

**The Desert and the Void:**

Theology and Philosophy of Cormac McCarthy

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# Introduction

Cormac McCarthy has become one of the most celebrated American novelists of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. McCarthy is a 1966 recipient of the William Faulkner Foundation Award for his notable debut novel *The Orchard Keeper*, and a 1981 recipient of the exclusive MacArthur Foundation genius grant, which is awarded to individuals who display extraordinary originality in any discipline. Over the course of a career that spans six decades, McCarthy has forged a reputation as a literary force by focusing his efforts on grandiose subject matter involving the issues of “life and death” as he puts it. Through his beautiful descriptions of violence, harsh landscapes, and cowboy freedom, McCarthy has cemented himself as both a titan of the Western genre, and a serious writer of important literary fiction.

A willingness to hold the proverbial mirror up to America, and examine the nations dark past, and problematic present, has remained consistent throughout McCarthy’s prolific oeuvre. A seamless combination of American history, folk lore, and taboo subject matter, coupled with the masterful ability to tell a gripping tale, allows space for McCarthy to pontificate and philosophize, creating masterworks out of genre fiction. People existing outside of the societal norms have historically been the focal point of McCarthy’s fiction. Drifters, cowboys, serial killers, and math geniuses, all occupy real estate in the authors mind, and come to life on his pages. Through his exploration of forgotten people, and liminal spaces, like the area surrounding the United States-Mexico Border, McCarthy has woven a dense landscape of supreme narrative, and insightful philosophical, and theological, thought. McCarthy’s work touches on a vast array of topics including the will of man, the nature of violence, the purpose to suffering, and the harsh

beauty of the American West. Beyond the physical world, McCarthy poses major theological questions regarding God, and the nature of such an entity, if it should exist at all.

In the later period of his life, McCarthy took an exciting turn as he began to shift his philosophical thinking and theological approach entirely. In this project, I have divided my thoughts on the career of McCarthy into a number of individual arguments that span a variety of topics on which McCarthy has written. Through the first half of this project, I have chosen to work off of his three novel masterpiece known commonly as The Border Trilogy. The novels that make up the trilogy were written in the authors middle career phase, and they are rife with the sort of thematic elements that have become the cornerstone of McCarthy's major works. I move beyond The Border Trilogy in the second half of the project, and begin to examine the late style of McCarthy through his most recent offering, the novel, *Stella Maris*. In the juxtaposition of the middle and late period styles of McCarthy, I believe there is a fruitful offering in the way of figuring out how, and why, the literary trajectory of Cormac McCarthy shaped out the way that it did. In order to achieve a smooth transition from the very separate styles of literature, I have included a middle section which uses musings of the great thinker, Edward Said, to help understand why a minor artist might release work that is contradictory to their established style as they near the end of their career. In short, I aim to create a map of McCarthy's career. I want to explore his most significant offerings on thought, religion, nature, and then I want to show how and why those ideas changed so drastically at the end of his career.

## **Chapter 1: McCarthy's vision of the West.**

Cormac McCarthy's western vision presents a duality which can seem contradictory on the surface. However, upon closer inspection, there is a clear purpose to the western setting which simultaneously evokes visions of the eternal, and a sense of terminus.

In Chris Dacus's article "The West as a Symbol of Eschaton in Cormac McCarthy" the author connects this notion of contradictory polarity regarding McCarthy's western symbolism to a direct relationship whereby these are not mutually exclusive concepts that contradict each other, rather they share a relationship whereas Dacus states "the two can be seen to compliment each other in such a way that the emergence of one logically entails the other [Dacus, p.2]" The American West was not frivolously chosen as the setting of "The Border Trilogy." McCarthy employs the landscape as an instrument to further challenge the narrative of the text. This means that McCarthy does not simply set these novels in the liminal territory surrounding the Mexico-United States Border without unique purpose. He uses this landscape to create a complex network of literary symbolism, where the land ultimately serves to form a direct connection between the action of the novels in both a narrative and philosophical sense, and the varied, and complicated characters who inhabit both the land and the text. Dacus states in his aforementioned article that McCarthy evokes a strong sense of terminus in The Border Trilogy not only with the text's content but in more structural terms with the precise order of the trilogy's novels. Dacus's central argument states that by borrowing from both eastern and western schools of philosophical thought, McCarthy interprets the west as a symbol of terminus within relation to

eternity. The term eschatology is used by Dacus to indicate the overarching topic of death, judgement, and final destination regarding the characters in the text, but also the philosophical vision which is being expressed in the novels. So when readers think about McCarthy's west in eschatological terms, they are considering the ways in which the setting serves symbolically and literally to inform these notions of terminus.

Furthermore, using Dacus's initial concept of eschatology, and eternity regarding McCarthy's western vision to inform my own ideas about the interplay between setting and theological/ philosophical significance in the trilogy. While Dacus is more concerned with the symbolic elements of the west in McCarthy's writing, regarding their structural significance within historical and philosophical context, the focus is on employing this concept in a more insular sense, examining how these notions of the west as terminus are incorporated into the text, and the nature of their significance contained only to the novels themselves. Whereas Dacus is taking a holistic approach to symbolism that stretches beyond the pages of the Border Trilogy, and takes history into account, this essay intends to examine the western symbolism of McCarthy insofar as it relates to philosophy on the books pages. This will help readers understand McCarthy and his thought at the novelistic level. It is simply a separate focal point, on the same argument that Dacus makes. It is necessary to differentiate between the west as a symbolic space, and as a literal space, which will be important during a brief historical overview, though it is not focused on these matters as closely as Dacus's essay.

Using Dacus's concept of western terminus I will springboard my exploration of setting, which is of major importance in The Border Trilogy. Furthermore, it is imperative to understand

how the use of western symbolism help illustrate theological and philosophical concepts that are ambiguous or even contradictory in nature.

McCarthy is wonderful philosophical thinker. However, he is also a wonderful novelist, and it is important to note that his literature does not serve philosophical or theological ends. An element of McCarthy's writing that truly makes him such a towering literary figure, is his deft ability to intertwine serious thought with beautiful story telling. If McCarthy wished to dedicate his time to philosophy that was independent of his fiction, these novels simply would not have been written. The deep connection that the fictional and philosophical/ theological elements in The Border Trilogy is so smooth, that it can be difficult at times to discern which takes precedence. The beauty of McCarthy, and the reason that it is worthwhile for scholars to explore his work, is that very element.

