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Dust, Ash, and the Sublime: Tracing Kant's Aesthetics in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing and The Road*

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Dust, Ash, and the Sublime:
Tracing Kant's Aesthetics in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* and *The Road*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
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University of South Florida

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all my friends and family who have encouraged and inspired me throughout the entire research and drafting process. The personal faith that Laura, Mom, Dad, and Mad all had in me was felt throughout the entire process. Without such influences, I would have lacked the motivation to continue on. Also and most importantly, I would like to dedicate my thesis to Rufus B., who has literally been at my feet throughout the writing process, always offering encouraging support and tireless entertainment; I love you little buddy!

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ABSTRACT

My thesis entails an examination into the presence of the sublime in two novels by Cormac McCarthy: his postmodern western *The Crossing* and his apocalyptic work *The Road*. I draw on Kant's aesthetic theory of the sublime, specifically focusing on the Dynamical and Mathematical sublime in relation to the settings of these two narratives. For the sake of brevity, I limit my study to nature's and religion's relation to the sublime in these works. Areas of particular interest to me include: a) How/why the characters of each novel appear unaffected by or even resigned to the lack of control or explanation concerning their surroundings and b) Whether the characters' sense of choice is dependent upon the presence of the sublime in their surroundings. At the thesis' conclusion, I suggest further routes for research, such as the potential connection between the aforementioned Kantian notion of human freedom and a burgeoning concept of morality in McCarthy's later novels, and perhaps a link from McCarthy's sublime and otherworldly slant to literary subgenres such as Magical Realism.

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's career as a writer has been one of emergence and individuality ever since he published his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, in 1965. The author's initial four works, known as his Southern novels, were generally ignored by the reading public, but McCarthy attained a cultish following among literary scholars and college students along the East coast beginning in the Seventies. When McCarthy's general setting for his work shifted from the South to the deserted American West, the writer was able to shed any Faulknerian comparisons and witnessed a firestorm-like recognition with *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985). From this moment on, his stature as one of America's foremost novelists was established, and each work to follow garnered more esteem and captivation from the reading public. Following *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy released three interconnected novels known as the Border Trilogy: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), which won that year's National Book Award; *The Crossing* (1994); and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). He then published the desert-noir *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and then post-apocalyptic masterpiece *The Road* in 2006.

McCarthy's fame as an American writer may also be evidenced by awards he has garnered and the adaptations of his work. Aside from the National Book Award, McCarthy was the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship in 1969, a MacArthur fellowship in 1981, and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007 for *The Road*. Attesting to

his popular reception, three of his novels have been made into major motion pictures: *All the Pretty Horses*, released in 2000 and directed by Billy Bob Thornton; *No Country for Old Men*, released in 2007, directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, and honored with the 2007 Academy Award for Best Picture; and most recently, *The Road*, released in 2009 and directed by John Hillcoat. Furthermore McCarthy participated in a 2007 interview with Oprah Winfrey, granting the American public an immediate glimpse into the literary genius that had been embraced yet remained secluded from the public eye for decades. As if his stature had not already been cemented, famed literary critic Harold Bloom recognized McCarthy as one of America's top four living novelists, *Time Magazine* included *Blood Meridian* as one of the 100 best English-language books written from 1923 to 2005, and the Library of America is apparently considering the inclusion of his novels among their prestigious publications.¹

Within the realm of scholarly criticism and publishing, a growing number of books, anthologies, and essays considering McCarthy's works have been appearing since the late 1980s. Vereen Bell's seminal 1988 work *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* was the first book-length publication dedicated solely to McCarthy's fiction. Numerous collections of essays have been published since then, increasing to a greater degree as scholars began to recognize that McCarthy was not simply another imitator of Faulkner's style or Flannery O'Connor's Southern Grotesque, but was a quintessential author who had his own niche to carve in the American literary tradition. His scope became broader than Faulkner's, his violence and sacrifice more brutal than O'Connor's. Today, a

¹ A wealth of biographical information concerning McCarthy may be found at the Cormac McCarthy Society's website, www.cormacmccarthy.com, as well as in Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce's Introduction to *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, pp. 1-16.

Cormac McCarthy Society exists and produces the biannual *Cormac McCarthy Journal*, thus extending the breadth of critical attention to his works.

As refreshing as it is to witness a contemporary author deserving of fame actually receive it on both the popular and critical levels of the American populous, scholarly interpretation of McCarthy's novels has been a bit skewed. Numerous readings of his early work construed the fiction's worldview as nihilistic and resistant to morality and logical meaning. The last two lines of Vereen Bell's inaugural and groundbreaking essay "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy" explore the lack of systemic meaning and dearth of insight into existential significance in the author's early works:

In Cormac McCarthy's novels, adjusting a notion of the self to an understanding of the nature of the world is a baffling and precarious enterprise, since it is the essence of that world, in all the novels, that form and meaning refuse to coincide. Experience, meanwhile, continues to insinuate questions while supplying no answers, leaving the articulate and the inarticulate alike fatefully free. (41)

Research focused upon his later, Western works, became entranced by the violence inherent in McCarthy, viewing such bloodshed as an extension of nihilism redirected as punishment for humankind's carelessness regarding the natural world; this resulted in many ecological interpretations.² Other scholars discern interpretative value in the storytelling, dialogism, and dialectic aspects of McCarthy's fiction, most notably in his Border Trilogy.³ The issue lies not in this wide breadth of interpretation, but more

² For ecological interpretations of McCarthy's fiction, see Berry, Busby, Frye, and Luce's "The Vanishing World."

³ Narrative and dialogic readings of McCarthy include Bingham, Chollier, Lilley, Luce's "The World as Matrix," and Mitchell.

notably in scholars' difficulty in appropriating the burgeoning humanism of particular McCarthy works with the savage and punishing settings or scenarios inherent throughout his *oeuvre*.

This study will investigate the presence of Immanuel Kant's eighteenth-century aesthetic theory concerning the sublime in McCarthy, and will inquire into the relationship between the punishing worldview/s and brief yet telling moments of spiritual redemption. Specifically, Kant's sublime permeates *The Crossing* and *The Road*, due to the philosophical depth of both texts as well as the desolate setting of the Mexican desert in the former and the post-apocalyptic, ashen wasteland of the latter. The principal objective will be in suggesting how either the sublime physical object or the sublime sentiment within informs characters' decisions and actions towards others. When confronted by a landscape or circumstance of utter ruin, the characters of these texts exemplify a semblance of intrinsic goodwill directed at their fellow sufferers.

Early in his seminal *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant explains the correlation between the sublime object and a setting void of order and/or morality:

[I]n that which we are accustomed to call sublime in nature there is so little that leads to particular objective principles and forms of nature corresponding to these *that it is mostly rather in its chaos or in its wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation*, if only it allows a glimpse of magnitude and might, that it excites the ideas of the sublime. (130, 5: 246, my emphasis)

While further elucidation and distinction among Kant's different types of the sublime will be divulged in the following chapters, the central premise stated in the above quote

permeates all movement of the sublime in McCarthy's two works. The sublime, in its awe-inspiring, breathtaking, or invigorating influence upon the human mind, will allow me to expound upon and explore the connection between the abject and the astounding. The characters, as they traipse and trudge through the hopeless environs that they inhabit, exemplify a shining internal sublime that empowers their moral and metaphysical inclinations. They thus strike back against the repressive forces of evil with an inherent and unexpected might, prolonging their valiant quests for retribution and/or admonition.

Broken down into three chapters, this study provides insight into each of the two novels in conjunction with a specific type of Kant's sublime, and then addresses a similar thread within both novels in the third chapter. Chapter One considers the presence of the Mathematical sublime in *The Crossing*, investigating how main character Billy Parham's intrinsic attraction to the hidden sublime world influences his decisions and ultimately incites his mental collapse. *The Road*'s relation to the sublime is detailed in Chapter Two, as the Dynamical sublime's presence in the relationship between the two main characters and their post-apocalyptic setting, as well as its embodiment as a flame within the young boy, glorifies the plight of the characters to a degree, introducing concepts of hope and salvation to a barren and morally-corrupt earthen nightmare. Lastly, the final chapter attends to Kant's treatment of ethics in conjunction with the sublime, especially the manner in which the sublime object impacts characters' decisions towards one another in times of physical strife and corporeal terror, resulting in a flickering yet burgeoning semblance of humanity in two works of a writer known for his prosodic brutality. The thesis ultimately traces the influence of the sublime in evoking the magnanimity of

individuals enraptured in a debilitating battle with an unforgiving wild that seethes and boils either within man or in the natural world.

A secondary purpose of this study is to assist in the growing amount of scholarly thought afforded McCarthy's fiction, intending a departure from the earlier nihilistic interpretations of McCarthy's fiction as morally-bereft and unrewarding to readings that begin to investigate the deeper philosophical and, more specifically, phenomenological slant of McCarthy. Much of McCarthy's later fiction has become focused upon the intrinsic sense of cognitive awareness within characters and their intuitive attention to the limits of their conscious capabilities; Kant's interest in the sublimating ability of humankind's mentality extends such a trend in McCarthy. In fact, two of the earliest scholarly publications concerning *The Road* feature insight into the unique sense of religious and spiritual depth of McCarthy's most recent novel.⁴

McCarthy's works have generally featured an aura of foresight from one novel to the next. The conclusion of *Suttree* entailed its main character leaving the rivers of Tennessee and traveling westward; coincidentally, McCarthy's next work was *Blood Meridian*, a text immersed in the hostile violence of the historical American West. Likewise, *The Crossing* concludes with Billy weeping in the nuclear fallout of an atomic bomb testing site in New Mexico; *The Road* begins with two characters wandering the abysmal post-apocalyptic landscape. Serious questions abound concerning where McCarthy will progress next in his fiction; considering the author's astounding prescience coupled with his alluring unpredictability, one's guess is as accurate as the other's. Hopefully, and most minimally, this thesis will serve as intellectual gab

⁴ See Carlson and Kunska.

concerning some latent routes for further discussion of McCarthy's past works, and intends to contribute to scholarly attention or awareness regarding an emergent and burgeoning sense of humanity in the works of an author previously deemed nihilistic and devoid of compassion.

Chapter 1: “Like a Man Bent at Fixing Himself Someway in the World”: Billy Parham’s
Doomed Allegiance to the Sublime in *The Crossing*

Throughout *The Crossing*, main character Billy Parham embarks upon three separate quests in “crossing” over from the United States’ border to the wild terrain of Mexico. In the first part of the novel, Billy attempts to lead a trapped and pregnant she-wolf back to her native turf; next, Billy, along with his brother Boyd, travails the unsettled and violent Mexican landscape in search of his parents’ murderers and stolen horses; years later, Billy ventures back to Mexico to find Boyd’s remains. Throughout these physical wanderings, an intensely personal inner voyage takes shape within Billy. He is the subject of an alienated and altogether tragic *bildungsroman* during his taxing travails in the Mexican wilderness. This quest for self realization is manifested due to Billy’s encounters with the sublime, evidenced initially in Billy’s intimate yet unspoken bond with the she-wolf, and then, following the she-wolf’s unnecessary and brutal death, in the awe-inspiring natural world that so greatly intimidates yet entices the seventeen-year-old American.

