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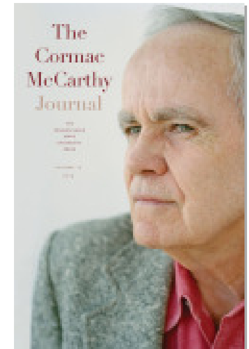

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Dreaming the Border Trilogy

Cormac McCarthy and Narrative Creativity

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ABSTRACT: Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy dramatizes the power of dreams and waking visions to reveal aspects or dimensions of reality that by their very nature seem resistant to language. The Trilogy accomplishes this through its numerous depictions of character dreams and visionary events, but also through unconventional stylistic and narrational features implying that what the reader is encountering in the text is a kind of dreamlike otherworld, translated by its oracular narrator into a more familiar idiom, the "spoken word." McCarthy's thematic interest in the dreamer-storyteller analogy and his distinctive use of a visionary narrative voice throughout the Trilogy challenge any straightforward understanding we might have about the process of narrative creation, which in McCarthy's case (and perhaps more broadly) seems to be characterized by a blurry interaction between creativity and reception, authorship and readership. KEYWORDS: Cormac McCarthy, Border Trilogy, dreams, narrative, style

Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy dramatizes the power of dreams and waking visions to reveal aspects or dimensions of reality that by their very nature seem resistant to language. The Trilogy accomplishes this through its numerous depictions of character dreams and visionary events, but also through unconventional stylistic and narrational features implying that what the reader is encountering in the text is a kind of dreamlike otherworld, translated by its oracular narrator into a more familiar idiom, the "spoken word." We might be inclined to think that the only dreaming going on in the Trilogy is that of the characters, but the foregrounded language and distinctive voicing of the Trilogy's numerous visionary passages consistently announce the ghostly, virtual presence of an ultimate dreamer figure, dreaming the various character-dreamers. This effect is generated by the strong sense of performativity that characterizes McCarthy's narrative voice throughout the Trilogy. As with the highly theatrical interpolated storytellers

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of *The Crossing*, McCarthy's narrator can often be witnessed performing the narration of the Trilogy, *telling* his own visionary acts of *seeing*.

That McCarthy conceives the authorial act of narrative creativity as dream-like in some important sense is suggested by the Trilogy's twin preoccupation with interpolated storytelling and visionary experience, and finally by the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, whose allegory of the dreamer-storyteller invites readers to see the Trilogy narrative as itself the dream of its author. Ultimately, McCarthy's interest in the dreamer-storyteller analogy and his distinctive use of a visionary narrative voice throughout the Trilogy challenge any straightforward understanding we might have about the process of narrative creation, which in McCarthy's case (and perhaps more broadly) seems to be characterized by a blurry interaction between creativity and reception, authorship, and readership.

The Border Trilogy and the Dream Idiom

The thematic importance of dreams and the dream world in the Trilogy is signaled by the first volume's titular reference to a traditional lullaby ("Hushabye, don't you cry, / Go to sleep my little baby. / When you wake you shall have / All the pretty little horses.")—a reference that is echoed by the closing words of the third volume: "You go to sleep now. I'll see you in the morning" (292). It's possible to view the Border Trilogy as structured around a series of dream narratives and visionary episodes, beginning with John Grady Cole's apparition of the lost Comanche nation in the opening pages of *All the Pretty Horses* through Billy's mystical vision of the dead she-wolf running free in the starlit mountains in Part I of *The Crossing*, and finally culminating with the puzzling dream within a dream recounted to Billy by the travelling stranger in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*. A rough count yields about twenty-five dream narratives and visionary episodes across the three novels.

Dreams are richly signifying in McCarthy's work generally, but particularly in the Trilogy, where they serve to advance the plot, develop character interiority, and enhance the thematic and philosophical complexity and richness of the three novels.[1] My concern here, however, is with McCarthy's investment in dreams as an otherworldly, pre- or nonlinguistic source of revelation. Throughout the Trilogy, dreams and visions offer characters mystical insight or an intimate glimpse of the "world itself," from which they are otherwise radically alienated, largely because they depend on helplessly anthropocentric means of engaging with a universe that seems ultimately aloof from humanity's misguided concerns.

At one very interesting turn in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, the unnamed stranger is recounting a moment in the dream of the traveler whom he himself has dreamt. He describes how the serranos in the traveler's dream "seemed to be urging [the traveler] to contemplate his surroundings, the rocks and the mountains, the stars which were belled above them against the eternal blackness of the world's nativity" (280). Here, Billy interrupts the stranger to ask for clarification, "What were they sayin?" The stranger replies, after a short pause:

> There is no way to answer your question. It is not the case that there are small men in your head holding a conversation. There is no sound. So what language is that? In any case this was a deep dream for the dreamer and in such dreams there is a language that is older than the spoken word at all. The idiom is another specie and with it there can be no lie or no dissemblance of the truth. (280-81)

The stranger's emphasis on a prelinguistic dream "idiom" in which "there can be no lie or no dissemblance of the truth" echoes passages from "Whales and Men," the unpublished screenplay McCarthy was working on in the late 1980s, between the publication of *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *All the Pretty Horses* (1992). In the screenplay, the character Peter Gregory asserts that dreams are "prelingual" and provide humans access to a "dialogue" going on continuously between the numerous "lifeforms of this earth"—a dialogue from which humanity has alienated itself through our evolved dependence on language as our primary means of interacting with the world. "Nomenclature is the very soul of secondhandedness," he says, something that alienates humans from the world, and he wonders about a communication between other creatures that humans have excluded themselves from. "Could it be that dialogue which we still sense in dreams?" he asks (57–58). Peter Gregory's expository reflections on the alienating effects of human sign systems resonate throughout the Border Trilogy but find their most concentrated expression in the rural philosophers and prophet figures Billy encounters throughout *The Crossing*.[2] Peter worries that humans no longer live "in the world as given" but instead dwell in a "linguistic model of the world," attached to the names of things rather than the thing itself (57). He sees "all symbolic enterprise as alienation," a kind of "false idol" (58).[3]