Dacus points to the specific order of the border trilogy's novels as having some symbolic relevance. He states that "McCarthy's eschatological symbolism in relation to the end of the West by way of a structural interpretation of history and eternity [is] presented in the order of the Border Trilogy [Dacus, pg. 12]." He goes on to elaborate, stating that specific passages in *All the Pretty Horses* which was the novel released firstly, "prepares us for the eschatological movement of history within the Trilogy as a whole and for the movement to the eternal in *The Crossing* as indicated by the title. If we think in terms of history, we are probably closer to the beginning or end of a particular cycle, and so ATPH (although the beginning of the Trilogy) is closer to the end of the historical cycle than TC. The inversion of ATPH and TC either way presents different synoptic perspectives for the reader, from the passage from time to eternity and

then from eternity back to time. Of course, *Cities of the Plain* is at the end regardless, and therefore seems to point toward something important eschatologically. [Dacus, Pg12] This concept is significant regarding McCarthy's penchant towards using structural symbolism, and intertwining it with direct symbolism that exists within the prose itself. So McCarthy is not only writing prose which is symbolic in order to convey these difficult notions of philosophy and theology, but the novels work in a structural sense to better examine these often ambiguous concepts. Readers experience the single story over three novels that exist outside of proper chronological order, and Dacus argues that the purpose of this is to convey to us the story with specific focus on elements of the eternal, and the end. With these notions understood, I am going to closely examine a passage, in order to employ Dacus's tactics to better understand the text. I will also examine the specific implications the western setting imposes upon the text.

Early in *All The Pretty Horses* McCarthy describes a bleak vision of the west that is rife with symbolism. This vision plays well into an examination of setting for the trilogy, and the intentions of the west as McCarthy sees it. "By early evening all the sky to the north had darkened and the spare terrain they trod had turned a neuter gray as far as eye could see. They grouped in the road at the top of a rise and looked back. The storm front towered above them and the wind was cool on their sweating faces. They slumped bleary-eyed in their saddles and looked at one another. Shrouded in the black thunderheads the distant lightning glowed mutely like welding seen through foundry smoke. As if repairs were under way at some flawed place in the iron dark of the world. [McCarthy. Pg.83]" To begin this close reading by stating the manner in which the passage uses the Western landscape to evoke visions of terminus, I would like to draw your attention to the time of day that McCarthy notes. "Early evening" he states, which is to say



plainly that the days end is on the precipice. A subtle, but wholly unambiguous duplication of an end. The boys gather together atop a ridge where they “looked back” over the land behind them. This term “looked back” seems to indicate that the storm coming is symbolically going to destroy the West. In my reading, I see this as a key term in framing the eschatological implications of this passage. Looking back, as one does on something that has ended. Looking back on something from the past. What these characters seek is of course, largely in the past. Subsequently, the notions that are represented by that broad term of “the west” when one discusses McCarthy, are also being made extinct. The terminus nears for the boys who seek freedom on the open land. It’s not safe, and it isn’t easy to survive. Furthermore, the idea of liberation that drives the characters further from their homeland, and deep into Mexican territory, is built on an antiquated premise. It is nearly 1950 as *All The Pretty Horses* is taking place, and it is important to keep the timeframe in mind throughout the reading, because McCarthy weaves a story that can easily feel like it exists outside of time. But at the very core of the ideas of finality that I am inclined to over-express, is the important notion that the end that is approaching is that of the culture the characters wish to partake in. John Grady Cole leaves his home in San Angelo, Texas and rides on horseback into the unknown of the Mexican desert because his way of life is threatened, when his mother sells the farm on which he was raised. The deep yearning for a “cowboys” lifestyle, and all that comes with it is exactly what drives the 16 year old protagonist away from his country. And the overarching conundrum of the novel is that this lifestyle is near extinction in the year 1949. So the storm that arrives, and blackens the western sky as these boys ride deeper into Mexico, and further away from the lives they know, serves as an important reminder that what they seek will not come without consequences, and it may not even exist in the way that they hope.

The next line references the west turning neuter grey, a shade that appears to be an invention of McCarthy's. This is an interesting word choice from a visual standpoint, and not necessarily one that would be expected to accompany the description of hue in the landscape. Upon close examination, one could take neuter to mean neutral, in the sense that it is lacking the ability to reproduce, or infertile. So this west that McCarthy depicts, appears to be ending in the biological sense. It is unable to reproduce, and it cannot sustain life any longer. The night is falling literally and symbolically on the west in this passage. It is the subtle usage of the adjective neuter, that so deftly displays McCarthy's skillful ability to convey important messages in a seemingly covert fashion. The way of life perhaps, western civilization, humanity, all potential targets for the greater scope of what McCarthy ascribes simply to the west in these novels. But nevertheless he intends to show his readers that the end is nearing. McCarthy's characters in *The Border Trilogy* are crusaders, they fight for their freedom on the open land, and it offers them doom in return.

Later in the passage McCarthy compares the optics of the lightning storm, to those of welding in a foundry. The most significant portion of this passage however, is the final line where he describes that symbolic foundry as making repairs in some "flawed" place, in "the iron dark of the world." This sentiment works to show that the visions of terminus described by McCarthy, are perhaps self imposed. It does so by juxtaposing nature, with the cruelties of man. The passage is literally about a storm, When writing about an author who places as much emphasis on will as McCarthy does, it is only appropriate that the ultimate, and final, judgement would be brought upon man, by his own hand. The symbolism evoked by the image of welding, the human physicality of it, and the notion that man has some finite control over nature, is

purposefully imposed upon readers in this section. McCarthy is making a point that nature is unable to be manipulated, and its considerable force is not beholden to human control. This subversion of the man vs. nature conflict emerges as a major theme in *The Border Trilogy*. And often times the harshness of nature that I believe it is reasonable to argue that McCarthy wishes to use this passage to describe the futile nature of man's attempt to manipulate nature, and its ultimate result being terminus. The west plays a key role here as the volatile nature of the land works to show the futility in man's attempt to conquer it. And simultaneously it fits a narrative element which symbolizes terminus and drives the novel deeper into an ultimate culmination of death.

In this passage the west is largely a symbolic space for McCarthy. However, it is not only a symbolic space. It is significant to mention the time period of the novel as correlating directly with the aftermath of WWII. It has long been speculated that the development of nuclear power is a major fixture in the fiction of McCarthy. In this passage the storm, and the Barron bleakness of the west can certainly evoke a nuclear vision. In his 2006 novel *The Road* for which McCarthy won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction, he revisits an apocalyptic, post-nuclear vision of earth. Using that major work as proof that McCarthy has long had nuclear war on his mind, it is reasonable to consider this vision a symbol destruction of an American way of life, and a literal destruction of earth. The grayness that the author depicts is perhaps a cloud of nuclear smoke. The storm, an effect of a demolished environment. Regardless of the more subjective interpretations of individual elements, the major idea here is that the west symbolizes both a tangible and intangible terminus, and it is likely that McCarthy wished to covet both notions in this scene.

On the contrary, this passage works to convey notions of the eternal. The monochromatic tones of nature as described by McCarthy, appearing to stretch forever. The very concept of the foundry as a space where man build, and forms, and becomes strong. The development of civilization is clear in this passage, and it tells the reader that McCarthy has an apt understanding of the eternal. The idea that humanity and the earth are connected, and that we will be always in a headlong war with each other, comes through in this passage. But the vision of eternity which exists here are not as powerful as those of finality. McCarthy creates some struggle like that between good and evil, but conveyed as that between man and nature, or finality and eternity. Ultimately through Dacus's article, and my own close reading I feel that I can reasonably argue that McCarthy uses the western landscape as a symbolic representation of both eternity, and finality. In order for McCarthy to form this concept he employed eastern and western schools of philosophical thought, and created a worthwhile basis for understanding eschatology, and it's purpose within the trilogy. The vision of the west in The Border Trilogy is a vision of a specific time. And it depicts the conclusion to a specific way of life, and point in history.