Billy’s affiliation with the sublime incites his alignment with the mystical objects he intrinsically finds pleasurable. In spite of the fact that the daunting mystery or apparent danger contained within these objects might inspire fear or hesitance, the novel

presents these as objects more akin to Billy than his fellow man. Throughout his three crossings, the entirety of significant physical harm suffered by Billy, Boyd, and the she-wolf is all employed at the hands of corrupt men and never by the unwieldy forces of the natural world. The she-wolf's fall occurs within a dog-fighting ring in a horrific carnival of a Mexican village (122), innocent Boyd is shot in the back by nefarious horse thieves on the open plain (269), and the lasting, final image of an impoverished and weeping Billy is set in the foreground of an atomic bomb test run (424). This novel is not about Billy's survival in a savage and unforgiving wilderness; rather, it concerns the young man's initial act of purification in his newfound allegiance to the sublime pleasure of nature followed by his eventual understanding of humankind's ignorant destruction of the unknowable mystic.

Billy's commitment to the sublime extends past the natural world and penetrates the mystical and surreal realm of consciousness. While an argument romanticizing Billy's relationship with nature can indeed be made,⁵ it is not necessarily the aesthetic qualities of nature but rather Billy's innate desire for the sublime that serves to couple the two so closely. In the sublime, Billy seeks and bears witness to those objects that contain an inexplicable vastness or mystery inapplicable to human logic, yet feature an incredible structure that is recognized and aestheticized by Billy's human mind; however, *The Crossing's* young protagonist naively attempts to infiltrate the forbidden matrix of the sublime by possessing and embracing those objects that are meant to remain distant from him. In turn, Billy's altruistic intentions are grotesquely distorted into situations of utter tragedy and ultimate death, as Billy's beloved she-wolf perishes and Billy relinquishes

⁵ See Frye.

his emotional core in the midst of the novel's apocalyptic ending. Billy essentially attempts to hold that which cannot be held and is permanently punished for it.

The idea of the aesthetic sublime, introduced by Edmund Burke,⁶ was treated at length by German philosopher Immanuel Kant in two of his works, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). Kant divides the feeling of the sublime into the Mathematical and the Dynamical. The Mathematical sublime, which applies directly to Billy Parham's experiences in *The Crossing*, is explained by Kant in the following manner: "[If an object] is judged as an absolute measure, beyond which no greater is subjectively (for the judging subject) possible, it brings with it the idea of the sublime, and produces that emotion which no mathematical estimation of magnitudes by means of numbers can produce" (*Critique*, 135, 5: 251).⁷ In this sense, any object that exists outside the realm of logical cognition, that cannot be plausibly measured by humankind's complex system of mathematics, and that thus lays outside of it, is called the Mathematical sublime. Kant provides examples of the majesty of the skies, the overwhelming scope of a mountain range that reaches above the clouds, or the relentless power of the seas during a storm – all references allude to natural settings that are characterized as sublime because of their resistance to measurement.

The Mathematical sublime channels a sort of pleasure within the witness, for it is in humankind's mental capability to experience and recognize the incomprehensible that channels such aesthetic fulfillment. No rationality or logic applies to the sublime object;

⁶ For more on Burke's sublime, consult *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful* (1756).

⁷ Discussion of Kant's Dynamical sublime will follow in Chapter 2.

rather, it is a phenomenon that is witnessed and appreciated, but with a meaning that does not register, within the mental faculty of mankind. This is a separate world that humanity can see and feel, but cannot and will never understand; the pleasure is in simply knowing it exists, not in how it works. Throughout *The Crossing*, Billy hears tales, anecdotes, and philosophical conjecture from outcasts banished from society, living alone in the ruins of the desert; not surprisingly, the majority of truths that Billy absorbs stems from such figures. One soothsayer tells him, “[W]e long for something of substance to oppose us. Something to contain us or to stay our hand. Otherwise there were no boundaries to our own being and we too must extend our claims until we lose all definition. Until we must be swallowed up at last by the very void to which we wished to stand opposed” (153). In this case, that boundless void is the sublime, which exists outside of one’s mental grasp but that is present and undeniably entrancing.

One of the principal tenets that humankind must maintain regarding the Mathematical sublime is that of distance. Kant notes that innate physical fear of sublime natural forces is righteous and should be respected. In that the sublime exists outside of scientific reason, its strength and violence possess the force to reduce the human body to nothingness, as witnessed in massive death tolls of natural disasters across the ages. Henceforth, the human mind’s ability to process and realize the majesty of the sublime is something to be admired, but from a distance. Kant notes the simultaneous allure of and resistance to the sublime:

[The feeling of the sublime in nature] may be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a *rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to* one and the same object.

What is excessive for the imagination (to which it is driven in the apprehension of the intuition) is as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself, yet for reason's idea of the supersensible to produce such an effort of the imagination is not excessive but lawful, hence it is precisely as attractive as it was repulsive for mere sensibility. (*Critique*, 141-42, 5: 258, my emphasis)

Billy Parham is ultimately doomed by his inability to resist the allure of the sublime. He cannot merely stand back and passively observe the majesty; rather, something within propels him dangerously towards it. Billy's desire to hold, possess, and connect deeply with the sublime object forms the essence of his being in *The Crossing*, yet is also the catalyst for his own and others' demise throughout the course of the novel.

Billy's dedication to the sublime is realized in his first quest to take the she-wolf that he trapped in the hills of his native New Mexico back across the border to the boundless desert landscape of Mexico. Throughout the journey, which comprises the first third of the novel, Billy and the she-wolf form an unspoken yet seemingly intrinsic link that strengthens and serves as the emotive crux of the primary part of the text. While Billy was ordered by his father to kill any wolf he trapped, it is clear early that Billy's intrigue and attraction to the wolf species will prohibit such an action. Before he has captured the she-wolf, Billy dreams of her out in the mountains: "He closed his eyes and tried to see her. Her and others of her kind, wolves and ghosts of wolves running in the whiteness of that high world as perfect to their use as if their counsel had been sought in the devising of it" (31). He envisions the wolf in its natural perfection, as an essential and

spiritual being that is supreme and mysterious to him; for Billy, the wolf is his connection to the sublime.

Billy conceptualizes the she-wolf, helplessly entangled in one of his traps, as his portal to a world that is ungraspable and mystical. Upon capturing the she-wolf and deciding to lead her back to Mexico, the most intimate and revealing moments between the two characters express Billy's desire to seek and extract the sublime from his situation. Billy aspires towards a sort of mental transcendence in his relationship with the she-wolf, as he consistently observes the various nuances of her actions and mannerisms in an effort to gain access to a world originally and intentionally remote from his human mentality. What Billy really craves is entry into his deeper capacities, into a manner of thought outside of his perceptibly limited logical mind, passage into what Kant calls the *supersensible substratum*:

[T]he magnitude of a natural object on which the imagination fruitlessly expends its entire capacity for comprehension must lead the concept of nature to a supersensible substratum (which grounds both it and at the same time our faculty for thinking), which is great beyond any standard of sense and hence allows not so much the object as rather the disposition of the mind in estimating it to be judged sublime. (*Critique*, 139, 5: 256)

One night while sitting alongside the fire, Billy ruminates while he looks at the she-wolf staring into the fire: "When the flames came up her eyes burned out there like gatelamps to another world. A world burning on the shore of an unknowable void" (73). In this passage, some of the most vivid allusions to the sublime throughout the entire novel point

to the arcane and enticing awareness, at once so foreign yet so intensely coveted by Billy, glowing in the she-wolf's primal eyes.

Numerous connections extant between Billy and the she-wolf suggest both Billy's innate desire to witness the sublime firsthand as well as the intrinsic link that extends the sublime in nature to the spiritual and metaphysical realm. Coinciding with the aforementioned passage of Billy's envisioning the wolf cascading across the sacred mountains with her ancestral brethren (31), later allusions within the prose intensify the bond between man and animal, between the normal and the sublime. As Billy and the she-wolf are confronted by a gang of dogs, a degree of shared energy unites the two: "In all that whirling pandemonium he could feel the wolf trembling electrically against him and her heart hammering" (64-65). As there exists a sense of mutual electricity that is being passed to and from each character, a fused duo emerges, causing Billy and the wolf, initially two disparate characters originating from opposing worlds, to be seen as one entity.

The sense of solitude, epitomized by the various vagabonds encountered and shaped by the novel's desert setting, is also the adhesive that merges Billy with the she-wolf in the later stages of their crossing. Following the wolf's imprisonment within a tent at the grotesque carnival, Billy observes that the wolf "watched him with her yellow eyes and in them was no despair but only that same reckonless deep of loneliness that cored the world to its heart" (105). In addition to strengthening the developing bond between Billy and the she-wolf in their shared loneliness, the text also hints at that same semblance of a metaworld that Billy so intensely seeks in the sublime, one of mystique

but also one that is as alienated and forgotten as he is when wandering alone in the hostile Mexican desert. Kant, in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* notes, “Deep loneliness is sublime, but in a way that stirs terror” (48). As both Billy and the she-wolf experience during their failed journeys, it is this same alluring terror within the loneliness that drives Billy further in his sublime pilgrimage throughout the novel.

The realm of the sublime, realized in the relationship between Billy and the she-wolf, becomes tinted with the sacred and adds a religious dimension to the dynamics of behavior and trust between the two. Their bond is complicated by the introduction of the spiritual and divine, for when questioned about his reason for trekking across the desert with the wolf, Billy “said that the wolf was the *property of a great hacendado*⁸ and that it had been put in his care that no harm come to it” (90, my emphasis). Compared to Billy's assumed reasons⁹ for escorting the wolf across the border, this overt reference to God as a “great hacendado” adds a spiritual depth to the relationship. Stacey Peebles notes, “For Billy...the wolf represents God – a figure as unknowable as it is beautiful and the impetus for a quest that defies even his own reason” (133). Augmenting the divine reference, the wolf is interpreted by Peebles as a sublime object, one of lurid beauty yet glossed with an undeniable aura of mystery. Billy still does not know the finite reason for his attraction to freeing the wolf, but one may glean from such passages that in addition to there being a sort of moral duty supporting his actions, a deeper desire to oblige the spirit of the natural world is also directing Billy's decision.

⁸ *Hacendado* may be glossed in Spanish as “landowner.”

⁹ Billy's intentions are never fully divulged to the reader, nor are his motives in forsaking his family and taking their only gun with him. Rather, his behavioral patterns remain mysterious and open to interpretation.