The Border Trilogy seems to affirm Peter Gregory's suggestion that in dreams alienated humans are still able to sense their connection, however fragile, with the "world as given." This connection bypasses language altogether and is facilitated by a different "idiom," one "older than the spoken word at all." It is not surprising that silence is a palpable element in most of the Trilogy's dream narratives and visionary episodes.[4]

Dreams in the Trilogy often highlight the incapacity of the spoken or written word to communicate something essential. Early in *The Crossing* Billy dreams of a messenger "with something writ upon a ledgerscrap but he could not read it" (82–83). Not only can the dreaming Billy not make out what is written on the ledgerscrap, but when he looks at the messenger he finds the face of the messenger "obscured in shadow and featureless and he knew that the messenger was messenger alone and could tell him nothing of the news he bore" (83). The illegible writing on the ledgerscrap echoes John Grady's dream in the fourth section of *All the Pretty Horses*, where horses "come upon an antique site" marked with tilted stones upon which, "if anything had been written . . . the weathers had taken it away again" (280). What John Grady "sees" in his dream, the narrator tells us, is that the "order in the horse's heart [is] more durable" than the order written upon the stones, because it is "written in a place where no rain could erase it" (280).

The Dreamer-Storyteller

The Trilogy's interest in dreams reaches its culmination in the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, where Billy Parham, now seventy-eight, encounters an itinerant stranger figure who recounts a dream he had "in the middle" of his life, in which a nameless traveler lies down upon a table of rock in a mountain pass and himself dreams a terrible dream of desolation, temptation, and ritual sacrifice (268). In the interior dream, the traveler sees "descending down through the rocky arroyos a troupe of men bearing torches in the rain and singing some low chant or prayer" (275). The men are seen carrying "upon their shoulders a litter or bier" upon which lies "a young girl with eyes closed and hands crossed upon her breast" (275, 279). The details of the storyteller's dream, and of the traveler's dream within a dream, resonate both backward and forward through the Trilogy, creating an eerie echo effect. The stranger's dream narrative hearkens back to Billy's dream near the end of *The Crossing*, "wherein he saw God's pilgrims laboring upon a darkened verge in the last of the twilight of that day and they seemed to be returning from some deep enterprise that was not of war nor were they yet in flight but rather seemed coming from some labor to which perhaps these and all other things stood subjugate." We are told that a "dark arroyo separated [Billy] from the place where they were going and he looked to see if he could tell by the nature of their implements what it was that they had been about but they carried none and they toiled on in silence against a sky that was darkening all around and then they were gone" (420–21). The traveler's dream also echoes John Grady's earlier dream in

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Cities of the Plain, in which "a young girl in a white gauze dress who lay upon a pallet-board like a sacrificial virgin" is seen "at the center" of a "great confusion of obscene carnival folk" (104, 103). The dream within a dream is then echoed in turn in Billy's final nighttime vision at the end of *Cities,* of "a row of figures struggling and clamoring silently in the wind," who appear "to be dressed in robes" and thought to be mysteriously "laboring toward him across the darkened desert" (289).

At the story level, these intertextual dream echoes bear out the storyteller's insistence on the autonomy of the dream world. Things become uncannier yet when we read the storyteller's remark concerning the traveler's (interior) dream of the troupe of men: "And strange as was their appearance and the mission they seemed bent upon yet they were also oddly familiar. As if he'd seen all this somewhere before" (279). This is striking on multiple levels. First, it suggests a medium-like or telepathic intimacy between the storyteller-dreamer and his dreamt traveler. Though the storyteller insists on the autonomy of the traveler—"This man was not me" (276)—he is nonetheless able to channel the most intimate details of the traveler's consciousness. On a metafictional level, the storyteller's relationship with the dreamt traveler reflects the authorial narrator's relationship in the Trilogy with the main characters, whose consciousness is not so much known through some power of omniscience as it is channeled or voiced through a visionary act. Finally, it is the *reader* who is encouraged to nod in familiar agreement with the traveler's sentiment, "As if he'd seen all this somewhere before." We *do* seem to have seen this somewhere before.

McCarthy's fascination with the blurry relations between the waking and dreaming worlds are reflected in the epilogue's recursive premise of the dream within a dream. McCarthy highlights the reflexivity of these gestures by planting a classical *mise en abyme* figure within the interior dream narrative itself. In the traveler's dream, the figure at the head of the troupe of mysterious torch-bearing figures is described as carrying "a sceptre on the head of which was his own likeness and the likeness carried also such a sceptre in miniature and this sceptre too in what we must imagine to be some unknown infinitude of alternate being and likeness" (275). More than just a clever conceit, this planted figure helps to underscore the seriousness with which McCarthy takes the storyteller-dreamer analogy proposed allegorically in the epilogue.

In the epilogue to *Cities,* much of the discussion between Billy and the stranger centers on the relative autonomy of the man who figures in the stranger's dream. "The proprietary claims of the dreamer upon the dreamt have their limits," the storyteller explains to Billy; "I cannot rob the traveler of his own autonomy lest he vanish altogether" (274). At one point in the discussion an

incredulous Billy asks, "You sure you aint makin all this up." To which the stranger replies, "your question is the very question upon which the story hangs" (277). The man insists repeatedly that he has not "made up" the traveler-dreamer of his dream: "But anyway the dreams of this man were his own dreams. They were distinct from my dream. In my dream the man was lying on his stone asleep" (273). Tracing the allegorical implications of the stranger's commentary, Edwin Arnold has suggested that the epilogue may be read as "a deliberate meditation on the nature of artistic creation, the responsibilities and limitations of the creator, and the independent existence of that which is created" ("First Thoughts" 239). Just as the storyteller in the epilogue insists that his dream-tale (in Arnold's words) "has a life and a morality of its own," so too are McCarthy's options "limited." For authors, as for the traveler-storyteller, "the tale [is] much stronger than the teller" (242).