## Chapter 2: Cosmic Cowboys

In Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* Man's connection with nature emerges as a central theme in the novel. While the western landscape is discernibly harsh, many of McCarthy's characters, and most notably his sixteen year old protagonist, John Grady Cole, are able to recognize, and form a spiritual connection with, the natural beauty of the land. Through McCarthy's musings on nature, and his character's admiration of the natural world, we can begin to uncover the central philosophies that lie beneath the surface of his work. In the, vision of the world depicted by McCarthy in *All the Pretty Horses*, the notion of beauty comes with a price, wherein there is a sort of cosmic tax that is assessed to his characters in exchange for their pursuit of the romantic ideals that they seek. In the passage below, the voice of Cormac McCarthy the writer, shines through the text, and ties together the concept of beauty, and the natural world, with the concept that suffering, and violence, are the necessary elements of the human experience that must be endured in order to achieve some sense of the beautiful.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, a much matured, weathered, and partially defeated John Grady Cole, comes to the realization that the earth's beauty, and perhaps the beauty of life, is not afforded to Man without the enforcement of a cosmic tax. The passage I have selected is integral to understanding John Grady Cole as the heartbeat of the novel, the character whose convictions are interchangeable with those of the book itself, and it is paramount in beginning to decipher the philosophy of *All the Pretty Horses*. "He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of

multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower [McCarthy 404].” John Grady’s thoughts in this passage give much insight in regard to clarifying Man’s relationship with nature in the book. And the purpose of suffering as a cornerstone of McCarthy’s philosophical convictions. John Grady interprets the world as being engaged in a vampiric relationship where beauty feeds off pain. Beyond that, we’re offered this cryptic sort of equation whereby it takes a great deal of pain to produce a small amount of beauty. The blood of multitudes, McCarthy writes, would be exacted for the vision of a single flower. So we can now understand that in McCarthy’s world, beauty exists. Beauty is visceral and powerful in his work, but it’s not abundant, and it can’t exist without suffering. The single flower, in McCarthy’s deft metaphor represents all the world’s beauty. And it is stressed by McCarthy how lopsided the exchange is between the immense violence, and suffering, and the beauty that can be burgeon in its wake.

Cormac McCarthy’s core school of philosophical principles in *All the Pretty Horses* appears to be something like a version of existentialism that is haunted by the phantom of religion. Existentialism is a philosophical concept that stresses the existence of the individual as a free entity that determines their own development through acts of will. The existence of the individual, and their acts of free will are stressed substantially enough to consider McCarthy an existentialist. However, an omnipresent undercurrent in the novel, continues to push the issue of god, and religion, and at times the mystical to the forefront of the novel’s philosophical or theological makeup. I believe this particular passage has more to offer in establishing McCarthy as an existentialist, and someone who is in search of the divine. The metaphorical journey of McCarthy’s passage suggests to me that the individual, or Man, or whoever he is addressing in

this quote, has the capacity to seek beauty, and to suffer as a result. The quote could be easily misinterpreted as something more deterministic, the earth as a mega-machine smelting femur bones and skulls into rose petals. Something separate from the will of the individual could be implied here, but I believe that John Grady Cole, and McCarthy see this as a byproduct of the human condition, and furthermore a byproduct of human behavior. The possibility of beauty in McCarthy's work, comes with the probability of suffering. And characters in the novels learn this quickly. McCarthy's characters live by personal codes of morality that are not comparable to those which would be commonly held in society. These characters, and especially John Grady Cole act freely, and act in the manner that suits their personal convictions. By the end of *All the Pretty Horses* John Grady Cole is a killer, a runaway, an abettor to wanted outlaws. However, McCarthy's romantic vision of the west, and his emphasis placed the personal moral code of the individual, paint John Grady Cole as a monument to justice, a folk hero, someone you would name your kid after.

McCarthy's philosophy is grounded in the existential, it searches for mystical, and it is haunted by religion. To begin to understand it, understand this passage. The prose is mystical, and mysterious, and hauntingly beautiful. The central idea being explored is that suffering is the means by which we extract beauty from life.

McCarthy's work is often mischaracterized as being nihilistic. To say that McCarthy is completely unconcerned with morals would be to misunderstand his intentions. In Vereen Bell's article entitled "The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy" Bell argues that in McCarthy "moral considerations seem not to affect outcome." This is true for McCarthy's work, but I don't

think it's enough to classify it as nihilistic. Bell says that it's an ambiguous sort of nihilism, but I say there is none at all. I think at the core of this novel, is the search for something good, in an otherwise harsh and unforgiving landscape. However, the presence of a nihilistic force in this, or any other McCarthy novel is never truly felt insofar as it takes precedence over those forces of good. McCarthy is always concerned with the journey, and the potential to find something peaceful, or beautiful, amongst the chaos. To argue Bell's point readers must understand a definition of the the word Nihilism. The Oxford English Dictionary describes it as "the rejection of religious and moral principles, in the beliefs that life is meaningless." Even though Bell prefaces his argument with ambiguity, it is evident that there is no reading of McCarthy that is complete devoid of meaning. And there is a stark difference between the idea of moral considerations having no affect on an outcome, and morality being totally irrelevant insofar as it lends to the idea that life has meaning. McCarthy is always in search of the meaning. And he doesn't strike me as the sort of person who would search for something that he was certain did not exist.



### **Chapter 3: Locating a divine presence in The Border Trilogy**

If God exists in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy, it is subservient to the landscape. There is a deep spirituality coursing beneath the surface of these novels, but it exists outside of traditional religious convention. McCarthy's God is strange and cruel, uninterested in forgiveness, (and perhaps uninterested in their creation?) God is a reflection of the land, and the people who inhabit it, and the vastness of the ink black Western night. No trace of piety can be found throughout a thousand combined pages of cosmic-cowboy musings, highbrow philosophy, and eyeball-less wanderers. Rather God is shown to be something that is interconnected with the land and with human behavior. God is the will of man, and the landscape is the cruel setting for his will to be done.