The contrasting ideals of the world of the wolf and that of humanity are referenced early, before Billy captures the she-wolf, in a scene where he goes to visit an old man named Don Arnulfo. In attempting to explain to Billy the impossibility of man's accessing the world of the wolf, the *viejo* distinguishes between the two separate ideologies:

He said that the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there...Between [men's] 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. (45-46)

The inherent conflict between these two worlds serves as the violent nucleus of Billy's story. In trying to cross over into the forbidden world of the wolf, Billy attempts an impossible transfer—from the logically grounded to the sublime—and thus alienates himself ideologically from the world of men, leaving him, in a sense, without a world.

Billy's alignment with the she-wolf is prefigured to a greater extent by the danger that promises to accompany the lone travelers. Prior to Billy's discovery of the trapped she-wolf, his younger brother Boyd has a dream in which "[t]hese people were burnin. The lake was on fire and they was burnin up" (35). Billy shrugs the dream off, responding, "There aint nothin bad goin to happen. You just had a bad dream is all. It dont mean somethin bad is goin to happen...It dont mean nothin. Go to sleep" (36). That

week Billy traps the she-wolf, steals his family's only gun, and silently leaves with horse and wolf to Mexico. The immediate connection between Boyd's apocalyptic dream and the commencement of Billy's entry into the realm of the sublime is not coincidental; rather, the dream presages the approaching turmoil that will arise as Billy attempts to get nearer to the she-wolf, his sublime object. Edwin T. Arnold notes, "Boyd's disturbing dream of fire prefigures a doom, 'somethin bad' to be sure, but it also hints at something mystical as well, a quality also found in the primal nature of the she-wolf" ("Go to sleep" 58).

Billy's unexplained intentions and blind ignorance attuned to the sublime materialize into horrific repercussions. Tragically enough, he does not fully realize the innocent waywardness of his choices until the wolf perishes in the dog fighting ring as the moral intentions of Billy disintegrate into a scene of hapless hostility and brutal death at the conclusion of the first book. Billy fails to heed or recognize the lesson of Don Arnulfo earlier in comparing the wolf to a snowflake (46); pertaining to this scene, Molly McBride effectively states, "By its very nature the wilderness cannot be owned because—like the snowflake which melts in your hand—as soon as it is held, it ceases to be the wilderness any longer" (77). In attempting to possess the wilderness of the wolf, an endeavor that signifies Billy's desire to align himself with the mysterious and untouchable world of the sublime, Billy realizes too late that he cannot do so, as a limited being existing within the world of man. In turn, the young American shoots the dying wolf in the head, thus shattering the sublime consciousness within the wolf and inside

Billy's mind, a sort of insubstantial apology to that “world burning on the shore of an unknowable void” that comes too late and at too great a price to really ever be forgiven.

The mystery of the distance between man and the sublime provokes both death and despair but also self-realization. Billy's failure to discern the incomprehensible nature of the wolf's world is clearly evident in his final ruminations in the last paragraph of Book One. After executing the suffering wolf, Billy trades his gun for the wolf's body and heads out to the Mexican mountains to bury it:

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. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has the 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. (127, my emphasis)

In this intensely metaphysical passage, one instantly recognizes the characteristics of the sublime that Billy so desperately seeks as he holds the she-wolf's head, her conscious connection to that other world, in his hands. The essence of the sublime is that it conveys that which cannot be measurably fathomed, as an object outside of the realm of mathematical reason but likewise a product of pleasure and desire.

One is reminded in this passage of the natural world to which the wolf belongs in the consistent allusions to the organic, earthly imagery that charges the excerpt with a

certain resonance and potency; this ethereal haven is a world immune to calculations and human interference, one that is ideologically distant yet omnipresent. David Holloway elevates the presence and allegiance of the wolf to one of a higher, more traditional genus: “From its position of autonomy, the wolf...is a repository of arcane and almost supernatural knowledge, the living residue of another possible world, ‘an old order’ honoring ‘Old ceremonies, Old protocols’ (*Crossing* 25, as quoted in Holloway). The wolf is valorized because it stands for the essential itself, for the authentic truth-bearing core of things” (149). In viewing the wolf as an “essential itself,” as a sort of limitless, formless, and fundamental absolute,¹⁰ the text reiterates the definite border between the worlds of humanity and nature. The passage cites specific artifices created by humankind in the words *altar* and *war*, thus aligning but never venturing to merge logic and reason with the inexplicable sublimity of the natural world. An individual’s order and rationality may breach the outer borders of the sublime, but his or her capacities for logic that revolve around a set of assumptions and physical rules/measurements, signified in the passage by the verb *believe*, will never be capable of comprehending the inner arena of the sublime aesthetic, of the divine design. As he holds the wolf’s lifeless head in his hands, Billy comes to realize that “what cannot be held” and is “at once terrible and of a great beauty” is in essence the realm of the sublime.

Billy’s two subsequent “crossings” consist of journeys in which the sublime continues to impact and infiltrate his mind in a similar manner as with the she-wolf. For much of the novel, Billy wanders alone and tends to philosophize introspectively

¹⁰ Echoing Kant’s description of the sublime object in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:244-46.

regarding his surroundings, most notably while traipsing through the ruthless desert and encompassing darkness of the Mexican landscape. However, in the same way that Billy reframes the inherent danger embodied in the she-wolf to sentiments of amazement, respect, and even romance, he tends to view the terrain with a similar sense of respect and awe. Correlating directly with Kant's Mathematical sublime, Billy finds pleasure in the distressing or foreboding desolation of the dusty plains; Kant notes, "Thus the inner perception of the inadequacy of any sensible standard for the estimation of magnitude by reason corresponds with reason's laws, and is a displeasure that arouses the feeling of our supersensible vocation in us, in accordance with which it is purposive and thus a pleasure to find every standard of sensibility inadequate for the ideas of the understanding" (*Critique*, 141, 5: 258).

Billy's inability to shape logically and construct limits or forms for the overbearing landscape results in a sort of internal and fundamental pleasure for him. When his view of the mountains is described early in the text, one may glean a sense of primal regard for their structure and presence both in the natural world and within his own realm of cognition: "Before him the mountains were blinding white in the sun. They looked new born out of the hand of some improvident god who'd perhaps not even puzzled out a use for them. That kind of new" (31). The mountains not only are placed outside of Billy's mind, but also are removed from the reasoning of a being superior to humankind, a god. Instead, Billy's imaginative capacities allow him to construct, realize, and embrace the sublime power of these natural structures. Discussing the romantic naturalism of *The Crossing*, Steven Frye observes that "even when the world depicted is

terrifying, violent, large, and seemingly indifferent, something essential and beyond knowing remains, manifesting itself in a universal story, articulated and embodied in the imagination” (62). In the same manner, Kant denotes the power of the sublime in inciting “the enlargement of the imagination in itself” (*Judgment*, 133, 5: 249).

The concept of divinity, taking root in the sublime grounding of Billy’s quest, is quite recognizable in the passage describing Billy’s transcendental rendering of the mountains. In the second book of the novel, the intrinsic spirituality of the natural world resurfaces as Billy meets with a series of mystics who all offer their individualized theological exegeses. One hermit reflects upon his past discussions with a man who questioned God’s purpose:

Who can dream of God? This man did. In his dreams God was much occupied...Weaving the world. In his hands it flowed out of nothing and in his hands it vanished into nothing once again. Endlessly. Endlessly. So. Here was a God to study. A God who seemed a slave to his own selfordinated duties. A God with a fathomless capacity to bend all to an inscrutable purpose. Not chaos itself lay outside of that matrix. (149)

Not only is Billy’s connection to the natural world limited by his physical impressions of the sublime, but the sublime also acts as a link to the divine. The above quote presents a rendering of the sublime that is created by God, who works to “bend all to an *inscrutable* purpose”; the OED identifies *inscrutable* as “That [which] cannot be searched into or found out by searching; impenetrable or unfathomable to investigation; quite unintelligible, entirely mysterious.” Within God’s own purpose, the same purpose that

was originally described as foreign to *a god* in the earlier quote, the principal sublime characteristic of unintelligibility and mystery is vital to its description. Furthermore, the very epitome of the unruly and disorderly, *chaos*, is referenced as being contained within God's matrix, thus cementing the notion of the sublime's placement within the realm of the divine.

The negative inscrutability of the sublime is the foremost characteristic that drives the aesthetic theory's role in the novel, thus casting aside the reader's affinity in glorifying its presence throughout *The Crossing*. Earlier descriptions of the mountains in an aura of resplendent brightness and heavenly vibrancy unjustifiably romanticize the influence of the sublime, for it is in the moments of terror and darkness that the true and ultimate purpose of the sublime may be deduced. In distinguishing between the sublime and the beautiful, Kant writes, "Night is sublime, day is beautiful" (*Observations* 47); considering the all-pervading darkness, Kant likens the sublime to the idea of infinity: "Nature is thus sublime in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity" (*Critique*, 138, 5: 255). Fairly early in the text, the concept of infinite darkness is personified as an ominous phenomenon of the natural world. As Billy rides off into the night, a rancher views him leaving: "The man stood at the gate watching after him. All to the south was the dark of the mountains where they rode and he could not skylight them there and soon they were swallowed up and lost horse and rider in the oncoming night." In the same passage, the narration surmises that "the darkness had a soul itself that was the sun's assassin hurrying to the west" (72). The sense of infinity coupled with encompassing or enveloping night conjures disturbing yet

resonant images of an inescapable and indescribable blackness that is wrought with destructive implications. Nick Monk notes, “McCarthy’s landscapes...may grudgingly tolerate a human presence, but they remain in essence wild and beyond the fashioning strategies of those who move through them” (95).

Night’s darkness is referenced later in the text as existing in conjunction with the terrifying sublime, a concept of Kant’s that was highly influenced by Burke’s classic notion of the sublime as a mixture of fear, horror, and pleasure. As Billy sits upon the banks of a small body of water, he melds the sensory impulses of his immediate surroundings with the premonitions of an unsure yet daunting future: “He looked out at the lake where there was no wind but only the dark stillness and the stars and yet he felt a cold wind pass. He crouched in the sedge by the lake and he knew he feared the world to come for in it were already written certainties no man would wish for. He saw pass as in a slow tapestry unrolled images of things seen and unseen” (325-26). While the pleasure in such a scene may not be immediately discernible due to the direct danger that Billy willingly impinges upon his own psyche, the poignancy and awe-inspiring power of the terrifying sublime is certainly present and adversely effective regarding the viewer of the sublime object. Billy is unwittingly prompted to consider his world’s tortured days to come, a thought that is astoundingly accurate when considering the apocalyptic conclusion to the novel.