The metaphor of the author who dreams the fictional worlds he writes into existence appears to have a special hold on McCarthy's imagination. With the stranger's insistence on the autonomy of his dreamt traveler, McCarthy seems to affirm that characters in literary fictions, like figures in dreams, are in some sense autonomous. Authors can't simply make characters do whatever authors would like them to do. The allegorical suggestiveness of the dreamer-author analogy is echoed in comments McCarthy made in his 2007 interview with Oprah Winfrey, where he muses on the idea of writing being a kind of "dictation." He recounts how

> when Henry Miller was working on his second book in Paris after he'd published *Tropic of Cancer* he said he would get up every morning and would go in and sit down at the typewriter and poise his hands over the key, and he would call out in French "*J'ecoute*: I'm listening" and here it would come. . . . He wrote an entire book like that, that was just all dictated, every word.

When Oprah followed up this anecdote by asking if McCarthy did "some form of that," McCarthy replied, "some form, yeah."[5]

In his book *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*, narrative theorist Richard Walsh reflects on the metaphor of the "novelist as medium" as a means of shedding light on the nebulous issue of narrative creativity. Drawing on comments from a range of writers including Sir Walter Scott, Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, Henry James, Elizabeth Bowen, Donald Barthelme, and Alice Walker, Walsh surveys certain kinds of experience "common among novelists" in which "creativity is equated with a loss of narrative control" (11). Walsh's intention is to

"do justice to the persistence with which the experience of narrative creativity is itself conceived as, precisely, transmission—as the mediation rather than the generation of narrative—and by the creators themselves" (130). In this "alternative view of narrative creativity," the

> narrative text is no longer the medium through which a prior authorial intent is transmitted: the author is not a figure *behind* the text, but one on the same side of it as the reader. The novelist as medium is a kind of privileged first reader—privileged with a selectivity and control over the narrative which is analogous to the privilege, in another sphere of narrative creativity, of a lucid dreamer; engaged in a teasing out, an elaboration and development, according to laws or imperatives already in place, but only to be fully unearthed in the process of writing. (131; author's emphasis)

Walsh's account of the novelist as medium, and particularly his notion of the author as "a kind of privileged first reader" resonates with Bert States's phenomenological treatment of the relationship between storytelling and dreaming. States, who has written extensively on the topic, identifies the following as the "deepest enigma of dreaming": "that one can be within a dream, as one is within waking reality, and simultaneously produce the world one is in" ("Authorship" 238). States finds this aspect of dreaming analogous to what happens in the act of literary fiction making. Storytelling, he argues, "springs from the same 'skill' that allows us to dream, and vice versa . . . . [W]hile creating the story the storyteller is, in a manner of speaking, really dreaming under different, if more controlled, circumstances" (239). States cites two phenomena commonly experienced by writers. When a story is going well for a writer, States notes (in terms similar to McCarthy's remarks about Henry Miller in the Oprah interview) that the story often seems to "write itself" and "the writer becomes more like a *secretary* than an author" (239; author's emphasis). In this state, which is characterized by a kind of "double-mindedness," the writer's "awareness of authoring these events is mixed with a sense of actually watching them *taking place* while authoring them: writing and experiencing interpenetrate each other, as in a dream" (239–40; author's emphasis). Secondly, while in this "bracketed state of focused attentiveness" the writer's consciousness of time and space is altered such that the writer takes on a position analogous to the lucid dreamer. If the lucid dreamer is "slightly awake, slightly *outside* the dream, while being largely *inside* it, [the] waking author is slightly asleep, or slightly *inside* the fiction while being largely *outside* it" (240; author's emphasis).

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States is interested in exploring what we might learn about fiction writing, or storytelling, from dreams, which he calls "the ur-form of all fiction" (*Dreaming* 3). From this perspective he is led to emphasize the analogous way in which conception and experience, "authorship" and "readership," appear to "interpenetrate each other" in both the act of dreaming and the act of fiction writing ("Authorship" 240).

McCarthy's Visionary Narrator

One of the chief distinguishing features of the so-called omniscient narrator in literary fiction is the ability to enter the thoughts of characters. McCarthy frequently narrates character dreams in his work, even though he generally resists the conventional narratorial prerogative of representing the discursive thoughts of his characters. In this regard, the narratorial agent of the Trilogy is in a position more like a dreamer who dreams of another dreamer dreaming. (McCarthy seems to prefer that model of entering another consciousness to the convention whereby narrators access the waking thoughts of their characters through a God-like omniscience.) I propose the term "Visionary Narrator" for the narrating agency in the Border Trilogy.[6] Not only does it fit the dreamer-storyteller analogy celebrated in the epilogue to *Cities* as well as the dreamlike atmosphere of the world readers meet in the Trilogy, it also shifts the emphasis of narratorial metaphors from the realm of knowledge and mastery to one of vision and revelation.

In the earliest published study of *Cities of the Plain*, Arnold mused: "to what extent is the ultimate dreamer revealed in this Epilogue to be McCarthy himself, attempting to explain or justify the story he is now concluding?" ("First Thoughts" 242). Arnold's comment is atypical insofar as it indulges the epilogue's implicit invitation to view the Border Trilogy as an authorial dream narrative. (For the most part critics have read the dream narration of the epilogue to *Cities* as a figurative device used by McCarthy to reflect upon broader philosophical or thematic concerns.) The metafictional gestures of the epilogue as well as certain stylistic and narratorial techniques McCarthy employs throughout the Border Trilogy suggest that McCarthy sees the authorial act of narrative creativity as dream-like in some more than merely metaphorical sense. Cumulatively, these techniques generate a strong readerly sense that the story world of the Border Trilogy is a kind of dream world.[7]

