed him drunkenly, they looked at his boots” (COP 37). Still sick with his Madero syndrome, John Grady cannot join the real world.

Dealing with his tragedy in his own way, John Grady rushes back into another dangerous love affair with the young Mexican prostitute Magdelena as a way to pursue beauty again and form his ideal world around that idyllic love. His idealization blurs his sense of reality throughout the relationship, though, as indicated by the fact that his first sight of Magdelena is a reflection, the dual image that separates the real and the assumed: “The whore had gone back to the sofa and John Grady was studying something in the backbar glass. Troy turned and followed his gaze. A young girl of no more than seventeen and perhaps younger was sitting on the arm of the sofa with her hands cupped in her lap and her eyes cast down” (COP 6). She is the perfect lure for his heroic inclinations, a damsel-in-distress and a manifestation of endangered innocence, a token of beauty caught in the squalid waters of reality: “She fuzzed with the hem of her gaudy dress like a schoolgirl. She looked up and looked toward them. Her long black hair fell across her shoulder and she swept it slowly away with the back of her hand” (COP 6). She is a clone of Alejandra and a chance for John Grady to redeem what he had lost. The main action of Cities of the Plain will follow John Grady down the same path again as he sacrifices everything
as a way to pay the terrible cost for beauty, for an attempt to make the ideal real.

When he finds Magdelena again, he also finds, again, a place in the world, for to be known by a loved one, for John Grady, is to exist, to be real in a world he never recognized to be real. He finds her at the expensive and exclusive White Lake whorehouse, and it should be noted that when he sees her again, it is again a reflection in the glass, further suggesting the duality of John Grady’s perception between reality and idealization: “When he looked into the glass again she was sitting by herself on a dark velvet couch with her gown arranged about her and her hands composed in her lap. He reached for his hat, not taking his eyes with her” (COP 66). The first conversation they have circles around whether Magdelena remembers John Grady from the first whorehouse, whether he has a place in her mind, which, as he finds, he does:

He watched her. He told her that he had seen her at La Venada but she only nodded and did not seem surprised. [. . .]

She asked why he had not spoken to her at La Venada. He said that it was because he was with friends. [. . .]

No me recuerda? He said.

She shook her head. She looked up. They sat in silence. [. . .]

She smiled wistfully. She touched his sleeve. Fue mentira, she said. Lo que decía.

Cómo?

She said that it was a lie that she did not remember him. She said that he was standing at the bar and she thought that he would come to talk to her but that he had not and when she looked again he was gone.

(COP 68-69)

Before leaving, he asks for her to say his name, another affirmation that he means something to
her, that to her, he exists:

   Say my name, he said.
   She reached and parted the canopy curtain. Mande? she said.
   Di mi nombre.
   She lay there holding the curtain. Tu nombre es Juan, she said.
   Yes, he said. Then he pulled the door closed and went down the hall.

   (COP 71)

Having rediscovered the romantic ideal of love, John Grady feels at place in the world as his desires become real. With this connection established again, with his past losses returned to him and the purpose of his life before him again, the degradation of what Mexico has become even seems to return to the pastoral beauty of his dreams: “He took his bearings by the gray light to the east and set out toward the city. In the cold dawn the lights were still burning out there under the dark cape of the mountains with that precocious insularity common to cities of the desert” (COP 71). Together again with his paramour, John Grady returns not only to his own lost past, but to the lost past of the west. He passes another man and they smile at each other “as if they knew a secret between them” (COP 71), a secret concerning again the tenuous balancing act between beauty and loss: “Something of age and youth and their claims and the justice of those claims. And of the claims upon them. The world past, the world to come. Their common transiencies. Above all a knowing deep in the bone that beauty and loss are one” (COP 71). As John Grady’s tragedy starts again, the narrator submits a reminder concerning the futility of the boy’s claims to his youth and the justice he seeks in making for himself a place in the world, the mirroring of the past and the future, the guarantee of repetition, and most importantly the sacrifice demanded in transactions of beauty and loss.
II.