Many characters speak of God in The Border Trilogy, some admit to believing in, or devoting themselves to a Christian God. However, this Christian God mentioned by McCarthy's characters, and the God which is truly at play in the novels are separate entities. This may seem confusing, but I believe the God that McCarthy wishes to present in his text, has little to do with the religious beliefs that his characters are circumstantially beholden to. Early in *The Crossing* McCarthy begins to shed light on his God, which is to say the one true God in The Border Trilogy. In this passage, ideas of McCarthy's nefarious deity and perhaps the notion of man as God, come to light. On the nature of this mysterious entity, McCarthy writes, "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. {McCarthy, pp.35}” In this vision of McCarthy’s God there is a hierarchy at play. It appears to be one where man is God to all that which he destroys, and where the sole purpose of divine power is to exorcise it through bloodshed, and conquest. The will of man is the enigmatic force that resembles in this passage, a creator. In this instance, a creator is a destroyer. McCarthy has a habit of piecing together meaning in cyclical terms, or in this case contradictory terms. He condenses the broad notion of God into something much simpler. God is whatever can destroy. And perhaps creating and destroying are one in the same for McCarthy. Also implied in the text is the notion that nature, and animal, are the greater god to that of man. (Man is the God, that has the capacity to destroy with intent? Unlike nature, animals?) Mankind is the god which has an insatiable and often futile appetite for blood. As justification for the claim in this instance, it is necessary to examine McCarthy beyond the sentence level, and begin to look at grammatical and individual word choices in the passage. The decisions made by McCarthy at the micro level are crucial in supporting his expression of an overarching narrative within the trilogy. Returning to this passage we are reminded of the beast who has long dreamt of man. McCarthy notes humanity here as something distinct from nature, the beast he addresses being the animal, and perhaps the natural world. Very particular word choice in this passage works to separate humanity from all else. McCarthy writes that a malignant lesser god, comes pale, meaning without pigment. This use of the adjective “pale” hints at McCarthy’s understanding of the white man specifically as the most heinous offender amongst all of humanity. Now whether he chose the adjective pale in his description to single out whiteness, or whether man is pale in a more metaphorical sense, perhaps lacking in some integral element of the soul that McCarthy strips down here and equates to a lack of pigment, is ambiguous. It is only clear to me that the

author is doing one of these two things. am inclined however not to ignore the word choice as having such strong connotations within its relationship to skin color, and therefore am willing to argue that McCarthy has not chosen such a specific term in ignorance of its obvious implications. Next McCarthy writes that these pale gods come naked, and alien. Naked meaning without clothes, or perhaps without fur in this case. And alien, meaning foreign, belonging to another country or nation. But the word alien can also be used to obscure, to display a deep, and shifting separation. The alien is unlike it's counterparts. Separate in a way that can not be bridged. Naked is an interesting word choice as well, because it is the one that makes sense only within the specific context of McCarthy's subject in this passage. He is literally writing about animal parts being preserved in jars of chemical liquid. This is not particularly important because the author uses that only the catalyst for a seemingly separate philosophical, and theological point to be made about the nature of man, and god, in relation to the physical world. The word naked here means two things. First, to be naked is to be without clothes, and when comparing humans to animals, as the most literal interpretation of this passage would have McCarthy doing, humans are naked in comparison to those fur swathed creatures. (*The Crossing* specifically deals with wolves, and they are used as a symbol of the manner in which man connects to, and forms a bond with, nature.) But naked also means undisguised, or blatant. It is evident that usage fits equally well into McCarthys writing. Man is the god that has come undisguised. Man's intention was never, and will never be obscured, and it can not be hidden. The nature of destruction is so deeply ingrained within that of humanity that they are one in the same. The destructive nature may not be cloaked. Man is naked in his intentions. Animal is clothed, the natural world has no intentions. The intentions of this creature that McCarthy aptly dehumanizes in his passage is of course the aforementioned destruction. These naked aliens come to slaughter your clan and kin

and route you from your house. Man is violent, and the destruction of not only our fellow man, but the natural world has been an exceedingly popular practice going on 300,000 years.

The last sentence of this passage is perhaps most telling about McCarthy's specific idea of god and its likeness to humanity. He writes that man is a god insatiable, who no measure of blood could appease. It's not often thought the trilogy that such a bleak portrait of man and god is painted so patently. Often the reader of McCarthy is left with sentiments of morality shrouded in ambiguity, or even an understanding of the individual existence as fostering a ubiquitous culture of the self, and the will. Here, McCarthy momentarily abandons that notion in order to clarify that the most reasonable expression of humanity, is one of unfathomable violence, and great unrest. Furthermore, the author claims that man is insatiable, meaning with an appetite that is impossible to satisfy. In this particular instance that appetite is for blood. So in this passage, the claims that McCarthy intends to make about the nature of man, and man's likeness to a cruel god, come into focus on a way that we aren't often exposed to. Man is like god, McCarthy argues, in that both have an insatiable appetite for blood, and for carnage. This notion deviates from the traditional Christian conventions which are at play throughout the interpersonal relationships in the novels. Again, reconfirming that the true god at play in the trilogy, is separate from the Christian god which is mentioned in the text.

There is a marriage between ideas of destruction, humanity, and godliness in this passage. McCarthy is ultimately expressing the idea of a basic core principal, that man is destructive with intent, whereas nature can not be. Man chooses to be like god in his capacity to destroy. Nature is an entity separate from humanity, and the entities that give substance to nature are incapable of cognitive evil. For McCarthy nature is truer to the Christian idea of god. In Christianity god has

the capacity to destroy, and does so within the practice of a sort of mechanical correction of the universe. A balancing of all things. However, the true god at play, is closer to man, something that practices destruction with a sadistic enjoyment. A being whose nature is death. Cracking the surface of the theological expressions of the Border Trilogy means to reconfigure the separate meanings of god within the novels. And it is fairly clear within this passage that McCarthy sees the truest god, as manlike in its appetite for destruction. And the truest man, godlike in his own nature, as a destroyer.

In the title of The Border Trilogy's tertiary novel *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy scholar Steven Frye draws a direct comparison to the Holy Bible. In his explication of the title's origins, and its religious connection, Frye writes, "The title 'Cities of the Plain' is drawn from chapter 19 of the book of Genesis, when—after establishing the covenant with Israel—Abraham attempts to stay God's hand against the iniquitous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But since the cities are bathed in sin, God enacts his justice: 'Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah' but 'it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt.'" The figure of God in this early biblical conception is active and multifaceted, concerned with human virtue and vice, willing both to destroy and redeem.[Frye, pg,139]" Firstly, this is an important point that illustrates how McCarthy is incorporating religious ideas into The Border Trilogy. Never heavy handed are these sentiments. McCarthy is no preacher. But he peppers a deep, and often learned theological perspective into his writing. McCarthy is haunted by religion, and it seems to be the element of his writing that he can't abandon. This biblical allusion also works as a useful allegory for expressing the major theme of destruction that is present throughout all three novels.

Specifically, the destruction of the West. Just as god destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, for trafficking in sin, so too will the American West fall by its own hand. When considering that the plot of *Cities of the Plain* is driven by John Grady's adoration of a Mexican prostitute, the biblical narrative further solidifies itself. Earlier in this section the comparison between man and god, in their ability for destruction was noted. Now, man, and god are literally similar in their penchant for sex workers. And still looking is the biblical notion that we are to be punished by god for indulging in such unholy activities. The punishment that is always in play through these novels, and at the risk of sounding redundant, is a symbolic destruction of the west. This time it is an effect of gods harsh ways, and a direct result of the sin of man. To tie the moving parts of this section together, the main idea can be summarized as such; in *The Border Trilogy*, God is a destructive force, akin to nature, that exorcises its will through the suffering of man. The West, symbolizes the freedom that the characters seek, and the harshness that must be endured in order to achieve it.