Richard Walsh points out that the function of the narrator in conventional narratological thinking is "to allow the narrative to be read as something

known rather than something imagined, something reported as fact rather than something told as fiction" (73). The "narrator" enables the readerly pretense that the story world encountered in a piece of literary fiction is "real." In the Border Trilogy McCarthy plays tricks with the traditional notion of the narrator as one who knows. McCarthy's unconventional narrational and stylistic techniques give the effect of a narrator who *envisions* the story world rather than merely reporting on it.[8]

We see this played out in the following, much-noted passage from the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*:

> He rode where he would always choose to ride, out where the western fork of the old Comanche road . . . passed through the westernmost section of the ranch and you could see the faint trace of it bearing south. . . . At the hour he'd always choose when the shadows were long and the ancient road was shaped before him in the rose and canted light like a dream of the past where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited and each armed for war which was their life and the women and children and women with children at their breasts all of them pledged in blood and redeemable in blood only. When the wind was in the north you could hear them, the horses and the breath of the horses and the horses' hooves that were shod in rawhide and the rattle of lances and the constant drag of the travois poles in the sand like the passing of some enormous serpent and the young boys naked on wild horses jaunty as circus riders and hazing wild horses before them and the dogs trotting with their tongues aloll and foot-slaves following half naked and sorely burdened and above all the low chant of their traveling song which the riders sang as they rode, nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and all remembrance like a grail the sum of their secular and transitory and violent lives. (5)

Ostensibly, this passage describes a recurrent experience of John Grady's, in which he sees, as if in a vision, the passing of the old Comanches out of the north. However, the focalization of the passage de-centers John Grady as the "seeing" agent. In fact the only explicit reference to acts of perception are linked to a second-person address: "you could see the faint trace of [the road]"; "you could hear them." The deictic clues that might help establish a fixed time at which the image is being perceived are also vague.[9] The vision seems perennial, but virtual—always potentially there to be seen if the right viewer is present.

This effect is reinforced by the sleight-of-hand way that the image of the ghost Comanche tribe appears upon the scene. Here is where it happens in the text: "like a dream of the past *where the painted ponies and the riders of that lost nation came down out of the north* with their faces chalked and their long hair plaited" (5; emphasis added).

Nonetheless, the vision itself is delivered with striking vividness. Add to this vividness the sense of an intense, fixated attentiveness on the narrating agent's part, one highlighted by the hypnotic rhythm of the paratactic prose, and the way the tonal register gradually rises to a lyrical crescendo at the end of the passage. The visionary experience is as much the narrator's as it is John Grady's. And the second-person references call attention to the fact that it is finally also as much the reader's too.

This passage dramatizes the epilogue's allegory of a storyteller who dreams a dreamer. But the striking displacement of John Grady as the central visionary agent here is ultimately suggestive of the epilogue's more radical conceit—that *every* sight and sound in the Trilogy is a kind of visionary event, the whole of which is beheld and then translated into the spoken word by the authorial narrator. This implies a unitary subjectivity at work across the three novels of the Border Trilogy. Some might resist this idea because of the stylistic variation that distinguishes the novels from one another; however, I would suggest that the sense of a common oracular voice "speaking" across the Trilogy transcends the linguistic differences we may perceive at the level of individual sentences or between the individual novels.

Oracular Narration and the Translation Effect

At play in the reader's engagement with the story world of the Trilogy is a "translation effect" whereby certain stylistic and narrational features produce a sense that what the reader is encountering in the text is a dreamlike otherworld that has been translated into a more familiar idiom, the "spoken word." The effect is generated by McCarthy's distinctive narratorial voice, which becomes more pronounced, more audible, precisely in passages depicting pre-language dream narratives and visionary episodes. Taken as a whole, these visionary passages create the effect of an oracular narrating agent who is able to see the dreams of the characters and then voices them for the benefit of the listener/reader. Ultimately, however, the oracular voice that we associate most directly with dreams and visionary episodes may be heard throughout much of the narration, well beyond character visionary passages—particularly in McCarthy's

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frequent use of a highly stylized indirect discourse and in his penchant for simile constructions ("as if," "looked like," "looked as if").

Here are two passages, both dream narratives, one from *All the Pretty Horses* and one from *The Crossing*:

> That night he dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wild-flowers out of the ground and the flowers ran all blue and yellow far as the eye could see and in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses and they coursed the young mares and fillies over the plain where their rich bay and their rich chestnut colors shone in the sun and the young colts ran with their dams and trampled down the flowers in a haze of pollen that hung in the sun like powdered gold and they ran he and the horses out along the high mesas where the ground resounded under their running hooves and they flowed and changed and ran and their manes and tails blew off of them like spume and there was nothing else at all in that high world and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised. (*All the Pretty Horses* 161–62)

> He slept and as he slept he dreamt and the dream was of his father and in the dream his father was afoot and lost in the desert. In the dying light of that day he could see his father's eyes. His father stood looking toward the west where the sun had gone and where the wind was rising out of the darkness. The small sands in that waste was all there was for the wind to move and it moved with a constant migratory seething upon itself. As if in its ultimate granulation the world sought some stay against its own eternal wheeling. His father's eyes searched the coming of the night in the deepening redness beyond the rim of the world and those eyes seemed to contemplate with a terrible equanimity the cold and the dark and the silence that moved upon him and then all was dark and all was swallowed up and in the silence he heard somewhere a solitary bell that tolled and ceased and then he woke. (*The Crossing* 112)