The final scene of the novel provides a brief respite for a weary character, but more crucially envisions allusions to the ominous days to come. Following his physically tedious and morally debilitating voyages throughout the Mexican wilderness, a sullen and

exhausted Billy stops to rest in a forsaken barn down the road from Silver City, New Mexico, an area near the Trinity Atomic Test Site.¹¹ Coincidentally enough, the last day that a cognizant Billy remembers is *Ash* Wednesday, when he encountered a group of churchgoing Mexican families in the town of Animas Valley. The overt atomic references to the presence of the apocalyptic in this scene serve to convey both the pleasure of the sublime encounter as well as the depressing erosion of sublimity in a nuclear world set upon a course for destruction because of humanity's devotion to nuclear science and mass death.

Billy initially views the loneliness of the apocalyptic setting in an aesthetic manner, noting the beauty of the devastation: "Off to the south a pile of trash was smoldering in the damp and a black smoke rose into the dark overcast. The desolation of that place was a thing exquisite" (389). Billy, a stranger to the scene, takes pleasure in his recognition of the unfathomable nature of the alienation and in the newness of the impression that has formed in his mentality. Kant's Mathematical sublime centers upon the incomparable characteristic of such a foreign object as this apocalyptic landscape: "If, however, we call something not only great, but simply, absolutely great, great in every respect (beyond all comparison), i.e., sublime, then one immediately sees that we do not allow a suitable standard for it to be sought outside of it, but merely within it. It is a magnitude that is equal only to itself" (*Critique*, 133-34, 5: 250). The "exquisite" aspect

¹¹ A prominent locale for nuclear testing during the middle of the twentieth century, most notably of the atomic bomb prior to its use in World War II. McCarthy is a fellow at the Santa Fe Institute, a foundation indebted to science and discovery, witnessed by their slogan: "complexity research expanding the boundaries of science." His relationship with the Institute's scientists is rumored to have influenced his fixation upon the apocalyptic in *The Crossing* and *The Road*. For more on McCarthy's relationship with the Santa Fe Institute, consult his November 20, 2009 *Wall Street Journal* interview with John Jurgensen.

of the apocalyptic lies not in the intrinsic pleasure of the object's vastness or immeasurable magnificence, but rather in its unhabituated and alien mystique.

Billy gradually begins to realize that this setting is not sacred or glorious, but is rather an indication of the erosion or diminishment of the natural world due to man's influence. That which was once a breathtaking landscape has been reduced to bleak nothingness, a quality of the terrifying sublime that is ultimately more harrowing to Billy's impressions of his own worldview rather than his impressions of the exterior environment around him. Billy finally understands that the sublime has been perverted and/or destroyed by man's bomb, and the dog at the final scene of the novel serves as a biting symbol of such a development. The dog is described as a grotesque and mangled creature more suited for the circles of Dante's *Inferno* than the ghost towns of New Mexico:

As it went it raised its mouth sideways and howled again with a terrible sound. Something not of this earth. As if some awful composite of grief had broken through from the preterite world. It tottered away up the road in the rain on its stricken legs and as it went it howled again and again in its heart's despair until it was gone from all sight and all sound in the night's onset. (424-25)

The reference to the dog immediately elicits memories of Billy's failed yet altruistic initial journey with the she-wolf, a holy creature from which emanated the lovely allure of the sublime. In the she-wolf, the influence, greed, and cruelty of the human world instigated, progressed, and finalized her physical ruin. In the dog, however, one sees not only the physical toll inflicted upon the natural world by the world of humankind, but

also the mental ravages as evidenced by the dog's demented, lamenting howl. The results of humanity's careless, self-assumed dominion over the sublime natural world should come as no surprise, for the same idea is presented within the novel's first twenty pages: "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" (17). Edwin T. Arnold astutely identifies such a notion as a central theme throughout *The Crossing*: "Billy Parham's journey is ultimately more devastating, spiritually, for he learns the greater truth of humanity's misplaced vanity and ultimate insignificance" (59).

Billy, himself a member in the evolutionary chain of the "malignant lesser god," is psychologically inverted and ruined by the debilitating influence of man upon the beloved sublime world. After harshly evicting the dog from its home, the next day Billy "called and called [for the dog]. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind. 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" (425-26). Throughout *The Crossing*, Billy Parham has kindled a relationship with the sublime, one that has opened his mind to another world and briefly to divinity, but that has also indirectly caused his psyche to self destruct. Harkening back to Billy's episode with the unreachable sublimity aflame behind the she-wolf's eyes, Dianne Luce identifies the novel as "the story of a boy who discovers too early and too

crushingly *what cannot be held* and whose spirit suffers a grievous wound” (211, my emphasis).

Billy’s quest for purpose, understanding, and enlightenment in *The Crossing* goes horrifically awry; his intentions are true, yet misguided and romantic, and are ultimately ill-fit for a world where the spiritual, ethereal, and pure are corrupted as quickly as can be by the laughter of heathenish villains, the crack of a rifle, or the sonic reverberations of a bomb. Edwin T. Arnold notes of Billy’s metaphysical quest, “In a religious sense, the divinity within the flesh and matter of the terrestrial world yearns for the spiritual world of light, for ultimate unity with God. Billy represents both kinds of displacement, geographical and spiritual. ‘I aint sick...and I aint lost,’ Billy insistently tells the priest (139), but clearly he is both” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 226). His journey begins as one in search of self realization, but concludes as a negative and destructive *bildungsroman*. Jacqueline Scoones’ words have truth to them: “Through young male protagonists, McCarthy explores the process of mapping the self, of locating oneself within a landscape while constructing a landscape of self within” (139). However, as such a landscape goes, so does Billy: as it erodes and disappears, so too does he. *The Crossing* begins as Billy’s quest to find and situate himself within the natural world, yet concludes with his being reduced to infantile and helpless weeping within a post-apocalyptic setting devoid of any semblance of life or sublimity.

Chapter 2: “Carrying the Fire” of Divinity and Sublimity: Interpretations of the
Dynamical Sublime in *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy’s most recent novel, post-apocalyptic vision *The Road* (2006), arguably continues the scenario left at the conclusion of *The Crossing*. While published eleven years apart from one another, *The Crossing* (1995) ends with a dejected Billy slumping to his knees in the fallout of a New Mexico atomic bomb testing site; *The Road* maintains such a storyline but with new characters, as a father and son wander the earth following some sort of nuclear catastrophe.¹² Both works revolve around the premise of nomadic characters innocently traversing an unknown and daunting landscape, replete with dangerous pitfalls and teeming with bloodthirsty villains while the “good guys,” as they are referred to by the boy in *The Road*, search for an unidentified haven of sorts. In fact, the theme of both works is so similar that Edwin T. Arnold, in writing about *The Crossing*, makes a statement that seems more closely applicable to *The Road* yet appeared in 2002, four years before the novel’s publication: “The basic structure of the natural matrix has been violently shattered, undone by man in an act of tremendous hubris, the final cost and consequences unknown” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 232). Man and boy progress across this dismal setting in search of salvation from their

¹² The explanation for the nuclear wasteland of *The Road* is never fully provided by McCarthy; when questioned by Jurgensen, McCarthy replied, “I don’t have an opinion...It is not really important.”

suffering; paving the way is the sublime, as Kant's Dynamical sublime informs the hope and divinity present in the two, thus spurring them on to individualized redemptive refuge at the novel's conclusion.

Like *The Crossing*, *The Road* features an ominous and all-encompassing landscape that is both mystical and that lies outside the realm of reason. The father and son respond to it in much the same way as Billy does, revered with a sort of awe but tentatively and with the utmost concern for personal safety and caution. In the previous chapter, the Mathematical sublime and its influences were traced throughout *The Crossing*, and the same version of the sublime is indubitably present in *The Road*. An absence of logical reason and rationality applies to the ashen wasteland that both characters endure throughout the text, complicated evermore by the unknown origins and inexplicable nature that unleashed such apocalyptic fury so recently yet with such violence. Fairly early in the text, not only does the man have difficulty in comprehending the mystery within the apocalyptic, but he begins to forget the names of objects that he once knew: "He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion" (75). Within such chaotic nothingness and uncertainty, the characters of *The Road* appear lost, both physically, in a land unknown to them, as well as mentally, witnessed by the erosion of the man's memory and grasp on reality.

The dark obscurity extant within the landscape of *The Road* is cut from the same literal thread that once perplexed yet enticed Billy of *The Crossing*. The Mathematical

sublime is categorized by the formlessness of the sublime object that lies outside of measurements derived from man. Pleasure is elicited from one's knowledge and realization that reason cannot and never will apply to such an object, and that the mind has the ability to imagine the infinite or absolute as existing outside of any conventions of numerical wisdom. While the existence of pleasurable feelings associated with the apocalyptic may be debated concerning *The Road*, moments abound in which the man is reverently aghast at the mystery and unknowability of the sublime object. One object that incites his reflection is the darkness of the apocalyptic world at night: "He got up and walked out to the road. The black shape of it running from dark to dark. Then a distant low rumble. Not thunder. You could feel it under your feet. A sound without cognate and so without description. Something imponderable shifting out there in the dark" (220). The sublime is witnessed by the man as a force, ominous to a degree, that permeates not only one's sight, but invades the mind and body. The artificial darkness caused by the fallout of ash has re-colored the road, an object that easily would be recognized and habitualized in any member of society's mind, as a presence invocative of the prominent unknown.

While the Mathematical sublime is applicable in *The Road*, Kant's Dynamical sublime factors in to a greater degree throughout the text. The former, associated with measurements, is replaced by the latter, driven by fear, which in turn exerts a solemn influence over the characters in the text. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant describes the Dynamical sublime in stating, "We can...consider an object as fearful without being afraid of it, if, namely, we judge it in such a way that we merely think of the case in which we might wish to resist it and think that in that case all resistance would be

completely futile” (144, 5: 261). Kant’s immediate example is the traditional Christian doctrine of fearing the power of God while embracing His eternal love and compassion. Surprisingly, Kant’s earlier text, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, conveys a legitimate amount of foresight into the interconnectedness of the fearsome object and the apocalyptic. In discussing the various states of the sublime, Kant notes, “A long duration is sublime...If it is projected into an incalculable future, then it has something of the fearsome in it” (50). In Kant’s view then, the Dynamical sublime, a lengthy duration of experience evoked by the fearsome object, directly correlates with the post-apocalyptic, a setting riddled with the illogic surrounding the apparent “incalculable future” and complicated by an inestimable, hidden internal significance.

The final sentences of the novel, generally the most poignant in any McCarthy text, convey the importance of the world’s inherent mystery, this time captured in the beautiful markings found on the backs of trout: “On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery” (241). This conclusive passage, which adopts an overtly ecological stance, is notable due to the emphasis placed on the mystery of the natural world.¹³ This is a world that is irreplaceable and unknowable; in these final lines, a Hemingway-esque¹⁴ appreciation for the resplendent yet forsaken cache of meaning and knowledge present in the crevices and dells of humanity’s native land springs forth. It is a setting that has become ignored or habituated by the mind of

¹³ Regarding this conclusive passage, consult Kunska, p. 67.