The act of observing, of witnessing, has risen as central importance in the world of The Border Trilogy – both as a way to derive meaning within a community of narrative lives and as a way to divine the mechanics turning the world’s engine – and it continues to be an act John Grady refuses to take part. Dueña Alfonsa’s sermon fell on his deaf ears and so too does Magdelena’s life story, a gruesome and sad tale that contrasts too violently with the idealized world John Grady has built around her, a world that includes marriage, a quiet and humble house on the range, and even a puppy. As he refuses to even listen to her story, to observe her narrative, he perhaps commits the sin that dooms him to his endless repetition: he denies her reality, rejecting her complete person in favor of maintaining his picturesque perspective on his young love. After John Grady tells Magdelena that he loves her, she commits herself to telling him her cruel past, a history beginning with how “she had been sold at the age of thirteen to settle a gambling debt” (COP 139).

McCarthy tells her tale with brutal detail, a tale that covers her betrayal by both a convent, who sells her to the original procurer, and the police, who instead of giving her refuge rape her and begin to prostitute her out to other officers and even prisoners before selling her back to the procurer from whom she had escaped. After a severe beating from the procurer, she ends up at her first whorehouse where she began the rest of her sad life as “a painted child in a stained kimono with her arm in a sling wept in silence or went wordlessly with men to a room at the rear for a price of less than two dollars” (COP 139).

This cruelest of tales is too much for John Grady’s sentimental and naïve heart: listening
to her leaves him “bent forward weeping with his arms around her” (*COP* 139). John Grady cuts her off, not wishing to witness the rest of her past; such evidence of the world’s potential for ugliness jars his idealization of both Magdelena and the world of wish she helps him create. He refuses to let her finish and reintroduces his romanticized and ideal worldview by asking her to marry him:

He put his hand over her mouth. She took it away. Hay más, she said.

No.

She would tell him more but again he placed his fingers against her mouth. He said that there was only one thing he wished to know.

Lo que quieras, she said.

Te casas conmigo.

Sí, querido, she said. La respuesta es sí. I marry you.

(*COP* 139-40)

By telling John Grady her history, Magdelena attempted to bring together John Grady’s split image of the world, torn between reality and his ideals. Witnessing her life would have perhaps taught John Grady what Madero finally learned before the mob, but he refuses to give up his own image of the world and join the network of narratives that reveal the world in all its horror and beauty.

Billy, caring for John Grady as if he were Boyd reincarnated, tries to protect John Grady as he falls further into the deadly trap of his ideals as the threat of Eduardo, the pimp who runs White Lake, becomes more imminent. But as the observer, and thus as the reader, he can do nothing to intervene and save John Grady from his guaranteed demise. John Grady has already admitted to Billy his own sense of helplessness in stopping the train of his tragedy, telling him “I
don’t know. I feel some way like I didn’t have nothin to do with it. Like it’s just the way it is. Like it always was this way” (COP 121). Likewise, Billy can do nothing. His first confrontation with Eduardo leaves Billy in a begrudged and grim agreement with the pimp's perspective on John Grady’s condition. When Billy goes on John Grady’s behalf to buy Magdelena from Eduardo, the pimp explains what is wrong with the young idealist: “What is wrong with this story is that it is not a true story. Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of. Do you believe that?” (COP 134).

Billy, having learned this in the despair of his history, cannot help but tell Eduardo that he does believe that, though admitting so leaves Billy abandoning John Grady’s idealism: “I don’t know, he said. I guess probably I do. I just don’t like to say it. […] It seems like a betrayal of some kind” (COP 134).

After Eduardo murders Magdelena, Billy storms White Lake in an effort to save John Grady by dealing with Eduardo himself. Here he continues to play the role of the reader, though, who cannot help but hope for the young hero’s survival even if that hero’s failure to change has set this violent series of events in motion. He rages, beating Eduardo’s right hand man Tiburcio and kicking in Eduardo’s door in another act of bravado. Eduardo receives him nonchalantly, calmly reminding him of their prior discussion: “You remember our conversation when last we met.” (COP 240). He then reminds Billy of his own inability to save John Grady from his destruction, telling Billy “your words carried no weight with him” (COP 240). Eduardo again, acting as the dark philosopher of Cities of the Plain like Judge Holden in Blood Meridian and Dueña Alfonsa in All the Pretty Horses, cuts to the truth of the situation, playing again off of Billy’s realization of John Grady’s sole agency in these events as a result of his quixotic flaw:
You present an odd picture, he said. In spite of whatever views you may hold everything that has come to pass has been the result of your friend’s coveting of another man’s property and his willful determination to convert that property to his own use without regard for the consequences. But of course that does not make the consequences go away. Does it?