As illustrated in these passages, one of the most distinctive features of the Trilogy's dream narratives is the way they sound. Though dream narratives in the Trilogy are often introduced by narratorial statements like, "he dreamt," it is McCarthy's conspicuous modulation of narratorial voice that cues a readerly

deictic shift from waking world to dream world. Both of the dream narratives presented above are characterized by a highly musical prose style. John Grady's dream narrative (the first of the two) comprises a single, very long sentence, made up mostly of simple one- or two-syllable words and structured around a series of rhythmically arranged paratactic clauses and phrases joined by the metronomic repetition of "and." The musical quality is enhanced by McCarthy's generous use of repetition and assonance, or internal rhymes and near-rhymes ("plain" and "rains"; "ran with their dams and trampled"; "hung in the sun"; "ground resounded"). McCarthy carefully manipulates the cadence of the narration by sometimes reversing conventional grammatical order and leading with a pronoun followed by its referent, as in: "they coursed the young mares and fillies"; "they ran he and the horses"; "they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare." The second dream narrative (Billy Parham's) shares some stylistic features with the first, including a conspicuous use of repetition, generous parataxis, and a pulsating meter (particularly in the last long sentence). Its tone, like the first, is lyrical and cosmic. But it is also significantly different from the first, lexically, rhetorically, and tonally. Its diction is stranger ("afoot," "small sands") and features more multisyllabic Latinate words ("migratory," "granulation," "equanimity"). And though highly lyrical, like the first, it is much darker, effecting an eerie, apocalyptic mood through its use of ominous imagery and figurative speech ("[wind] moved with a constant migratory seething upon itself"; "as if in its ultimate granulation").

Though different in their individual features, both passages are characterized by a conspicuous stylistic expressivity, rendering them distinctly "audible"—more so than the prose style that predominates in each novel.[10] Consistently throughout the Trilogy, the narration of character dreams and visionary episodes is marked by a self-reflexive foregrounding of narratorial voice; this foregrounding calls attention to a distinctly audible agency behind the narration. In effect, McCarthy's narrator becomes a more overt presence during occasions in the narrative where dream narratives and visionary episodes are being represented. There is something ironic about this, given that most of the dream narratives are depicted as explicitly prelinguistic. Indeed the absence of language is essential to both dream experiences reproduced above. Paradoxically, the overtly audible, high rhetorical narratorial voice in both passages seems designed to call our attention to the otherworldly extraordinariness of the dream, and in some way render it truthfully. Hence, the overt narratorial voice produces a "translation" effect. If narration stripped of narratorial voice tends to produce the sense that a story is telling itself, or is merely being transcribed by the narrator, McCarthy's overt voice signals to the reader that the narrative world of the

Trilogy—which is a kind of dreamworld or otherworld—is being translated into a more intelligible idiom, that of the "spoken word."[11] If we are to see the dream visions narrated in the Trilogy and witness the vision that is the Trilogy's narrative, we must hear the voice of the narratorial idiom into which the dream world of the text has been translated. If it seems odd that we must attend to voice to hear visions, we might liken this paradoxical idea to Guy Schuler's notion, in the screenplay "Whales and Men," that whales "see with sound," and connect this in turn with the "resonance that was like a music" evoked in John Grady's dream.[12]

My proposed metaphor of the "translation effect" resonates with McCarthy's unconventional use of both English and Spanish to narrate his tale. The Trilogy's first instance of Spanish dialogue appears on the second page of *All the Pretty Horses*. Untranslated passages of Spanish dialogue occur throughout the Trilogy, most heavily in *The Crossing*, but with moderate frequency in the first and third volumes as well. Though McCarthy does not refrain from presenting his readers (who may or may not be bilingual) with long stretches of Spanish, he will often render in English phrases and whole sections of dialogue that are presumably spoken in Spanish. (Rhetorically, McCarthy's inclusion of both languages in the Trilogy allows him to present long stretches of English-rendered dialogue as "authentic translations" of speech by Spanish-speaking characters.) For instance, when Billy visits the blind revolutionary and his wife in Part III of *The Crossing*, the blind revolutionary's tale, which is mostly told by his wife, is rendered mostly in English, with snatches of Spanish to remind us that the blind revolutionary and his wife are speaking throughout in their native language: "She said that the blind man had been born of humble origins. Orígenes humildes, she said. She said that he had lost his eyes in the year of our Lord nineteen thirteen in the city of Durango" (275). Here, the reporting in translation seems to be signaled with "that," which is typically used for indirect quotation, whereas the Spanish is identified in direct quotation ("she said"). The blind revolutionary's tale continues for about twenty pages, much of it presented through a "translated," or English-rendered, indirect quotation, though McCarthy often drops the speech tags altogether. Here is a passage in which the blind revolutionary is speaking:

> He spoke of the first years of his blindness in which the world about him awaited his movements. He said that men with eyes may select what they wish to see but for the blind the world appears of its own will. He said that for the blind everything was abruptly at hand, that nothing ever announced its approach. Origins and destinations became but rumors.

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> To move is to abut against the world. Sit quietly and it vanishes. En mis primeros años de la oscuridad pensé que la ceguedad fué una forma de la muerte. Estuve equivocado. Al perder la vista es como un sueño de caída. Se piensa que no hay ningún fondo de este abismo. Se cae y cae. La luz retrocede. La memoria de la luz. La memoria del mundo. De su propia cara. De la carantoña.[13] (291)

Here the speech reporting style of the passage moves by stages from a rather distanced indirect quotation, rendered in English and with speech tags ("He spoke of . . . He said that. . . He said that. . ."), to a free indirect discourse rendered in English, but without speech tags ("Origins and destinations . . ."), and finally to a free direct discourse in Spanish ("En mis primeros años . . ."). The stylistic movement in this passage from an indirect reporting of "translated" speech, to a direct transcription of the character's "actual" words reflects the evolving tone of the blind man's reflections, which become increasingly more intimate as the monologue continues and the paragraph moves to a close.