¹⁴ Reminiscent of Nick Adams in “Big Two-Hearted River.”

common man, a possible allusion to humankind deserving *The Road*'s doomed fate due to an overwhelming ignorance and/or hubris in situating humanity's unwarranted dominion over nature. In much the same way as Billy attempted to possess that same sacred inscrutable side of nature, this last passage appears to reference the undeniable inability of humankind to ever comprehend the dangerous wonders of the natural realm.

The otherworldly setting works to discolor or distort familiarity and knowledge in the eyes of the wandering characters. The man repeatedly forgets commonplace referents to objects as well as characteristics of shape and utility concerning certain tools; the nomads of *The Road* are also faced with objects that have been reframed through the guise of the apocalypse. In such a case, the sublime provides emotions of breathlessness compounded by mystery. Late in the text, the boy and man finally arrive at the ocean, a destination that might serve to deliver the two away from their suffering. However, the man's natural assumptions of the ocean are instantly distorted by the bleakness and power inherent in the massive object shifting and crashing before them:

Then they came upon it from a turn in the road and they stopped and stood with the salt wind blowing in their hair where they'd lowered the hoods of the coats to listen. Out there was the grey beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. *Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of.* (181, my emphasis)

As they stare out into the sea, the foreignness of the object bewilders them; the conventional sensations exist, with the "salt wind blowing" and the waves cresting—referents commonly associated with the ocean—but it is the sublimity of the apocalypse

that renders the normal ocean into an “alien sea” within a “world unheard of.” The apocalypse acts as its own illogical catalyst, for as it casts its shroud over the world that the man once knew, it alienates his natural preconceptions from his otherworldly observations. This is no longer the familiar ocean of the past, the body of water that he once had a cogent grasp and knowledge of; this is now a strange entity that exists outside of manmade reason, replete with a magnitude that can only be defined as an absolute in and of itself.

The characters of *The Road* become aligned with the Dynamical sublime amidst such confusion, for they never appear to dread the fearsome object directly as they move throughout the apocalyptic landscape; fear is a distinctly possible sentiment, but is never realized in the main characters. In fact, rather than conveying a sense of timidity concerning the potential recurrence of such a hostile and omnipotent event, the father and son use the landscape and destruction to their advantage in hiding from the true villains of the novel, their fellow man. In light of such an apparent embrace of the apocalyptic, both are consistently reminded of their inferiority and weak physical presence in comparison to the mighty forces of uncertainty that earlier reduced the landscape to its permanently gray state. In one of his midnight ruminations while his son is sleeping, the man wonders at their pitiful role as mere animals attempting to survive in the punishing and unforgiving environs in which they are trapped:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing

black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (110)

In such thoughts, the Dynamical sublime, which is bred by the fear that the object *should* produce but does not, is contained within the “absolute truth of the world”; themes of chaos, ultimate and inescapable power, and darkness are referenced in relation to the term. Juxtaposed against such intimidating images as “crushing black vacuum of the universe” are two human beings, reduced to mere “animals” scurrying across the landscape in hiding and in fear. However, interesting in this scene is that the man stands within such menacing blackness at the darkest time of the night without fear of the earth or the universe. Rather than possessing an inherent fear of what one might assume should very well be the cause of trepidation and angst, the man exists within it in a manner of comfort and philosophical tranquility.

Man and boy endure within the post-apocalyptic landscape in a cautious yet secure manner, for the mysterious edge inherent in the setting’s state is glossed not with an imperiling nature, but with a presence more inclined to promoting impunity. The novel itself provides very little background concerning the origins of the current state of the land, only that there was a “long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (45). The absence of information shifts the focus of the text from the actual apocalyptic event to the characters attempting to subsist within its fallout. In such a case, the man and boy are closely aligned with the ashen landscape rather than placed in opposition to it. George Guillemin, in discussing the pastoral elements of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, makes an

argument applicable to *The Road* as well: “What is altered in McCarthy’s pastoralism is that landscape and character share their fate (the negative materiality of death) and status (the positive materiality of life) as existential equals due to the erasure of all previous utopian pastoral hopes” (109). Like *The Crossing*, it is man who inflicts pain and destruction in *The Road*, thus placing the “good guys” on the side of the sublime landscape, as both endure against the sadistic and amoral actions of villainous man.

Kant, in distinguishing between the various types of the sublime (and before he identifies the Mathematical and Dynamical), clarifies the correlation between the *terrifying sublime* and the *grotesque*, two terms that fit in directly with the paradigmatic occurrences of *The Road*: “The quality of the *terrifying sublime*, if it is quite unnatural, is adventurous. Unnatural things, so far as the sublime is supposed in them, although little or none at all may actually be found, are *grotesque*” (*Observations* 55). The characteristic that connects both terms is unnaturalness, a tag that certainly applies to the story of the man and boy. That the apocalypse was an unnatural occurrence, created most likely by man, and is thus an artifice rather than an act of nature, renders it applicable to such a classification as the *terrifying sublime*.

The presence of the terrifying commingling with the promise of the sublime introduces a uniquely dichotomous partnership to the conflicting worldviews inherent in *The Road*, especially when the man and boy happen upon a series of grotesqueries extant within and due to the presence of the apocalyptic. Scenes associated with cannibalism abound in the text and are the most poignant and burning images to the reader and to the characters; the man and boy stumble into a basement that holds a half-consumed living

body on the floor among a group of imprisoned, emaciated people (93) as well as view a newborn human infant roasting on a spit while its mother and her fellow travelers wait to consume it (167). The graphic nature and inherent horror of such scenes serve to epitomize the madness of humanity in the face of destruction as well as the intrinsically corrupt nature of common man; paradoxically, the man and boy are situated outside of this paradigm due to their otherworldly magnanimity and because of the boy's implied divinity (to be explored later in this chapter). What separates this novel from others of McCarthy that feature the punishing side of humanity¹⁵ is the presence of the sublime and the hope associated with it.¹⁶ In *The Road*, the sublime, that object that incites not only fear but also transcendental wonder, is ordained unto the characters, as their external optimism and one character's internal divinity are thrust to the forefront of the battle to survive.

The inclusion of the divine is a characteristic that instantly distinguishes the Dynamical sublime from the Mathematical, much in the same way that *The Road* stands apart from other McCarthy fiction. In the Dynamical sublime, God is both a sublime object, as was referenced earlier by a quote from the *Critique of Judgment* using God as an example of the fearsome object that is not directly feared by man, and a part of the sublime observer. In such a way, God is clearly connected to the sublime, but is also linked closely to man, the sublime observant in whom His ways are explicitly reflected

¹⁵ *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Blood Meridian* immediately come to mind.

¹⁶ Jacqueline Scoones aptly points out that McCarthy's later novels evoke a semblance of sanctity when considering the preservation of life amidst an ominous setting: "McCarthy's invocation of the silent, still, darkness of the world is a potent omen. Yet, his powerful constructions of the permanence of places and the continuity he establishes between acts of 'turning-itself-towards' others and the things of the world, reaffirm the necessity of faithfully consecrating the presence of life" (150).

through man's decisions and actions. The Dynamical sublime makes possible the transference of God's qualities onto humankind via the mirroring representation of both entities, God and humanity, as similar vessels that contain and are empowered by their awareness of the sublime.

In *The Road*, the boy represents this two-fold link between the divine and the sublime; furthermore, his role as a repository of goodness, innocence, and hope amidst such moral corruption and desolation is frequently referenced and revered by the man, his father and protector. Ashley Kunsa identifies the interplay between the intrinsic benevolence, repeatedly witnessed in the boy, and the harrowing scenes that take place within the nightmarish landscape: "The paradoxical achievement of McCarthy's novel is that it accepts the disjunction between where the world/fiction has been and where it is going, and in this moment of possibility—after the old and before the new—reconciles barbarous destruction with eloquent hope" (69). The "moment of possibility" alluded to by Kunsa is the conclusion of the novel, in which the boy, whose father has died and left him alone, is found by a family of compassionate wanderers who instantly recognize the boy's inner divinity. Kunsa reads *The Road* as a novel that emphasizes the change and transformation of a human-afflicted world over a drastic event; this eschatological interpretation holds definite weight in its identification of a shifting metaphysical landscape, but decentralizes the core premise of the novel: the boy's ingrained goodness as a final glow of desperate yet persistent self-philanthropy. The boy in the text is most closely associated with a savior-like ethos, for in him all of the previous transgressions of mankind, evidenced by the final lines of the text, stand to be remedied.

A breakdown of the correlation between the Dynamical sublime and God will clarify the boy's association with godliness. Kant notes in a lengthy passage of his *Critique* that the feeling of superiority (fearless when facing the fearsome) over the daunting object is both a sublime sentiment and ability of humanity; this talent, however, is only present due to the heavenly being of ultimate sublimity that implanted such a capability within man:

Everything that arouses this feeling [of intellectual superiority] in us, which includes the power of nature that calls forth our own powers, is thus...called sublime; and only under the presupposition of this idea in us and in relation to it are we capable of arriving at the idea of the sublimity of that being who produces inner respect in us not merely through his power, which he displays in nature, but even more by the capacity that is placed within us for judging nature without fear and thinking of our vocation as sublime in comparison with it. (147-48, 5: 264)

God's implanting within humankind of the intellectual aptitude to both confront and elevate oneself above the sublime object defines the divine side of the Dynamical sublime, and is also that facet which serves to link humankind and God via the sublime object. *The Road* adopts the boy as the sublime object, the epitome of God's power found within humanity in the face of the physically daunting and dangerous object; as the apocalyptic environs reduce many beings to awe and madness, the boy remains strangely grounded and transcendently superior to such a magnitude of destructive and mysterious forces.

Classifying the boy as a divine sprout emboldens the text and exemplifies the omnipotent nature of the Dynamical sublime. The reasons surrounding the boy's aura of unaffectedness concerning the fearsome object of the Dynamical sublime may initially be dismissed as being consequential of his naivety in being a seven-year-old child; however, his growing up within a wasteland of murder and cannibalism would strip any such label from him. Instead, his mindset is shaped by his supreme identity as the divine object, a concept that is referenced repeatedly throughout the novel. Early in the text, father and son repeat a notion that consistently refers to their magnanimous intentions towards others as their moral responsibility of "carrying the fire." The reference surfaces four times in the text: once as an opportunity for the man to explain their security to the boy (because they are "carrying the fire," no harm will be inflicted upon them) (70); next as a beacon of hope for the boy as he envisions his quest to find another family in the event of his father's death (182); at the deathbed of the father when he encourages his son to live on without him (234); lastly, as the son questions a newfound family's beneficence at the novel's end (238). The "fire" remains intentionally ambiguous, as it only signifies man and boy's impermeability to danger as well as one's way of communicating his alignment with the "good guys"; the phrase's definition is elucidated a bit further as the father offers his dying words to his son, letting him know that the fire is "inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (234).¹⁷

¹⁷ Perhaps this is the same fire that is referenced by Edwin T. Arnold in a reading of *The Crossing*: "Deep inside McCarthy's darkest visions is that mysterious and sacred fire, that hidden illumination that bides and binds" ("Mosaic of McCarthy's Fiction" 182). What Arnold is astute to denote is the mysterious nature surrounding the fire, a quality that is certainly applicable to that same fire referenced in a sublime manner in *The Road*.