(COP 240)

In no way does this argument admonish Eduardo of his cruelty, but it highlights again John Grady’s stubbornness in pursuing his ideals, a stubbornness that has ultimately blinded him or made him indifferent to the results of his actions. His speech deflates Billy’s anger and his resolution to kill Eduardo to protect his friend. He, like the reader, can do nothing as he observes John Grady’s predetermined end. All he can do is curse the evil of the world that Eduardo represents, an evil that forever prevents the world of John Grady’s ideals: “Damn you to hell, he said. You and all your kind” (COP 241).

The climactic knife fight between John Grady and Eduardo acts as a fitting emblem for everything John Grady represents in the schemes of history and, in McCarthy’s comment on the literary past, the existential search that had been the artistic pursuit of his literary predecessors. John Grady’s determination holds through, never giving up the good fight as he tells Eduardo “I come to kill you or be killed” (COP 248). Always speaking grim truths, Eduardo tells John Grady throughout the fight his dark philosophies of how the world really works, creating the music for this violent dance. He tells John Grady of the meaningless of his search, a search taken by all malcontents of the American culture John Grady initially left:

I am forty years old, he said. An old man, no? Deserving respect, no? Not this fighting in alleys with knives. [. . .] Not this fighting with suitors. With farmboys.
Of whom there can be no end. [. . .] They drift down out of your leprous paradise seeking a thing now extinct among them. A thing for which perhaps they no longer even have a name.

\[COP\ 249\]

Eduardo continues to attribute John Grady’s failures back to his core disillusionment with the world that had been placed before him:

In his dying perhaps the suitor will see that it was his hunger for mysteries that has undone him. [. . .] For that is what brought you here. That is what you were seeking. [. . .] That is what has brought you here and what will always bring you here. Your kind cannot bear that the world be ordinary. That it contain nothing save what stands before one. [. . .] [Y]our world totters upon an unspoken labyrinth of questions.

\[COP\ 253\]

Eduardo dissects the plight that has plagued John Grady, that has driven him to both his tragedies in *All the Pretty Horses* and now in this novel, a plight of needing to find that single vision of a flower, a piece of beauty in an ordinary and often too cruel world. He bleeds, suffering multiple lacerations, while Eduardo eviscerates him with his speech as well, beating into him the futility of his endeavors. And indeed, John Grady bears these wounds and fulfills his role in history, repeating the same story of a human’s ideals being cut apart before him: that in his search for meaning only oblivion is found, a modern and existential conclusion reached bitterly once again. As the knife fight represents another end to this familiar struggle, its mutually fatal end guarantees that it will continue, both sides of undeniable truth and ceaseless idealism cancelling the other, an act best manifested in John Grady’s killing blow to Eduardo,
won only through the dropping of his defenses: he jams his knife through the bottom of his jaw, lodging the blade between his eyes and effectively sealing his mouth, silencing his dark truths. As John Cant writes, John Grady, with his final strike, “shut[s] the mythoclastic mouth of the infernal speaker of truths” (231). No victor emerges; the struggle will continue through other actors. Utopia, even John Grady’s personal utopia, is unattainable once again, but the speaker of truths concerning the world’s incompatibility with such notions, also falls silenced.

And so the same story, both his and this familiar narrative of tragedy, is told again through John Grady, and Billy is left again as the dejected observer, the reader who witnesses such sad tales. Billy finds him in Mexico, cut to pieces and dying. Knowing he will not return again to the ideal world he was creating, knowing that his death is imminent, John Grady entrusts to Billy the last artifacts of his life: his grandfather’s gun that he sold to the pawnshop and the pup he had taken from the ransacked den. Billy, always the observer who has to bear such loss, acts as the reader shouting out against the ultimate narrator, the grand storyteller, who weaves these stories, trying to force that writer to see the tragedy he has created: “He was crying and the tears ran on his angry face and he called out to the broken day against them all and he called out to God to see what was before his eyes. Look at this, he called. Do you see? Do you see?” (COP 261). John Grady’s tale is done, and in his final moments he tells Billy that he welcomed the end: “Bud when I seen her layin there I didnt care to live no more. I knew my life was over. It come almost as a relief to me” (COP 259).