McCarthy demonstrates an exquisite degree of control in orchestrating the shifting movements between Spanish and "translated" English throughout the Trilogy. We see this in another representative passage; this time it is *The Crossing*'s *gitano* speaking:

> After a while the gypsy continued. *He said that* he'd thought at one time that the client wished simply to have the aircraft as a memento. He whose son's bones were themselves long scattered on the sierra. Now his thought was different. *He said that* as long as the airplane remained in the mountains then its history was of a piece. Suspended in time. Its presence on the mountain was its whole story frozen in a single image for all to contemplate. The client thought and he thought rightly that could he remove that wreckage from where it lay year after year in rain and snow and sun then and then only could he bleed it of its power to commandeer his dreams. The gypsy gestured with one hand in a slow suave gesture. La historia del hijo termina en las montañas, he said. Y por allá queda la realidad de él. (405–06; emphasis added)

This passage presents two other distinct features related to McCarthy's handling of indirect quotation in the Trilogy. As we see here, the "translated" English speech is itself highly stylized and distinctly audible—not just as human speech, but audible in the sense I elaborated above. Namely, the narrator is not simply

translating Spanish speech in a merely instrumental way; the artfulness of the voice suggests translation of a different kind, from some dream idiom into the spoken word. The narrator's stylized voice indicates the revelatory, or visionary import of the tale that Billy is being offered here.

Also contributing to the stylized expressivity of the narrator's indirect discourse here is the repetitive use of "he said that." Given McCarthy's strict disavowal of speech tags in representing character dialogue, it is easy to see that their function here has more to do with how they contribute to the overall rhythm and music of the passage; their orchestrated repetition lends the passage a ritual feel, consonant with the prophetic mode of the tale.

On the whole, McCarthy's interpolated storytellers, whether Spanish or English speakers, reinforce the analogy of the dreamer-storyteller suggested by the epilogue insofar as their own acts of storytelling display a trance-like involvement in the tale they are telling. Here Bert States helpfully suggests that storytelling "might be thought of as an altered state of waking consciousness. It is to waking consciousness, perhaps, what lucid dreaming . . . is to normal dreaming. In either case, there is a certain sense of out-of-bodiness, of transcendence, or 'aboveness' and a certain godlike, or pantheistic power to be both inside and outside the fiction at the same time" ("Authorship" 239). This mesmeric effect of the tale upon the teller is reflected in the three major interpolated narratives of *The Crossing*, by the ex-Mormon, the blind revolutionary and his wife, and the *gitano*, but also in passages representing smaller episodes of character storytelling.[14] Like a lucid dreamer, who is both in and out of her dream, each storyteller seems to dwell ambiguously both inside and outside of a story world they simultaneously inhabit and create in the telling of it.

The final stylistic feature of McCarthy's narratorial voice that I would like to highlight is his striking use of simile constructions that suggest a groping for words to do justice to a scene, event, or vision that is experienced by the narratorial agent as elusive, resistant to language, or in some way mysterious or incommunicable. McCarthy's use of such simile constructions ("like," "like some," "looked like," "as if," "looked as if," "seemed") is overly abundant throughout the Trilogy, especially in *The Crossing*. Here is a sampling of short excerpts from across the Trilogy:

> He walked out on the prairie and stood holding his hat like some supplicant to the darkness over them all and he stood there for a long time. (*ATPH* 3)

> The charro stood looking out down the barn bay. He looked like an extra in a stageplay reciting his only lines. (*ATPH* 261)

> [H]e looked to be truing some older, some subtler instrument. Astrolabe or sextant. Like a man bent at fixing himself someway in the world. Bent on trying by arc or chord the space between his being and the world that was. (C 22)

> He looked fourteen going on some age that never was. He looked as if he'd been sitting there and God had made the trees and rocks around him. He looked like his own reincarnation and then his own again. (C 177)

> [T]he little light that [the flame] afforded waxed and waned and threatened to expire entirely. The three of them bent over the poor pallet where the boy lay looked like ritual assassins. (C 309)

> Then they sat in the road with the white line running past their elbows and the gaudy desert night overhead, the myriad constellations moving upon the blackness subtly as sealife, and they worked with the dull red shape of rubber in their laps, squatting like tailors or menders of nets. (*COTP* 32)

> The blind man turned his face up and smiled at the space alongside John Grady. As if some unseen double stood there. (*COTP* 86)

> He took a long slow pull on the cigar. He made a strange and graceful gesture with the hand that held it, turning it in an arc and holding it palm up. As if it cupped something unseen. Or were accustomed to holding something now absent. (*COTP* 131)

> [Eduardo] stopped in his tracks and turned and started back the other way. He looked like an actor pacing a stage. At times he hardly seemed to notice the boy. (*COTP* 249)

Each of these passages, of course, has its own local significance, but stripping them of their context makes it easier to hear the distinctive voice resonating through them all.[15] In each case the ghostly presence of the visionary narrator is evoked through the voice of the narration. Some of the passages might be construed as internally focalized (i.e., by a character) to some degree, but ultimately, each passage is finally attributable to an external focalizing agent—one who often seems at pains to communicate or translate the sense of some peculiar,

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sometimes portentous, usually mysteriously significant (and often unseen), gesture or detail in the story world. Ultimately, the story world of the Border Trilogy comes across as strange and otherworldly—indeed, as dream-like—to the narrator as it is to the alienated protagonists, whose repeated ventures into Mexico from the United States are experienced as journeys into a world whose utter foreignness proves finally unimaginable to them both.

Such considerations lead us to a final thought. In each of the instances quoted above, a foregrounded simile gives the narrator's external focalization a self-reflexive quality. Here we don't just see the scene, we *envision* it in the sense of seeing it "as if" it looked a certain peculiar way. The effect of passages such as this, together with the other stylistic features I have highlighted throughout the article, is to introduce a degree of mediation in the narration that quietly disrupts the focused reader's natural state of immersion in the narrative world. At such moments readers may have the sense that what we are "seeing" as we read is a strange, otherworld witnessed firsthand by a narrator, or indeed, "dreaming" author, who is now transmitting it to us. This conception of the Trilogy's author as "a kind of privileged first reader" located on the same side of the narrative as the reader rather than "behind" it in turn feeds back into the Trilogy's thematic emphasis on the world as a tale (C 154), insofar as it invites readers to see themselves as co-witnesses to a narrative whose life transcends the language through which it is conveyed.