Not only is the boy's divinity softly alluded to by the "carrying the fire" tag, but he is lucidly labeled in a godlike manner by other characters in the novel as well. He is referred to by the old man prophetically named Ely as an otherworldly being or an angel, an observation to which his father boldly responds, "What if I said that he's a god?" (145). In the final paragraphs of the novel, the mother of the well-meaning family is immediately and abnormally drawn to the boy. First, she welcomes him as though she were expected him by stating, "Oh...I am so glad to see you," an observation that alludes to a sense of familiarity although the two have never met. The woman later bluntly explains "that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (241). In addition to references considering his unique connection to God by other characters, the boy himself directly confesses his divine origins to his surprised father; as the two are debating whether or not to help a stricken man on the side of the road, the following exchange occurs:

The man squatted and looked at him. I'm scared, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared.

The boy didnt answer. He just sat there with his head bowed, sobbing.

You're not the one who has to worry about everything.

The boy said something but he couldnt understand him. What? [the man] said.

[The boy] looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one.

(218)

This final peculiar comment from the boy might strike any parent as a simple slip of the tongue due to a child's inexperience with colloquial and religious speech, but given the

context of the novel, its alignment with the Dynamical sublime, and the consistent references to the boy's divinity by multiple individuals in a book that is barren of characters, the boy's connection to God cannot be denied. Ashley Kunsu's essay on *The Road* also recognizes the explicit Messianic identity of the boy (66), reframing his heavenly origins in his unique practice of giving names to objects and people, a custom that is forsaken by adults throughout the novel.

The divinity of the boy may be witnessed in his superiority over the superior, aligning him closely with the very nature implicated by the Dynamical sublime. As his metaphysical origins or associations are clarified, his character becomes elevated in import over any other character in the novel as well as over the mysterious and unimaginable power of the apocalypse. The boy's inner worth, however, is conveyed to the reader in the context of the apocalyptic nightmare in which the characters are knowingly trapped. Without the alienating and humbling effects of the ashen world, its ability to sublimate the boy would be lost. Paul Crowther, in considering an avalanche as an example of the Dynamical sublime, explains the correlation between the mighty object and the observer:

[F]rom a rational viewpoint, not only can we comprehend the power of the avalanche and the havoc it wreaks, we can even conceptualize the idea of infinite power and the insignificance of our relation to it. The mighty object, in other words, 'realizes' the fact that our conceptualizing capacity can even range over power that, from the perceptual and imaginative viewpoint of a finite creature, is

incomprehensible as a totality. This, I would suggest, explains our pleasure in the dynamical sublime. (149)

In *The Road*, the boy as observer of the sublime becomes inferior to his role as the sublime object, for his presence as a godly entity realizes the *apocalypse's* insignificance to *him*. The boy, not the apocalypse, is the mighty object, one who possesses the mysterious power of God and “carries the fire” within.

One's proximity to God is indirectly referenced by Kant, as he denotes the intrinsic link between man's desire to please God by acting in His perceived manner; man uses his inner godliness, that part of him that was implemented by God during man's creation as an image of Himself,¹⁸ to overcome the fearsome object and to experience pleasure in the sublime: “Only when he is conscious of his upright, God-pleasing disposition do those effects of power serve to awaken in him the idea of the sublimity of this being, insofar as he recognizes in himself a sublimity of disposition suitable to God's will, and is thereby raised above the fear of such effects of nature, which he does not regard as outbursts of God's wrath” (*Critique* 147, 5: 264). In essence, it is closeness to God that elevates the subjugated individual over the subjugating force. The boy not only reveals definite proximity to God in his accepting and casual approach to the horrors of the sublime object (his fearlessness of the fearsome), but also explicitly identifies himself as “the one,” as a carrier of the word of God; like the man states early in the novel, “If [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke” (4).

The ultimate significance of the relationship between divinity and the Dynamical sublime in *The Road* is that it inspires the sentiment of hope, mentioned earlier as a rarity

¹⁸ See Genesis 1:26-27.

in a McCarthy novel, and it is that hope which drives the characters on throughout the desolation of landscape and vicious perversion of men's minds. As the man and boy reach a point of highest misery and malnutrition, while they're crossing the most punishing section of the post-apocalyptic landscape, the man devotedly instructs the boy to keep hope alive:

They were crossing the broad coastal plain where the secular winds drove them in howling clouds of ash to find shelter where they could. Houses or barns or under the bank of a roadside ditch with the blankets pulled over their heads and the noon sky black as the cellars of hell. He held the boy against him, cold to the bone.

Dont lose heart, he said. We'll be all right. (149)

The inner bond between two humans is what inspires the feeling of hope, even when all natural forces are intent to impress death upon them. While Ashley Kunsu correctly deduces the pervading theme of hope in the text, she places emphasis on the persistence of the landscape following a catastrophic event as a seminal beacon of optimism in the novel: “[T]his world's very existence in the face of such unlikely odds is itself the hopeful suggestion of an alternative to stark existential nothingness” (64). Such a suggestion is certainly plausible given the stripped setting and nihilistic premises of the violent and unforgiving early scenes, but it is the element of humanity that serves as the greatest and most notable progenitor of hope in *The Road*.

The importance of the Dynamical sublime, one's confrontation without fear of the physically dominating object, is that it promotes hope in the most unlikely and otherworldly of settings. Kant describes the true basis of pleasure in the Dynamical

sublime as existing within one's basic human ability to judge and rationally situate it; in distinguishing between the inferiority of man's physicality versus the superiority of his mentality, Kant notes,

[T]he irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of it and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us, whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion. (*Critique* 145, 5: 262)

By separating themselves from the apparently unavoidable hopelessness of the situation, both man and boy are empowered to exist and persevere within the most hostile and unnatural of locales. The inherent fearlessness that both man and boy convey is exemplified by the manner in which they habitualize their lives within the apocalyptic. As the man describes his son, he notes a profound affinity for adaptation in the boy's nature: "Always so deliberate, hardly surprised by the most outlandish events. A creation so perfectly evolved to meet its own end" (50). Perhaps the imperviousness is due to the countless atrocities and horrors that the boy has already faced, resulting in a semblance of desensitization in the face of the terrifying. However, it is not only the boy, his entire life having been spent in such a setting, whose sensations of fear have been dulled but the man as well, who remembers what it was like before the land changed; following a violent encounter with a man who grabbed his son, the man reflects, "This is my child, he

said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire" (63). The methodical manner in which the man recites seemingly rehearsed lines back to himself clearly alludes to the sense of adjustment that he has made in the setting. Rather than exist in a state of perpetual trepidation, both man and boy adapt within the sublime landscape, aware of its presence but never fearing its wrath.

Moreover, it is humankind's innate ability to elevate oneself above the superior physical object, suggested in *The Road* by the consistent allusions to the boy as a purveyor of godliness. A sense of hope for the future exists within the boy that drives the man on to protect and cherish his son not only due to his innate role as parent, but also for the hope of humanity. In discussing the possibility of love existing within the confines of death in the novel, Thomas A. Carlson states, "The father, by contrast, would hold the same belief but differently: life and world are not possible if we do not love, and the hope of life and world, whose appearance is in fact always and only to borrowed eyes, rests in the child, his heart, who—amidst the burned earth and its cold secular winds—carries the fire, and passes the breath, of life" (62). The boy as sublime object, as evidence to man's closeness to God and to man's pleasure in the Dynamical sublime, compounds his role as both son of the apocalypse but more notably as divine and hope-filled savior-in-training; nothing can harm the boy, for his path is that of basic yet eternally beloved man, man in his closest relation to God, thus forming the central premise of *The Road* and dictating the father's final words: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (236).

Chapter 3: "I Will Not Send You into the Darkness Alone": The Extraordinary Altruism
Entwining the Father, the Boy, and Billy Parham

The two previous chapters have traced the influence of Kant's sublime upon the characters' interrelations and appreciation of natural settings. One further facet to Kant's sublime concerns ethics, and extends the sublime focus from the sublime object to the sublime mentality. Here, the sublime informs one's ethics and subsequent decisions; in *The Crossing* and *The Road*, such an influence results in a strikingly humanistic worldview in each novel. As the main characters, Billy Parham of *The Crossing* and father and boy of *The Road*, encounter various obstacles and are forced into difficult and impacting decisions, their immersion in the sublime shifts their approach from resembling one that is more pragmatic and egocentric to one that seeks to help others and abides more closely to an altruistic moral code.

Pain and suffering are two crucial tenets of a character's life in any McCarthy novel. In fact, such sentiments are expected by the reader to a degree, who seemingly braces him or herself prior to plunging into the text. As he discusses *Blood Meridian*, Steven Shaviro writes, "A strong compulsion draws us through this text, something beyond either fascination or horror. 'What man would not be a dancer if he could, said the judge. It's a great thing, the dance' (*Blood Meridian* 327, as quoted in Shaviro). Bloody death is our monotonously predictable destiny; yet its baroque opulence is

attended with a frighteningly complicitous joy” (146). Unlike previous texts such as *Blood Meridian* or McCarthy’s earlier Southern works, both *The Road* and *The Crossing* feature protagonists who endure pain, but who expect to transcend the limits of physical torment.¹⁹ Kant notes in his *Critique* that the sublime object enables the human to rise above bodily affliction via the intrinsic power of man’s soul; sublime objects “elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature” (144-45, 5: 261). In so doing, humankind attains an ability to confront physically daunting pitfalls and to challenge them with courage, no longer haunted by the hostile threat and devoid of timidity or passiveness along the way.