#### **Chapter 4: On very Late Style.**

As this project begins to transition away from the western setting, and the romantic idealism of McCarthy's middle period wherein he penned The Border Trilogy, it is necessary to acknowledge the abrupt shift in perspective that is being facilitated. Upon the December, 2022 release of his latest novel *Stella Maris* it became clear to me as a reader of McCarthy, that there are certain philosophical and theological elements of his earlier work that he is leaving behind. In fact, *Stella Maris* completely sets itself apart from the body of work McCarthy has produced over a nearly sixty year career as an author. It does so specifically by departing from his humanistic approach to philosophy, and his traditional approach to theology, and moving into the realm of post-humanist philosophy, and taking a theological approach that poses questions about the nature of reality, and perception, rather than the nature of a deity, and that entities intentions for humankind. The obvious question when encountering a massive shift in the literary style of a nearly ninety year old author, is why. And especially why now. Using Edward Said's book length collection of essays entitled *On Late Style* in order to provide a reasonable explanation as to why McCarthy, at such a senior age, has decided to uproot his philosophical and theological approach to fiction. Said's book is a useful guide for understanding this concept, as the text explores the late style of several major artists throughout history, and the reason for their final works introducing new ideas that emerge as contradictory to those embodied in their earlier offerings.

In Edward Said's final work *On Late Style*, the Palestinian-American thinker, and author, examines the creative contradictions that often define an artists late works. He also touches on

the manner in which the encroaching hand of death seems to impact the work of many artists. As McCarthy shifts from a lifetime of writing deeply humanistic fiction, to his own late style, which is nearly void of humanism from a philosophical perspective, it is important to try and understand why this change has occurred.

With the assistance of Said's brilliant thoughts on lateness in art, and my own understanding of McCarthy's trajectory as a novelist, I will attempt to unearth the reason for the shift, as a predecessor to the analysis of the late text itself.

Said introduces his thoughts on "late style" by way of German philosopher Theodor Adorno, who coined the phrase in a 1937 essay on Beethoven's late works. Though Beethoven obviously represents a singular artist, and therefore a singular perspective on lateness. However, Said's analysis of his work serves as a worthwhile reflection of McCarthy's major shift in subject matter. The important idea to note is that there is a pattern of major artists taking stances that contradict their earlier work as they move nearer to death. On the matter, Said writes "where one would expect serenity and maturity, one instead finds a bristling, difficult, and unyielding—perhaps even inhuman—challenge. "The maturity of the late works," Adorno says, "does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are...not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation [Said, pg.36]" In this passage Said notes that it would be expected of the late period artist to move towards serenity, and maturity. An established figure in their field might not feel inclined to continue exploring the complexities of their craft. With age, and maturity, we might expect serenity to follow. Think of an old man in a rocking chair. His best days are behind him. He's



made his contributions to the world. We might expect him to light his pipe, and blow thin streams of smoke from his lips, while the sun glides from the eastern corner of his porch and disappears behind the darkness of the west. McCarthy didn't do that, and evidently neither did Beethoven. McCarthy spent his late eighties writing a novel that is far more complex than the ten he penned before it. He shifted from a fascination with the American West, and a deep connection to humanity, into the chaos math, platonism, and post-humanism of *Stella Maris*. According to Said, this contradictory stance in lateness is actually a result of a more complete understanding of the world. The incongruities that McCarthy explores in his late work are a reflection of his maturity as a human being. The concept of terminus, courses beneath the surface of *Stella Maris*, just as it does with *All The Pretty Horses*, but the aged McCarthy raises the steaks in his late work. His philosophical approach that once could be read as a finale for the spirit of romantic American idealism, and the cowboy freedom of the west, is now staring deep into the void, and asking readers if the human experiment is approaching a conclusion.

While McCarthy has been no stranger to catastrophe throughout his earlier work, it is important to note that the catastrophic presence in The Border Trilogy was focused on losing a sense of personal freedom. McCarthy used the Bildungsroman template to explore characters who were in search of a unique way of life, that was quickly moving towards extinction. And he used the west as a setting where that kind of freedom just might be possible to attain if you're willing to pay a harsh price. The characters of those novels had real beating hearts. They were not simply representatives of complex ideas, in the way that *Stella Maris's* protagonist Alicia Western is. However, the catastrophic elements of *Stella Maris* raise the steaks once more. A way of life is not the issue at hand in McCarthy's latest novel. Rather, the perception of humans

understanding of reality becomes the philosophical subject at hand. It is an entirely more pessimistic world view, and as you'll read later, one that looks past humanity, and asks us to question the reality of our existence. Using complex mathematical concepts like topos theory, and brain busting philosophical systems like platonism, McCarthy moves beyond the human, and into the purely theoretical, posing larger questions than ever about our relationship with abstract objects, their independence from the physical world, and the implications these concepts have for the human experience. Said notes a distinct example of another artist whose late work embodies catastrophic ideas . On the German maestro's final musical offerings Said notes "Beethoven's late compositions are in fact about "lost totality," and are therefore catastrophic. [Said, pg.37]" "lateness includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness...(And of course, lateness retains in it the late phase of a human life.) [Said, pg.37]" This passage is easily analogous to McCarthy's work in *Stella Maris*. Notice Said's usage of the term "lost totality", as they are used in literary and cultural theory, refer to the possibility and practice of complete, unified closure. Typically associated with social and cultural formations, totalization defines the processes by which disparate and unrelated phenomena are understood in connection with a larger complex totality." [Rice+Kim, *lit theory from 1900-1966*] This fits in well to explain firstly why McCarthy's late work is in fact contradictory to his earlier writing. There is an element of pessimism that runs deeper through *Stella Maris* than any of the Border Trilogy novels. It is reasonable to ascribe this darker view point to something analogous to the lost totality that Said wrote about. In Beethoven's late work the lost totality that is represented in the music is an effect there being "...no transcendence or unity.[Said, pg.36]" While adding in his description of lateness on the whole, that it "retains in it the late phase of a human life. [Said. Pg.37]" Both points that Said poses on lateness can be