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NOTES

1. Edwin Arnold has carefully traced McCarthy's use of the dream motif from his early novels through the Border Trilogy. Arnold finds in the dream episodes spanning McCarthy's work crucial evidence that his characters, contrary to some critics' assertions, do "experience intense feelings and fears and conflicts" ("Dreams and Visions" 39). He points out that McCarthy's views about dreams are decidedly more Jungian than Freudian and generally serve to "remind us of what we fail to apprehend in our daily existence" (67), thus opening up new "experiential possibilities" (38) and "a different way of seeing the world(s), of finding our place therein" (67).

2. This idea first emerges in the wolf trapper Don Arnulfo's cryptic remarks to Billy about the unknowability of the wolf: "Between [the acts of men] 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" (46). Later, in the town of Bacerac, Billy and Boyd listen to a group of locals philosophizing about maps and their relative virtues. One of the men suggests that, "anyway it was not so much a question of a correct map but of any map at all. He said that in that country were fires and earthquakes and floods and that one needed to know the country itself and not simply the landmarks therein" (184–85). This sentiment is taken up later and more insistently by the Yaqui indian gerente, Quijada: "The world has no name, he said. The names of the cerros and the sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us" (387). Finally, in the closing pages of the novel, the *gitano* who heals Billy's horse tells how, reflecting on photographs collected by his father, he gradually came to see that "Every representation was an idol. Every likeness a heresy. In their images they had thought to find some small immortality but oblivion cannot be appeased" (413).

3. Drawing on passages from both "Whales and Men" and *The Crossing*, Dianne Luce has suggested that "[f]or McCarthy, 'the thing itself' carries connotations of truth, ultimate essence, the sacred heart of things that inspires reverence, and he implies that humans access the thing itself only by transcending the obstacles posed by artifact, language, and physical sense in moments of spiritual insight that constitute a direct and immediate apperception of the 'world as given'" ("The Road and the Matrix" 208–09).

4. Toward the end of Part I in *The Crossing*, Billy dreams about his father "afoot and lost in the desert." To the dreaming Billy, the eyes of his father "seemed to contemplate with a terrible equanimity the cold and the dark and the silence that moved upon him and then all was dark and all was swallowed up and in the silence he heard somewhere a solitary bell that tolled and ceased" (112). To the unwitting Billy, who doesn't yet know of his father's murder, the exaggerated silence of his father in the dream and of the dream landscape, contrasted with the solitary tolling bell, are themselves communicative, portentous of news to come. In *All the Pretty Horses*, when John Grady dreams of Blevins in Saltillo, we read that, "Blevins came to sit beside him and they talked of what it was like to be dead and Blevins said it was like nothing at all and he believed him" (225). Twice, Billy dreams of his brother in *The Crossing*, addressing him on both occasions, only for Boyd to remain silent (326, 400). Billy also dreams of his long-dead sister passing the house, but when he calls out to her, "she did not turn or answer him but only passed on down that empty road in infinite sadness and infinite loss" (*COTP* 265–66). Similarly, in the ex-priest's recounting of the old pensioner's dream of God weaving the world, we read that, "Spoken to He did not answer. Called to did not hear" (C 149).

5. McCarthy goes on in the interview to discuss the role dreams have played in helping scientists solve particularly intractable problems. He cites two anecdotes. The first, about the German chemist Friedrich August Kekulé, who apparently discovered the ring structure of benzene in a dream, and the second about an MIT mathematician who, through a dreamt conversation with John Nash (made famous in the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*), wakes up and finds he has solved a difficult math problem that had stumped him.

It is worth pointing out here that the epilogue's analogy of the dreamer-storyteller echoes the tradition of the medieval dream vision, embodied most famously in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Hearkening back to medieval sources, McCarthy's interest in the dream-within-a-dream motif in the epilogue to *Cities* is surely a nod toward the traditional allegorical trope of human life as oneiric experience (Broncano 105).

6. As is the case for most non-first-person narratives, this visionary narrator that I am proposing is not presented in the text per se, but is rather intuited by readers in response to certain narrative and stylistic cues—cues that in the Border Trilogy are most prominently associated with McCarthy's distinctive narratorial voice. The visionary narrator of the Trilogy is ultimately a readerly construction, a more or less unitary "voice" heard throughout the text. As a subjective agency, the narratorial persona is not strictly distinguishable from the author, Cormac McCarthy. Nor need it be. To some extent, the allegorical gestures of the epilogue encourage an awareness on the reader's part of the Trilogy's ultimate storyteller figure—its author, McCarthy himself.

7. Some of this "dream world" effect has to do with McCarthy's intensely visual prose style. He has long been praised by critics and reviewers for his powers of sensory description and for his uncanny ability to captivate the visual imagination of readers, to evoke dream-like visions in the readerly mind's eye. Yet, McCarthy's style may be characterized as "visionary" in another sense. Critics and readers of McCarthy frequently comment on the dreamlike, or strange otherworldly atmosphere of his texts, or invoke dreamlike or visionary language when attempting to describe certain effects produced by McCarthy's writing style. Edwin Arnold suggests that reading McCarthy's novels "is an experience not quite real. We are never in the present world, neither in time nor history." For all McCarthy's scrupulous attention to streets, towns, distances, and dates, "there is nonetheless always the sense that this is some world never quite our own." Arnold even goes so far as to muse, "It may be that all of Cormac McCarthy's writings constitute a prolonged dream" ("Dreams" 38). Arnold's comments are borne out in part, though with different emphases, by the testimony of other critics. Dianne Luce has suggested that *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian* may be read as book-length "dream-narratives" in which "the life experiences of the male protagonists are largely presented as gnostic or purgatorial nightmares" (*Reading* 93). In her reading of *Suttree*, Luce notes how the strange night journey of the italicized prologue and powerful last paragraph of the novel's epilogue together frame the novel's main action as "on one level, a dream within a dream or a dream of a dream, harking back to *Outer Dark* and anticipating the complex epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*" (*Reading* 204). Focusing on McCarthy's narrational techniques in *Blood Meridian*, Thomas Pughe explores how McCarthy's writing achieves a "visionary quality" or a "visionary rhetoric" that renders much of the novel "apocalyptic" in tone (373). And Kenneth Lincoln, a reader closely attuned to the otherworldly in McCarthy, comments on the author's "visionary hyperrealism," his tendency to push "the natural credence of things to lurid depths, giddy heights, and ironic abruptions," in a manner "shared by dreamers, visionaries, poets, mad and holy men" (19). See also my "Reading Visions and Visionary Reading in *Blood Meridian*."