For Billy, though, life goes on, and having rejoined the narrative community of humanity, he is once again victim to suffering through tragedy and loss. The reader is all that remains at the story’s end. As the closing lines of the final section of Cities of the Plains confirm as much with John Grady’s retreat from the narrative through his death and Billy’s lonely trip home, where he
carries the burden not only of his friend’s body but of his friend’s tale, passing on forever into the matrix of narratives that is the world: “The dead boy in his arms hung with his head back and those partly opened eyes beheld nothing at all out of that passing landscape of street or wall or paling sky or the figures of the children who stood blessing themselves in the gray light. This man and his burden passed on forever out of that nameless crossroads” (COP 262).

III.

Many scholars have already approached the epilogue of Cities of the Plain as the final cap on the narrative themes that stream throughout the trilogy: its focus on Billy and on the layers of reality created through the act of storytelling resolves the prior action and returns the reader to his or her implicit role in taking part in The Border Trilogy. After facing another traumatic loss on the same scale of the she-wolf’s and Boyd’s death, Billy leaves the ranch with the dog, a reminder of John Grady’s burden, and returns to his drifting ways, becoming again the huérfano devoid of a place within the narrative framework of the world: “He left three days later, he and the dog” (263). Mac implores him to “let it go” (COP 264), but Billy’s attempt to rejoin the community he abandoned once before has failed again: “I’d like to. I think it’s goin to be a while” (COP 264). And it is a while as Billy’s life passes through a single page, through “days of the world. Years of the world. Till he was old” (COP 264). The crux of the epilogue rests with Billy’s strange encounter with another man of the road, perhaps another huérfano, “another such as he sitting also solitary and alone” (COP 266). In an episode reminiscent of the cryptic and profound philosophical pauses in The Crossing, the stranger opts to tell Billy about a dream he had of a dreamer, a dream within a dream which, as Cant writes, creates a relationship that “occupies a position analogous to that of the writer who must enter into the world of his creation as though it had a life of its own” (232). The stranger frames this story, though, by first telling
Billy of his attempt to define meaning from his life by creating a map of it: “In the middle of my life, he said, I drew the path of it upon the earth because I thought that if I could see the pattern and identify the form of it then I would know better how to continue. I would know what my path must be. I would see into the future of my life” (COP 268). It is an act simpler but akin to the adventures set out upon by the protagonists of The Border Trilogy, and likewise, the stranger’s mapping did not give him the answers he had wanted: “It was interesting. It looked like different things. There were different perspectives one could take. I was surprised” (COP 269). At first the stranger sees a face in his map, though it is a fleeting image, and he concludes what the map revealed to him “was a suggestion” (COP 269).

Within the parable of the dream, though, is where the stranger recites his own conclusions about meaning and reality, and his conclusions tie together the thematic threads of The Border Trilogy. The passage is dense and complicated, but through the layers of the dreams, and Billy’s skeptical questions throughout the stranger’s story, McCarthy irons out, in his usual difficult style, the creation of meaning through narrative that has superseded the repetitive failure of humans to script or map out their own lives. The stranger’s assertion that the traveler he watched in his dream was not him but a distinct individual reinforces the idea of witnessing; that one’s understanding of life and its events does not have an intrinsic source but is rather a culmination of collecting pieces of other lives, fragments of other narratives:

This traveler also has a life and there is a direction to that life and if he himself did not appear in this dream the dream would be quite otherwise and there could be no talk of him at all. You may say that he has no substance and therefore no history but my view is that whatever he may be or of whatever made he cannot exist without a history. And the ground of that history is no different from yours
or mine for it is the predicate life of men that assures us of our own reality and that of all about us.