seen as relatable to McCarthy's own late work, wherein no transcendence or unity can be found. McCarthy's introduction of platonism, and mathematical philosophy, that by way of platonism is void of humanity, would support Said's claim that lateness is the state which one cannot surpass. From a philosophical, and theological standpoint, McCarthy is at the end of his rope in *Stella Maris*. Since Said tells us that one cannot transcend or lift themselves out of lateness, it is fitting that the latest (and perhaps final) philosophical offering of McCarthy reflects this notion wholeheartedly. In platonism, we are dealing with the concept that there are entities that predate human thought, and will certainly outlast it. McCarthy asks his readers what that means for the human experience, and he seemingly believes that it means humanity is only standing in its own way. In *Stella Maris* he cites the development of the atomic bomb as an example of this. All of the necessary components to create a world destroying weapon have been present for eternity, or at least since the inception of the universe. Humans pluck the components from the void where they have long existed, and they create the capacity for destruction. In McCarthy's late career he sees this as the fault in humanity, whereas in his early and mid career, he viewed humanity as flawed, with the capacity for goodness. This lead him to search for god, as a beacon of that goodness. An entity that allowed for mankind to choose their own fate. Now, these ideas are muted in the authors writing. The goodness that existed at the core of his protagonists in the past is less visible in *Stella Maris*. Perhaps McCarthy feels, at his advanced age, that there is less goodness in the world now, and his writing is a reflection of that notion. The god that he searched for in his earlier work, is now a scientific machine. Man doesn't choose how to be, because everything is already existing, and we merely pull it from wherever it resides in the nothingness of space, and time. There is nothing new under the sun for a ninety year old McCarthy, and even still the sun is setting. This idea significantly dulls the purpose of trafficking

in idealism, or romanticism, or even Humanism, because there is an element of the deterministic, and the pessimistic, overshadowing the ideal. Where there was once heart, there is now math, and science. It looms over the late artist, and he treats it the realization as if he's pulled back the curtain on the Wizard of Oz and found a vessel of flesh and blood where he thought there was magic. A nuts and bolts oxygen sucker, the product of a cataclysmic explosion that let iron from the core of an ancient star into our bloodstream. Everything else was here before, it will remain after. This is for McCarthy the moment of "lost totality" and it is catastrophic to his very being as a writer.

Besides the intangible realizations that Said attributes to lateness, there is the more concrete issue of age. The specific manner in which the nearing of death affects artists work in that period. This idea is actually much easier to grasp for me. As death nears, your perspective on life changes. The major way that we see McCarthy's perspective on life change in his late style, is in his pessimistic attitude regarding the human experience. By which I'm claiming that McCarthy is uncertain of whether our experience as humans is really an experience at all. He seems to think it's more of a failed experiment, wherein we chipped away at the ancient knowledge of the universe, and fashioned the offerings into destruction. Even through the pitch darkness of his early and mid career, the nature of humanity, and reality was never put on the stand, and subjected to McCarthy's hound dog, line of questioning. On the issue of the human experience, all we had to worry about when reading McCarthy prior to December, 2022 is whether we are purposeless sacks of sinew, and calcium, floating through the endlessness of space.

The latest writings of McCarthy, which represent his late style, are more focused on the larger issue of reality. What we really know about ours, and what we may have gotten wrong.

“In Beethoven’s middle-period opera *Fidelio*—the quintessential middle-period work—the idea of humanity is manifest throughout, and with it an idea of a better world. [Said, pg.38]” Said focuses on musicians in *On Late Style*. This passage describes Beethoven’s middle-period work *Fidelio*, which Said notes is rife with humanity, and the idea of a better world. This is a useful tool for understanding McCarthy’s pro human middle-period works, wherein there is a strong current of faith in humanity, and the human experience present throughout the pages. Note that it is a common trajectory for artists to lose faith in the human experience as the age, and to look beyond humanity in their late-period. In this case, just as Beethoven became decidedly less humanistic in his own late-period, McCarthy did the same. Ultimately, there is a natural souring to the human experience that occurs amongst many artists, and when they no longer feel inclined to plumb the depths of the human soul, they still have the urge to create. The result of this process being a late-style that is decidedly post-human.

## Chapter 5: I gotta go see about a girl.

Cormac McCarthy's latest novel *Stella Maris* tells the story of Alicia Western, a twenty year old math prodigy who checks herself into a psychiatric hospital located in Black River Falls, Wisconsin. The novel is set in 1972, and consists entirely of conversations held between Alicia, and her psychiatrist, Dr. Cohen. The novel is a stylistic, and thematic, departure for McCarthy, a now 90 year old author who spends his days haunting a semi-mysterious think tank in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In *Stella Maris*, McCarthy begins to demystify his own lore in a manner which we had not previously seen. The significance of the latest emergence from McCarthy, is that it gives readers insight into the shift in theological, and philosophical, perspective that has occurred over the authors career. While examining the latest, and perhaps last, works of McCarthy, I will also be attempting to unearth the aforementioned shift, and elaborate on the social, and political factors that have perhaps contributed to a stark departure in philosophical, and theological schools of thought from the height of the authors career in the 1980's, to present day. The novel is so dense with metaphysical and epistemological jargon that one can think themselves into a hole while reading it. However, there is a clear path to understanding both the implications of this novel as a singular entity, and the work as a representation of McCarthy's growth as an author, simultaneously.

To begin with the core principles of *Stella Maris*, it is a novel of thought. Not only schools of thought, but the brain as a thinking machine. The human ability to synthesize information, perceive the world, and perhaps the misleading nature of our reality.

Alicia Western, the novel's protagonist is a certainly a thinker. She's a math prodigy, who graduated college at 14 years old, and claims to have read 10,000 books. Her character works throughout much of the novel as something other than a believable 20 year old girl.

In Joy Williams review of the novel for Harper's Magazine she brings this point to light. "Brilliant, beautiful Alice is barely believable as a female human being. And why should she be? She's a quesser, an outlier, a method of inquiry, an experiment maybe, experimented upon like a mink crazed in a lab. [William, pg.2]" This quote is significant mostly because McCarthy is a smooth operator, and it's important to acknowledge that his protagonist is existing with a double purpose, not only driving narrative, compelling readers with a Will Hunting tale of genius that can't be turned off. The curse of thought. But also working as a lab rat for McCarthy, in order to explore a number of themes that exist in a territory previously unexplored by the author. Once we have an understanding of who we are dealing with, evidently a suicidal genius, with a penchant for incest. We can begin to indulge in McCarthy's exploration of mathematics, and their representation of the metaphysical. While conducting research, I happened upon a quote that works to sum up the base layer of thinking for the new math minded McCarthy. The quote is from a paper explaining mathematical metaphysics which was written by Clark Glymore, and Luke Serafin, and it reads as follows, "Quite simply, the position of mathematical metaphysics is that an object exists if and only if it is an element of some mathematical structure. To be is to be a mathematical object. [Glymore, Serafin]." Here we can see the standing of mathematicians, that all life, and every structure is a mathematical object. McCarthy uses this point as a springboard, and he often flirts with rhetoric that is inaccessible to the common reader. Cutting through the math jargon, is usually a more accessible explanation of whatever idea McCarthy is

attempting to frame. For example, early in *Stella Maris* Grothendieck's Topos theory is mentioned by Alicia as a being the field of mathematics that eventually caused her to quit pursuing them altogether. It ultimately isn't important that the reader might have no understanding of the complex theory, because McCarthy reveals how it pertains to the philosophical aspects of the text that he is interested in exploring.