8. The narratologist Seymour Chatman argues that the conventional third-person narrator "is a reporter, not an 'observer' of the story world in the sense of literally witnessing it" (142). He continues, "The narrator can only report events: he does not literally 'see' them at the moment of speaking them. The heterodiegetic narrator *never* saw the events because he/she/it never occupied the story world" (144; author's emphasis). The prospect of a "visionary narrator" that I'm proposing allows us to imagine—from a readerly perspective, rather than Chatman's structuralist perspective—how it is that the narrator of the Border Trilogy could be said to "see" the story world without being an actor within it.

9. Stephen Tatum has highlighted the "spectral" quality of this passage and its ambiguous focalization (126).

10. The distinctly audible narratorial "voice" I am proposing here overlaps to some extent with Nancy Kreml's notion of a marked "opaque" style in McCarthy, characterized by a complex syntax, a wide ranging lexicon, "pronounced prosody," and a prominent use of figurative language (42–43). Kreml contrasts this with a second stylistic register, a plain unforegrounded "transparent" style, featuring basic syntax, mostly concrete and simple nouns and verbs, few

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adjectives, and few metaphors and similes. The difference, however, between my discussion of narratorial voice and Kreml's discussion of a dual style, is that Kreml's is linguistically based, and rigorously textual, whereas the "voice" that I'm evoking here is a textual *effect* ultimately construed by the reader. My discussion of narrative voice in this article, and particularly in this section, owes much to Richard Aczel's essay, "Hearing Voices in Narrative Texts."

11. Where McCarthy's narratorial voice is least present, most effaced, is in dialogue passages featuring his protagonists. Those passages seem to the reader like purely transcribed speech, all the more so given McCarthy's tendency to not use speech tags. In such passages, the Trilogy's visionary narrator all but disappears for a time.

12. In the screenplay, as in the Trilogy, the relationship animals share with the world is contrasted sharply with the alienated experience of humans. The screenplay explores this contrast in terms of the radically disparate modes of being-in-the-world associated with whales and humans respectively. The character Guy Schuler, a marine biologist, reflects on the fundamental inaccessibility of whales to humans, emphasizing also the whale's intrinsic harmony with "the world." He notes that whales "see with sound," which humans might wish to translate, but "it's not that kind of language. . . . For a whale the name and the thing are the same" (93–94).

These reflections anticipate the more lyrical, mystical reflections of Don Arnulfo, in his remarks to Billy about the wolf, who is for humans, "una cosa incognoscible": "The wolf is made the way the world is made," he concludes. "You cannot touch the world" (*C* 45, 46).

13. Translation: In my first years of darkness I thought that blindness was a form of death. I was mistaken. Losing sight is like a dream of falling. I thought that there was no bottom to the abyss. One falls and falls. The light recedes. The memory of the light. The memory of the world. Of your own face. Of your own ugly face.

14. Here are two shorter passages from *Cities*, where we have a character acting in storytelling mode. In both cases, McCarthy's stylized use of indirect discourse signals the "altered state of waking consciousness" (States) experienced by the characters in their storytelling:

> [Mr. Johnson] sat looking at the table. He talked for a long time. He named the towns and villages. The mud pueblos. The executions against the mud walls sprayed with new blood over the dried black of the old and the fine powdered clay sifting down from the bulletholes in the wall after the men had fallen and the slow drift of riflesmoke and the corpses stacked in the streets or piled into the woodenwheeled carretas trundling over the cobbles or over the dirt roads to the nameless graves. . . . And the small artillery pieces on wheels that scooted backwards in the street at every round and had to be retrieved and the endless riding of horses to their deaths bearing flags or banners or the tentlike tapestries painted with portraits of the Virgin carried on poles into battle as if the mother of God herself were authoress of all that calamity and mayhem and madness. (*COTP* 64–65)

> He told her about working for the hacendado at Cuatro Ciénegas and about the man's daughter and the last time he saw her and about being in the prison in Saltillo and about the scar on his face that he had promised to tell her about and never had. He told her about seeing his mother on stage at the Majestic Theatre in San Antonio Texas and about the times that he and his father used to ride in the hills north of San Angelo and about his grandfather and the ranch and the Comanche trail that ran through the western sections and how he would ride that trail in the moonlight in the fall of the year when he was a boy and the ghosts of the Comanches would pass all about him on their way to the other world again and again for a thing once set in motion has no ending in this world until the last witness has passed. (*COTP* 205)

15. Christine Chollier presents a fascinating, powerful reading of McCarthy's "omnipresent" similes (130) and other "modalizations" in *The Crossing*, which resonates with my own. Chollier notes how ultimately, in this resolutely "anti-anthropocentric" novel where "[a]uthorial narration is everything but omniscient," narrational shifts to external focalization are used only "to increase mystery, not to lead from secrecy to revelation." As a result, the reader is "barred" from both the character and the author/narrator, and "consequently from the spheres of reference and from that of interpretation" (142). Chollier's reading focuses more on the hermeneutic implications of McCarthy's similes, finding in them evidence of a profound sense of "loss, nescience, and threat" (142) experienced not only by Billy, but also by the reader. However, if we read the Trilogy in light of the epilogue's affirmation of the narrative act, and if we indulge its central analogy of the author-dreamer, it is possible to make a different kind of sense of McCarthy's distinctive stylistic and narrative techniques.

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