Kant reiterates that it is not the bodily strength of humankind but one’s inner fortitude, most notably that of the soul and the will, that dignifies humanity’s elite position above its foe. One might notice the line of emphasis here upon the human mentality as a qualifier of superiority, for the Mathematical sublime emphasizes the ability to realize (but not necessarily comprehend with logic and measurement) the sublime object, while the Dynamical sublime testifies to the mind’s securing and divine capabilities to surpass the corporally-dominant object. The mind is the critical tool that allows one to strive for enlightenment, even when the body is grounded and reduced to nothing when facing a physical magnificence of the sublime force. In his *Observations*, Kant writes, “Mathematical representation of the infinite magnitude of the universe, the

¹⁹ Earlier protagonists, like Culla Holme of *Outer Dark* or Lester Ballard of *Child of God* either appear indifferent/immune to recognizing their suffering or embrace the debilitating state that leads both to insanity.

meditations of metaphysics upon eternity, Providence, and the immortality of our souls contain a certain sublimity and dignity” (57); Kant clearly labels the human mentality as possessing a sublime quality, which allows for the soul to ascend above the physical torment oftentimes central to much of McCarthy’s work. In an interview conducted by Peter Josyph discussing the literary merits of *Blood Meridian*, Harold Bloom states, “To affirm the darkness, to affirm the horror, but ultimately to transcend it and to suggest that, even though we are alienated from it and cannot get to it, there is the final parable of man striking fire from the rock and whatever that intimates. The aesthetic achievement of the book is to bring about a negative transcendence” (216). While the vagueness surrounding the term “negative transcendence” may be misleading,²⁰ Bloom’s words concerning McCarthy’s work could not be more correct in identifying the relationship between man’s mental cognition and the terrifying world that threatens to engulf him.

Characters throughout the two novels are faced with moments in which they must act immediately, relying upon their virtuous allegiance to the sublime mentality in order to promote and seek goodness even when confronted by the gnashing teeth of evil. The onus placed on them to react intrinsically and instantly and to make the proper decision is agonizing, yet it is also what distinguishes these characters from the more depraved individuals of McCarthy’s other works. The father’s internal deliberations in *The Road* provide a harrowing glimpse into the mental anguish that he faces daily, knowing that grotesque cannibals lurk around every corner to consume both his boy’s and his own

²⁰ I define it in conjunction with Erich Heller. Heller’s Law may be loosely appropriated as stating that when any aspect of Good is withdrawn from a situation, Evil will conjure meaning from the “negativity below” and will assume ultimate force; in the absence of Good, Evil thrives and attains cogent significance. For more on negative transcendence, consult Heller’s essays on Kafka’s *The Castle* (1975).

flesh, but constantly aware that there is only one bullet left in his pistol. If caught in such a situation, the man questions whether or not he could really take his son's life for the boy's own sake; he also wonders what may happen if the pistol misfired:

They lay listening. Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesn't fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly. (96)

In contemplating the worst possible yet certainly plausible scenario, the man is drawn more closely to the boy, especially as he recognizes the fading presence of his internal will versus his animalistic nature. That there might be a "being within" the man frightens him, for it is his grounded logic and rational approach that has fueled their survival; hence, the thought that a primal entity lurks within and may have the capacity to strike his son's innocent head with a rock aligns him with the brooding cannibal, the reduced image of man formed out of the apocalyptic situation, and thus tortures his psyche.

A scene in *The Crossing* features a similar scenario in which an innocent female child is put at risk and the protagonist must decide his action quickly and without second thought. In this instance, however, the reader is granted no access to the internal realm as the decision registers and ferments inside Billy's mind; unlike the man, whose mentality is clearly affected, McCarthy's removed presentation of Billy's inner struggle alludes to the difficulty in discerning good from evil in the barren desert landscape. The girl's

youthful, vulnerable presence is colored with a burgeoning feminine sexuality, qualities that, when darkened by the wrathful yet silent night, are apt to be pounced upon and ravaged by the majority of heathens whom she might pass; she is described as “a young girl walking barefoot and carrying upon her head a cloth bundle that hung to either side like a great soft hat” (203). Billy and Boyd offer to accompany her to a nearby destination, but she declines and continues walking, so the boys pass her by, assuming she will arrive to safety sooner than they expected. However, the brothers then encounter “two horsemen on the road riding back the way they’d come who spoke to them briefly out of the darkness and passed on” (205). Instantly, almost instinctually, and with very limited exposure to these men, Billy tells Boyd that they will follow the two men to be sure that they leave the girl alone. Billy’s inherent ability to distinguish the malevolent nature of the men in a mere second of passing them by in the road is what categorizes him as a hero in the text; Edwin T. Arnold denotes the difficulty in sorting out the good from the bad in McCarthy’s fiction: “In none of McCarthy’s novels is the division between good and evil easily distinguished nor are the agents easily identified and cast. It is, however, the state of the soul that is being examined and narrated” (“Name, Knowing, and Nothingness” 54). In this instance, Billy’s soul and ethical presuppositions lead him to an innately astute decision and enable him to discern effectively between the innocent traveler and ominous stranger.

Billy’s intuition is correct, for the brothers find the men holding the girl hostage as they rest at a campfire. One man’s evil nature is gleaned instantly from his description as he rests opposite Billy, confirming Billy’s immediate suspicions: “When [Billy]

looked across the fire the man who was smoking had squatted on his heels and was watching him through the warp of heat with eyes the color of wet coal” (207). The man, characterized here by black eyes and a face distorted by flames, later reveals his intentions concerning the young girl, stating “that if they were old enough to bleed they were old enough to butcher” (209). Billy and Boyd promptly save the girl and escape from the men to the girl’s pueblo down the road, but only after Billy’s quick yet informed decision to go back and look after the girl upon passing the “demonios” earlier.

Characters in both texts routinely make difficult decisions in an inherent yet inexplicable manner, for readers are seldom provided with clarification to support any choice arrived at or action taken by an individual. Such obscurity may be due to the fact that the characters themselves have difficulty in providing a reason for their subsequent choices. Rather than entailing a careful deliberation, characters simply react naturally to a situation, thus aligning the ethical choice more closely with one’s virtuous nature than with a laudable aptitude for logical contemplation. As Billy is attempting to free the she-wolf from the dog fighters, he is asked, “Para qué trajo la loba aquí? De que sirvió?”²¹ [Billy] stood holding the wolf. All waited for him to answer but he had no answer” (118). That Billy cannot answer the question posed to him evidences that he himself has no reason to support his actions; rather, they simply occur innately, outside of the realm of logic or appeal to some function or end. Paul Crowther, in illuminating the ethical side of Kant’s sublime, notes that the inexplicable nature of one’s actions distinctly correlates to one’s moral sublimity: “Thus for Kant, while moral virtue presupposes a feeling of

²¹ Loosely glossed from the Mexican Spanish as “Why was the wolf brought here? For what purpose?”

affection for humanity, this feeling only takes on its distinctively *moral* character when it issues in impartial principles of conduct, rather than *ad hoc* sympathetic responses” (11).²² Billy’s lack of purpose, that he is not using the wolf simply as a means to an end but as an end in and of itself, testifies to his instinctually moral character, and is thus reflective of the true nature of morality and ethics within the sublime.

The boy in *The Road*, who inhabits a divine significance within the text, urges his father to take selfless actions towards others. In the punishing and twisted scenarios of the novel’s landscape, the altruistic individual would not be expected to survive; perhaps the boy’s predilection concerning the welfare of others explains his routine association with godliness and his position as a Christ-like savior. As the boy and his father pass an old man wandering the road, the boy seeks to help the stricken man:

He’s scared, Papa.

I dont think you should touch him.

Maybe we could give him something to eat.

He stood looking off down the road. Damn, he whispered. He looked down at the old man. Perhaps he’d turn into a god and they to trees. All right, he said. (137)

In observing that there is no true “adult” reason to support the father and boy assisting a stranger in an environment as hostile and unforgiving as that which exists in the novel, one might be inclined to dismiss the boy’s desire to accommodate another simply as naivety or inexperience. However, the divine reference made by the father concerning the undefined pronoun *he* (more likely directed at the old man but a possible reference to the

²² Interpreted from the Latin as “for this purpose,” alluding to a more utilitarian basis for decision making; this normative approach is the direct opposite of how characters respond morally when possessing the sublime, according to Crowther.

boy as well) suggests an otherworldly presence informing the father's decision to give food to the old man. Later in the text, the boy seeks to help a man who stole from them, leaving father and son without any supplies or sustenance until they tracked the man down in the road. During their confrontation, the father desires to shoot the man or, at the very least, to take their supplies back and leave the man naked and certain to die in the cold, windy road. The boy, however, is apt to immediately forgive the man and seeks to assist him²³; in an argument with his father about personal responsibility and the extent of altruism, the boy vaguely reveals that he does "have to worry about everything" and that he is "the one" (218). No further explanation is provided concerning this self-imposed label for the boy; the scene instead serves to illustrate both the divine nature of the boy and also the dearth of explication that accompanies any moral decisions made by the sublime mentality.

Kant further elucidates upon his vision of the morally sublime individual as he categorizes such a character in comparison with the savage. In the following passage, Kant references the esteem to which the sublime individual must be held, as well as the intrinsic courage, mental fortitude, and selfless disregard for personal safety that defines such a being:

For what is it that is an *object of the greatest admiration* even to the savage?
Someone who is not frightened, who has no fear, thus *does not shrink before danger but energetically sets to work with full deliberation*. And even in the most civilized circumstances this exceptionally high esteem for the warrior remains,

²³ The boy's instantaneous absolution of the thief is reminiscent of Christ's didacticism concerning retaliation in Matthew 5: 38-42.

only now it is also demanded that he at the same time display all the virtues of peace, gentleness, compassion and *even proper care for his own person, precisely because in this way the incoercibility of his mind by danger can be recognized.*

(*Critique* 146, 5: 263, my emphasis)

The virtuous and moralistic individual envisioned within Kant's sublime will embody such traits without hesitance or intimidation by the challenges he will face because of his actions. There is also a strictly deontological, anti-consequentialist tilt to the sublime individual, for he does not weigh the odds or look to the action's potentially negative results. Rather, he responds intrinsically, replete with a natural disposition towards helping his fellow man in times of danger and uncertainty. In *The Road*, following the father and boy's argument regarding the thief, they attempt to return his personal belongings as night falls on the ashen landscape: "They went up the road calling out in the empty dusk, their voices lost over the darkening shorelands. They stopped and stood with their hands cupped to their mouths, hallooing mindlessly into the waste" (219). In so doing, both characters immediately forsake their personal safety for that of another, this time one who has wronged them and attempted to leave them stranded upon a beach with nothing. The employment of the word *mindlessly* in this passage contrasts the actions of the father and boy with the more grounded and practical leanings of the narrator. The narrator may view the decision as mindless in that it is idiotic and yields to an increased likelihood in alerting dangerous entities lurking on either side of the road at night. Rather than choosing the logically disciplined action, father and boy risk their own lives for

another, thus refusing to consider the probable negative consequences of their altruistic actions in hope of helping an afflicted individual to survive in the relentless darkness.

While the two in *The Road* are not punished by their seemingly ignorant decision to help another, Billy and Boyd venture out early in *The Crossing* and happen upon a vagrant Indian to whom they provide food and other provisions. The Indian, an embittered, sinister, and potentially evil nomad, continues to demand more of the boys, who in turn have difficulty in refusing his requests. Upon discussing the Indian that night, Boyd and Billy have the following conversation:

We ought not to of gone out there to start with, Boyd said.