(COP 274)

The stranger summarizes that this condition “presses upon us the realization that all knowledge is a borrowing and every fact a debt” (COP 274). The traveler in the dream, like a character in a story or the agent in another’s life, is a carrier of this borrowed knowledge, something created out of history just as each person is created out of the history behind them, just like John Grady. The stranger’s assertion is that these are not simply dream figures or words on a page, but an affirmation of what is real, something that exists within a context of history. Billy, again sharing the role of the reader, says exactly what the reader wants to say after pulling through more of the stranger’s dream parable: “I think you got a habit of makin things a bit more complicated then what they need to be. Why not just tell the story?” (COP 278).

The stranger’s parable effectively dismisses scientific conceptions of being able to know what is real and replaces them with a subjectivity based on narrative meaning, that through creating stories of our lives meaning and reality are made as real as they can be. The traveler in the dream undergoes a ritual that reveals to him “the strangeness of the world and how little was known and how poorly one could prepare for aught that was to come” (COP 282) and he concludes that he reached this realization through the final rejection of his past notions: “If he had any revelation it was this: that he was repository to this knowing which he came to solely by his abandonment of every former view” (COP 282). Again, the conclusion mirrors Billy’s backward enlightenment through the trilogy. The message, ultimately, is an echo of what has been said before throughout The Border Trilogy concerning the need of individuals to share the story of their lives and listen to those of others in order to mark their existence within a workable
reality born out of narratives:

These dreams reveal the world also, he said. We wake remembering the events of which they are composed while often the narrative is fugitive and difficult to recall. Yet it is the narrative that is the life of the dream while the events themselves are often interchangeable. The events of the waking world on the other hand are forced upon us and the narrative is the unguessed axis along which they must be strung. It falls to us to weight and sort and order these events. It is we who assemble them into the story which is us. Each man is the bard of his own existence. This is how he is joined to the world.

(COP 283)

To be the bard of your existence, to make a story out of life but not to write it, is the task visited upon each person. Arnold comments on the paradigm shift invited by the epilogue in two different articles, writing in one that the complexity of the stranger’s tale – as it jumps between layers of dreams and of fiction -- relates the impossibility of finding a primary level of reality:

“Moreover, since we are reading a work of fiction, and McCarthy, as author, is himself ‘dreaming’ Billy and the stranger and all that comes between them, we must always be aware that we can never in this world find that primary level of ‘reality’ or ‘fact,’ which is, of course, the whole point of the epilogue” (“Go to Sleep” 66). Then, Arnold agrees with the stranger’s ultimate conclusion, which replaces the lost cause of finding that primary reality with the imperative of structuring lives into narratives: “The essence of the traveler’s story is that we create in retrospect the narrative of our lives; we give shape to the events that have occurred, whether they have inherent connections or not” (“First Thoughts” 241).

Indeed, in the world of dreams and narrative, we are given the control that reality denies,
a control fought for by the most fervent, like John Grady. The struggle for this control, though, often invites further difficulties rather than a manifestation of our desires. As such, this world is not our world, but the story of it is: “Our waking life’s desire to shape the world to our convenience invites all manner of paradox and difficulty. All in our custody seethes with an inner restlessness. But in dreams we stand in this great democracy of the possible and there we are right pilgrims indeed. There we go forth to meet what we shall meet” (COP 283-84).

Returning to answer Billy’s earlier skepticism, he tells him what Billy has heard in an earlier journey, that the only real world that matters exists within the subjective self: “The life of yours is not a picture of the world. It is the world itself and it is composed not of bone or dream or time but of worship. Nothing else can contain it. Nothing be by it contained” (COP 287). The stranger’s final words to Billy ring with the familiarity of the recurring mantra that all tales are one and that all is telling, creating a holistic view of reality that depends on a communal effort to recognize the reciprocal duty of each person to live through the other’s knowledge. His conversation with Billy ends with a passage reminiscent of John Donne's famous words:

Every man’s death is a standing in for every other. And since death comes to all there is no way to abate the fear of it except to love that man who stands for us. We are not waiting for his history to be written. He passed here long ago. That man who is all men and who stands in the dock for us until our own time come and we must stand for him. Do you love him, that man? Will you honor the path he has taken? Will you listen to his tale?