On Alicia's work with Topos Theory, McCarthy writes "Well. In this case it was led by a group of evil and aberrant and wholly malicious partial differential equations who had conspired to usurp their own reality from the questionable circuitry of its creator's brain not unlike the rebellion which Milton describes and to fly their colors as an independent nation unaccountable to God or man alike. Something like that. [McCarthy, pg. 14]" This is the first philosophical examination of a mathematical concept in the novel, and it works to introduce the reader to the understanding of math as something that is alive. In *Stella Maris* mathematics are the deepest and oldest connection to consciousness, and it is inferred in the work that math existed before humans, and before life on earth. There is almost a spirituality to the mathematical path, and as the novel develops, mathematics actually emerge as something akin to God. Note that Western draws a comparison to Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* which tells of man's first disobedience in the garden of Eden, and the loss of paradise as a result. The rebellion Western refers to here is that of Satan, who rebels against god, and forms an army of demons to do so. The analogy wherein mathematical theories are akin to Satan's rebel army shows readers that McCarthy is thinking of the secular in spiritual terms. A passing of the torch is at play here. Where McCarthy has long searched for a spirituality in more traditional terms, or at least in terms of the physical realm, he has now shifted his attention to the mathematical.



There is also an element of foreshadowing in Western's analogy, as McCarthy writes that these equations seek to fly the colors of an independent nation, not beholden to god or man alike. This can be seen as an early example of mathematical Platonism, which emerges later as a significant element of the text. The important idea to note here is that Western has an understanding that mathematical entities can seemingly exist independently of human thought, or Divine intervention. Here we are given our first taste. McCarthy rewires our brain chemistry just a little bit, and we see math as something organic. Alicia personifies the equations she was working on, explains them like trickster gods, undermining her reality, establishing their own. Here math is seen as the element of life that is indistinguishable from the self. From this starting point McCarthy is able to explore a deeper understanding of the connection between the human condition, mathematics, reality, and the origin of consciousness.

Beyond the direct correlation between mathematics and philosophy, McCarthy is turning a new leaf in his school of thought. In *The Border Trilogy*, which was covered earlier in the paper, McCarthy explored a deeply humanistic approach to philosophy, and theology. His characters found purpose in the romantic ideals they coveted, they chased dreams, and their beings hardened when they discovered the cruelties of man. They searched for God in the land, and the natural world, and they bore the burden of great suffering and in that suffering they saw a beautiful spirituality. Everything from McCarthy's earlier works was connected to romance, some notion of love, a tangible connection to the beating hearts of his characters, and their adventures, and their pain. Now, at 90 years of age, McCarthy has left the material world behind. Alicia Western shows up to the mental hospital with \$40,000 in cash, and she tries to give it away to the receptionist. Symbolically, this small gesture, which receives no special attention in

the novel signifies the degree to which McCarthy has relinquished his own mind from the material world. We are now dealing with an author whose questions have more scale than ever before, they dig deeper into the void, attempting to make sense of life, and purpose, and existence. However, at 90 years old, the window of time to answer these questions is closing on McCarthy, and there emerges an urgency from the author. A scramble for the deepest truth in the face of death.

The most significant connection that may be drawn between McCarthy's Border Trilogy period, and his latest work is that he is still very much interested in posing the large scale philosophical questions that his readers have become accustomed to. McCarthy has never stopped searching for the meaning behind it all. But it is completely worthy of investigation that the author who has been called "Louis L'amour with a thesaurus" by Graeme Wood of *The Atlantic*, is dabbling in chaos math. The L'amour joke is funny, but it also reveals a view of McCarthy that I believe has largely been eradicated over the decades. McCarthy as a writer of the western genre. A cowboy scribe, telling vaquero stories, romanticizing hand rolled cigarettes, and rivaling the English with his enticing descriptions of bean-centric breakfasts amongst the backdrop of a smoldering fire. White smoke billowing through the crisp air high in the Sierra Nevadas, or drinking black coffee in the courtyard of a Mexican hotel, a horse that runs forever, the freedom of the West. These are the beautiful images, and perhaps so beautiful that one can get lost in them.

So why Grothendieck? Why Topos Theory, and Oppenheimer, where there was once poetry? We must consider an analytical approach that examines the engine behind philosophical reasoning. This is to say that in the early work of McCarthy, his character were used as a device

in order to create scenarios which explored philosophical arguments and concepts. However those works never questioned the notion of the philosophical thought itself. Throughout the Border Trilogy, McCarthy, the reader, and his characters, all operated under the usual assumption that human beings are innately able to think in a philosophical manner. However in *Stella Maris*, McCarthy focuses his attention to the engine behind philosophical thought, and he begins to attempt to unearth some deep truths about the nature of thought itself.

Mathematics in the novel is juxtaposed with the human condition most significantly insofar as it relates to the development of the atomic bomb during World War II. In the novel's account of America's development of nuclear power in the mid twentieth century, McCarthy largely ascribes the feat to the engine of mathematical development of the physical weapon. Rather than harp on the common ethical dilemma that arises from the development of world destroying technology, McCarthy chooses to approach the philosophical from a mathematical standpoint. I argue that this nuts and bolts approach to philosophizing begins to reveal McCarthy as something of a mathematical ontologist. This means that McCarthy has moved beyond examining philosophy in its common form, and he has begun to explore the structure of philosophy itself. As previously mentioned, Alecia Western's father served as a physicist on the Manhattan Project, and McCarthy makes it clear in the novel that his protagonist is internally at odds with this concept. The bomb, existing simultaneously as perhaps the greatest scientific achievement in history, and the most dangerous. "anyone who doesn't understand that the Manhattan Project is one of the most significant events in human history hasn't been paying attention.[McCarthy, pg.84]" This line of dialogue is spoken by Western when pressed to comment on the issue of the bomb during a therapy session. The passage here is fairly simple to comprehend, and it's also probably true. However, McCarthy refers to the Manhattan Project as being significant in human

history, rather than mathematical or scientific history. Obviously this makes sense because the bomb is a scientific achievement with the capability to impact human lives. The bomb serves as a allegorical device for deepening the readers understanding of the interaction between mathematical achievement and human reasoning. The bomb serves here as both a physical object with real life implications, and a metaphor with philosophical implications. McCarthy doubles down on this notion, claiming that anyone who doesn't understand the significance of the Manhattan Project, simply hasn't been paying attention. So generally speaking, It is significant to note McCarthy's musings on the development of nuclear power in the analytical portion of my argument. The key price of information to take away from this passage, and sentiment, is that McCarthy, though his character, begins to connect mathematical concepts to philosophical ones, using the most significant mathematical achievement in regard to worldwide impact as his catalyst. To create the bomb is a both a mathematical, and philosophical decision. Furthermore the term "create", or "develop" in the context of the novel has a unique meaning. Because the concept of mathematics in *Stella Maris* are expressed as formulaic equations which actually exist in reality, but are often very difficult to discover, the bomb serves as an entity that has existed in the proverbial ether forever, and was unveiled by the human mind, and applied to our unique circumstances.