Billy didnt answer.

Ought we.

No.

Why did we?

I dont know. (12-13)

The sparseness of the language in this exchange hints at the instability and insecurity felt by both young boys concerning their actions with the ominous Indian. That Billy cannot explain why they helped such an individual testifies not to his youth, but to his intrinsically sublime character. Billy, in this sense, is an undaunted philanthropist, one who goes so far as to assist even those who are ungracious for his services. Following his failed quest to Mexico with the she-wolf, Billy returns home to be informed that his parents have been murdered by a group of marauding Indians, the sheriff intimating that the same individual whom Billy helped was among them (167). The idiom commonly

associated with McCarthy's fiction, "No good deed goes unpunished," resurfaces here in the most violent and ruthless manner; however, Billy's intrinsic spirit of altruism emerges as he refuses to seek out his parent's murderers, but instead searches for his brother and the family's stolen horses, thus cementing his establishment within the soulful sublime as he shirks away and rejects a warranted future role as vengeful vigilante.

A telling recognition of morality tends to exist within the smaller and more subtle actions of characters, given the plethora of violence and pain that defines much of McCarthy's literature. Edwin T. Arnold notes that in light of McCarthy's "astonishing approximation of chaos, his grand evocation of the mystery of the world, there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious. There is, in addition, always the possibility of grace and redemption even in the darkest of his tales, although that redemption may require more of his characters than they are ultimately willing to give" ("Naming, Knowing, and Nothingness" 46). While many characters perish in McCarthy's works due to their own ignorance or vice, the protagonists of *The Crossing* and *The Road* tend to exhibit an abnormal sense of right in the face of overwhelming wrong. Such protagonists nevertheless do remain in a punishing realm prone to enchaining and eradicating innocence; hence, the characters, rather than becoming overtly, even obviously (and thus insanely) benevolent, only allow for their magnanimous sides to emerge through minimal yet decisive actions. In one case in *The Crossing*, simple wording between the brothers both reveals the care and concern they have for the peasant Mexican girl and defines them as morally-cognizant individuals positioned among corrupt and seething men. After

rescuing the girl, Billy and Boyd remember the stranger's obscene statement of bleeding and butchering:

Did you hear what he said about her? (Billy)

Yeah. I heard it. (214)

No further words ensue upon the topic, but such a small exchange between two "hardened" cowboys serves to convey the lasting impact that the hostile and grotesque statement had upon the boys (most notably Billy, who raised the topic) and to recognize the boys as opposed to such an evil ideology. In this sense, the boys are specialized and separated from more weathered cowboys who have most likely repeatedly heard and become immune to the impact of such brutal words. In their youthful innocence and alignment with good, Billy and Boyd subtly exist as moral soldiers battling against the pervasive iron fist of evil in the novel, exemplified in this scene by one minimal reference to an earlier comment.

One small action by a secondary character near *The Road's* conclusion ensures the reader of the boy's security following his father's death. The boy, alone and left scavenging the beach, happens across a man in a parka; while he appears to be one of the "good guys," the reader has learned throughout the text that face value amounts to nothing and that appearances and new individuals are never to be trusted. Therefore, in a novel craving some sort of resolution, merely having the boy trust the stranger would not only be outlandish and contrary to the novel's interpretation of humanity, but would result in a harrowing and mysterious conclusion involving an ominous adult stranger with an innocent, benevolent, and divine young boy. Thus, in a sense, the new stranger must

“prove” himself to the reader by his actions and not his potentially deceptive words. Upon ensuring the beloved boy that he would not harm him and that he had a family of his own, the man goes to look for supplies among the boy’s campsite, promising the boy along the way that he would cover his deceased father with a blanket (240). Based upon the novel’s pessimistic rendering of earlier strangers, the man should be expected to steal all of the father’s belongings, including the ragged shoes off his feet, collect any items of value and burn the rest including the father’s body, then lead the boy away where he would steal the boy’s pistol, take the boy prisoner, and so on. However, in the smallest of details, the text communicates to its reader that the man is truly to be trusted and is a proper prospective guardian for the boy. In the scene to follow, the man allows the boy to say farewell to his father, and the narration ensues:

[The boy] walked back into the woods, and knelt beside his father. He was *wrapped in a blanket as the man had promised* and the boy didnt uncover him but he sat beside him and he was crying and he couldnt stop. (240, my emphasis)

While the text seamlessly maintains narrative focus upon the boy, the minute reference to the father’s body covered by a blanket is all that the reader needs to discern and accept the new man as a moral and genuine individual, one suited to protect the divine boy who possesses all hopes for humanity’s future in the text.

An unspoken yet understood code of social morality exists among the individuals in McCarthy, certainly present in the random man adopting the boy in *The Road* but also quite prevalent and directly related to Billy’s survival in *The Crossing*. As he is being

chased by horse thieves while simultaneously carrying his wounded brother Boyd, Billy benefits from the random beneficence of a group of migrant farm workers in a truck:

Tómelo,²⁴ [Billy] called to them. Tomás. The horse stamped and rolled its eyes and a man reached and took the reins and halfhitched them about one of the stakes in the truckbed and other hands reached for the boy and some clambered down into the road to help lift him up. Blood was a condition of their lives and none asked what had befallen him or why. (272)

The workers deliver Boyd to a village where a doctor administers care to him free of charge, even after Billy repeatedly offers the doctor his horse (301, 314). As Billy waits outside of the pueblo for Boyd to heal, he again witnesses the same truckload of workers: “The workers on the bed of the truck waved and some took off their hats and then one of them stood and steadied himself by one hand on the shoulder of his companion and raised one fist in the air and shouted to him. Hay justicia en el mundo,²⁵ he called. Then they all rode on” (318). Following their rescuing Boyd and delivering him to safety, it is almost as if the workers take pride in their selfless allegiance to Billy; such a relationship alludes to an unwritten bond that perseveres between Billy and the workers in their shared role as protectors of Boyd. Phillip A. Snyder calls it the “Cowboy Code”:

While existence in the often inhospitable environments of the Border Trilogy requires a certain degree of survival instinct, the hospitality that also pervades these environments may play as crucial a role in defining them. That great generosity of spirit and sustenance can flourish in such environments embodies

²⁴ “Take him”

²⁵ “There is justice in the world”

the McCarthian sense of grace, made more intense within a western setting where strangers are welcome at the campfire or hearth because, on the frontier, individual survival has always depended on mutual hospitality. (220)

The hospitality of the migrant Mexican workers towards Boyd, a “gringo” stranger to them, alludes to the intrinsic presence of morality among groups of individuals and those in trouble. The Cowboy Code that exists in *The Crossing* is also the Sublime Code, for it is due to the influence of the omnipresent sublime, reflected within the actions of men, that enables such selfless salvation ultimately to become manifested.

Morality and ethical actions are not at all absent in McCarthy’s later fiction, for the presence of the sublime in both works enables characters to strive for an elevated sense of individual self-worth and enlightens their psyches to an altruistic purpose within the text. While the danger of the natural landscape and violent sadism inherent in crooked men may threaten their sanctified humanity, the characters’ belief in a deeper realm of existence and close relation to the sublime grants them a semblance of hope and a persevering will. As they slough through the dismal darkness and ashen or desert terrain towards the slightest beacon of light, the protagonists reserve a moral sensibility that does not break in the harshest or most inhumane of travels.

Cormac McCarthy’s writing grasps a resonance that has both captivated and confounded modern readers for the last half century and counting; there is no doubt that

the author's body of work will continue to fascinate, but how will it be interpreted? Ashley Bourne denotes the changeability and apparent shift that is occurring within the locales and mindsets of McCarthy's works: "This is the tension underlying McCarthy's novels: the desire to reclaim a vision of the mythic West of years past entwined with a pragmatic recognition of the inevitable forces that must sweep the myth away" (124). A principal intention of this thesis is to convey that the literature is not impervious to analysis that employs traditional aesthetic theories as its point of departure. That Kant's sublime can be traced within McCarthy's masterful texts may come as little surprise to one who is familiar with the flexibility and dimensionality of meaning in the author's ten novels. The works, featuring viewpoints that oscillate between the violent and the sacred, embody a depth that has proven both challenging and rewarding for lay readers and critics alike.

The multidimensionality of McCarthy's works yields numerous alleys for interpretative exploration. In promoting the interdisciplinary angle of literary studies, any of Cormac McCarthy's novels are primed for application in the social and behavioral science fields.²⁶ Disciplines such as religious studies and philosophy have already begun to embrace the author's fiction, thus shattering earlier views of the author's worldview as extraneously nihilistic in favor of a much more revisionist interpretation of the American West as well as providing insight into the Gnosticism and likenesses to Heidegger throughout the Border Trilogy specifically. Potential insight into McCarthy's unique brand of Magical Realism retains a blooming possibility for critical inquiry, with the

²⁶ Nuanced elements of the science fiction genre that are present in *The Road*, such as questions into the passage of time, otherworldly powers of the divine subject, and uncontrollable future, seem primed for recent interpretative movements in cognitive criticism and Theory of Mind analysis.

potential to reignite a literary subgenre that remains underexplored and with a significance that extends into Postcolonial and Postmodern theoretical approaches.²⁷ Any branch of knowledge is ripe for application, for the accessibility of Cormac McCarthy's work in relation to multiple critical faculties and veins of interpretation consistently yield original and interdisciplinary readings/publications in the academic sphere.

In the application of Kant's sublime to *The Crossing* and *The Road*, a more optimistic and promising reading of the author's works is plausible, perhaps probable. The glowing centrality that supports the sublime is the idea that fear and intimidation, stemming from physical objects promoting negativity, may be countered with intrinsic mental superiority, always epitomized and realized within the respectable individual. McCarthy's fiction was darkened early by morally bereft and hedonistic characters but it departs from its traditional cynicism regarding human nature and instead incorporates characters that possess honorable and valued virtues. The author trades the incestuous Culla Holme (*Outer Dark*), the necromancer Lester Ballard (*Child of God*), and the brooding Judge Holden (*Blood Meridian*) for the tortured yet amiable Billy Parham of *The Crossing* and the kindhearted, altruistic father and boy of *The Road*. It is as though McCarthy's general view of humankind is shifting as he begins to introduce traits of innocence, tenderness, and selflessness in his protagonists, thus invoking empathy rather

²⁷ Cormac McCarthy is commonly referenced with Magical Realist writers such as Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez, yet the unique manner in which his works engender the aspects of Magical Realism remains unexplored. Perhaps the issue remains that the subgenre has yet to be properly and universally defined; however, critical attention towards the subgenre has been marvelously captured in a few works, most notably including *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Zamora and Faris, Eds., Duke UP, 1995.

than treading in the perilous waters of contempt. Where McCarthy's work loses a few razor sharp teeth, it gains a beating pulse.

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