(COP 289)

The command to listen returns, the act of witnessing being a central importance to the perpetuation of this narrative reality within which all lives are lived, all existences claimed and
proven. Billy has fled again this community after suffering through the truth of tragedy that runs throughout life and is unavoidable, but again he is exhorted to return.

In doing so he finds the only salvation there is at the end of The Border Trilogy. In his old age he is “taken in by a family just outside of Portales New Mexico” (COP 290) and he shares with them the details of his own life, making a story out of what had been scripted for him: “In the evening after supper sometimes the woman would invite him to play cards with them and sometimes he and the children would sit at the kitchen table and he’d tell them about horses and cattle and the old days. Sometimes he’d tell them about Mexico” (COP 290). In doing so, he becomes the meaning he has always sought, becoming a world unto himself as his hands become the map of meaning contrived by the passing stranger: “She patted his hand. Gnarled, ropescarred, speckled from the sun and the years of it. The ropy veins that bound them to his heart. There was map enough for men to read. There God’s plenty of signs and wonders to make a landscape. To make a world” (COP 291). To the end Billy denies that he holds any significance to Betty, the mother who took in the huérfano and hombre del camino, but in sharing his life and joining again that community, he becomes known, he exists, and he has the meaning he long sought:

I’m not what you think I am. I aint nothing. I dont know why you put up with me.

Well, Mr Parham, I know who you are. And I do know why. You go to sleep now.

I’ll see you in the morning.

(COP 292)

After the trials endured throughout the trilogy, Billy has found again the home he lost so long ago. The Border Trilogy ends with the observer finally winning his rest, the reader reaching the long sought ending, and the tale taking its place within the matrix of all tales, the world.
Conclusion

My initial intent with this project was to link McCarthy back to modernist writers, particularly Ernest Hemingway. As I continued, I found that this overly broad topic could not support a strong thesis, so I had to whittle away my material until I shaped it into a manageable project. Focusing on narrative meaning in The Border Trilogy, a topic that divided the two protagonists into actor and observer/reader, enabled me to interpret the breadth and complexity of The Border Trilogy from a consistent and intriguing perspective. By doing this, though, I feel that I have come back to my original intent and have partially helped lay the groundwork for inducting McCarthy into a tradition of American literature that reaches back through Hemingway, Faulkner, Twain, Melville, and numerous others.

Ultimately, the young heroes of The Border Trilogy represent another lost generation, leaving a home they have become disillusioned with in order to find some missing meaning in life. The basic story forms the skeleton for some of the most important works in American tradition, and John Grady’s role in The Border Trilogy is to repeat, once again, this familiar story. And as has been tradition, the life he seeks eludes him, and while his fate is worse than Ishmael’s, he still ends abandoned in a sea of unknowing.

The Border Trilogy is not simply a reiteration of this core American story, though. The presence of Billy Parham and his role as the observer of these tragedies he tries to avoid allows McCarthy to comment on this tradition. When the two stories are paired, we see that one story is doomed to be forever repeated for the meaning at the end of that American quest has always been illusion. Yet that does not make the story meaningless, for the reader – Billy – continues on
past the last page, carrying the burden of that story and making it real through the simple yet profound act of witnessing. From this act meaning is created. From this act the world is created.

Looking back on my work, it appears that this has been a thesis of doom and gloom, and working within McCarthy’s semi-nihilistic universe would almost demand such a conclusion. Yet Billy’s significance in the trilogy is to provide a substantial answer, substituting the need for an unattainable meaning with the nebulous but powerful narrative meaning, that indeed all is telling and that that knowledge exists as a sort of comfort in an often implacable world. This idea empowers the reader, and as this project caps my initial step into literary studies, I can think of no better conclusion and thus no better thesis to which I could have committed myself. As such, McCarthy’s dedication at the end of The Border Trilogy works just as well as a dedication to this thesis:

I will be your child to hold
And you be me when I am old
The world grows cold
The heathen rage
The story’s told
Turn the page.

The reader lives on past the story’s end, carrying whatever meaning was found within its pages into the world. So do I move on past the end of this thesis, taking with me the knowledge I have claimed throughout this year of work as I, too, turn the page.
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