From our understanding of McCarthy's reframing of philosophical thought, we can begin to approach his investigation into the engine behind philosophical thought in itself. This matter entails his groundbreaking meta-philosophical approach to fiction wherein philosophy itself becomes the subject of philosophical investigation. As much as that may sound like such an ostentatious string of introduction to philosophy buzzwords, there is a concrete idea at the core.

With *Stella Maris* McCarthy uses mathematics as an allegorical tool to try and understand the nature of philosophical thinking as it relates to human existence.

During a particularly philosophical discussion (even for this novel which is rife with such musings) between Alicia and Dr. Cohen, the young mathematician touches on the subject of mathematical platonism. And we begin to see just how hard McCarthy is trying to decipher the void into which he has been staring for some six decades. Dr. Cohen is unsure of this particular subset of mathematical philosophy, and he inquires with one of his usual average-mind/ dumb guy questions that work like a steam engine for McCarthy to bowl his way into the important big brain stuff that he really wants to talk about. “What it sounds like?” Alicia answers, when the therapist asks what exactly a mathematical Platonism is. She is seemingly unable to comprehend individuals who don’t already know everything. Then she breaks it down, in a passage that illustrates the notion that McCarthy is operating in a post-human space, and that he may feel that humanity is no longer worthy of his thoughts at all. On the subject of this tricky concept, Western attempts to clarify in a simple enough manner so that both myself, and Dr. Cohen can possibly comprehend the sentiment. “It supposedly expresses a belief in the existence of mathematical entities independent of the human mind. [McCarthy, pg.86]” We have reached a considerable distillation of the rather amorphous concept at hand. Mathematics that can exist without the human mind. This notion implies that perhaps there are more entities which can exist independent of the human mind. McCarthy’s deft introduction of this theory into his novel is a prime example of his reworking the concept of basic philosophical ideas that he has been probing throughout his career. The mathematical platonism remains an important thematic element throughout the story, where readers are now faced to evaluate this work with the

lingering effects of a sizable bomb that has been dropped on their sense of basic understanding. Are entities of the mind existing without having been discovered by human thought, or is human thought the product of such entities?

Alicia elaborates on the concept later in the therapy session. This time Western and her dim-witted shrink continue the charade of intellectual sparring that has all the upset potential of prime Mike Tyson vs. a third grade child. Alicia's character further develops her explanation of the theory with this clear cut approach, "The power of the theory is still speculative. But it's there. You have a sense that it is waiting quietly with answers to questions that nobody has asked yet.[McCarthy, pg. 92]" This excerpt calls back to the original quote on the matter of platonism in mathematics, and it does a good job of explaining how exactly one can apply the theory to a practical situation. The power of the theory being speculative clarifies that conjecture in both mathematics, and philosophy, can actually aide in the process of discovery. Western refers to answering questions that have yet to be asked. It's a clear image of platonism, the notion that there are properties existing outside of space and time, and that they would behave a certain way or or maintain its specific characteristics regardless of human thought or behavior.

McCarthy implies that there is an infinite amount of discovery that is waiting to be plucked from some place without substance. Some place independent of the universe perhaps. It would not be far fetched to suggest that with this concept, McCarthy is toying with a dubious understanding of our reality. In this context, reality being the suspect of McCarthy's doubt. In order to bolstered this argument, note this passage that precedes these conversations on platonism. Earlier in the novel, when discussing her affinity for music, Alicia speaks about the

qualities that music possesses, and she elaborates by acknowledging that perhaps music possess qualities that we are unaware of. This passage will serve to help readers understand the concept of platonism better through a sort of inversion proposed by the protagonist. “I was deeply synesthetic and I thought that if music had an inherent reality—color and taste—that only a few people could identify, then perhaps it had other attributes yet to be discerned.[McCarthy, pg.50]” This passage uses a framework that most all hearing people can understand, and it subverts that understanding, and introduces new possibilities to a property which most of us probably thought we had a full grasp on. And most importantly it uses a concrete perceptual phenomenon in order to illustrate the point. Synesthesia is the phenomenon wherein stimulation in one cognitive or sensory pathway leads to involuntary experiences in a second cognitive or sensory pathway. For example you may have heard of instances where people hear music, and it causes them to see certain colors in their mind. Or they feel textures that put a certain taste in their mouth.

The nature of philosophical thought becomes the subject of philosophical investigation in *Stella Maris*. As McCarthy doubles and triples down on the frailty of our reality, he relies on ultra complex philosophical concepts that are heavily based in the mathematical arena in order to question the mechanisms behind our thought processes in a manner that is coherent, and at times even convincing.

# Final Words

From Cormac McCarthy's quintessential middle period works *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*, to his latest novel *Stella Maris*, a major shift has occurred in the theological, and philosophical, perspective of the author. What began with my examination of McCarthy's offerings on human nature, and spirituality, tied in with the Western setting of *The Border Trilogy*, has evolved in real time, and morphed into a work that I hope gives readers insight into the career arc of the writer. It is of value to examine the content of McCarthy's writing, as he is a singular voice in contemporary fiction. However, there is equal value in understanding how, and why, a major author changes their views over the course of their career.

In the particular instance of McCarthy's late style, there were biographical elements that may have contributed to the shift from humanism to Platonism. Most notably, McCarthy's connection to The Santa Fe Institute, a math and science oriented think tank where the writer spends much of his free time. The institute claims to focus mainly on what they call "complex adaptive systems." Besides that, there is the element of age, which Said tells us, can in fact have a major influence over an artist's late period work. The nearing of death has perhaps contributed to the shift in McCarthy's perspective as a thinker. He's grown old, and his time on this plain of existence is nearing its end. In this time, many people find god, or religion. That way there's something to look forward to. The after-hours joint for the human race. I believe McCarthy has shown us that he is unsatisfied with what it means to be human based upon the common understanding. There is a cynicism in him, greater now than ever before. And as the sun sets on his time here, it is clear that McCarthy seeks a deeper truth about what it all means. His hunger for this truth, insatiable as ever, but his time frame narrowing rapidly.



Ultimately, this is what has caused the great contradiction in McCarthy's career. The issue amounts to a dissatisfaction with the answers that the author discovered throughout his life as a writer. Though his nature as a thinker caused him to dig deeper, and deeper, it eventually led him to a deconstruction of the ideas that formed the basis of his early and middle career. By the age of ninety, the beauty, the pain, the suffering, and the spirits, had not filled that void of curiosity, and what we got in the end was a departure. A leap into the unknown, and a breakdown of post-human, a pre-universe philosophy. A man of science, who couldn't put his finger on why we're all here, so he decided maybe we never were. McCarthy is no longer "Louis L'Amour with a thesaurus" he's a post-humanist, and a cynical old man. He thinks we blew it big time, and he's not sure if it even matters.

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