

Cormac McCarthy's Romantic Naturalism

Oliver Spivey

Review: *Ungessed Kinships: Naturalism and the Geography of Hope*, by Steven Frye. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2023. Pp. 181. Paperback, \$29.95.

The loss of Cormac McCarthy in June of 2023 signifies the loss of one of the last remaining links to that tragic tradition in American fiction, a tradition which includes—in all their stylistic variability and originality—Hawthorne, Melville, Hemingway, and Faulkner. But McCarthy and his American predecessors may be said to belong to a more ancient literary lineage, despite their writing in a post-Enlightenment culture. The late George Panichas tells us of this “ancient and higher tradition of wisdom”:

For the true novelist the burden of vision and responsibility is imperative and unavoidable. Consequently, in his fictional world we are thrown into a world of good and evil; a world in which moral struggle, loneliness, choice, accompanied by pain and misery and terror, become a transcending and a transforming experience. This experience of moral crisis can be a prelude to moral awareness. Art that provides for this heightening experience belongs to that ancient and higher tradition of wisdom that returns us to the world of the Bible, of Sophocles, of Virgil, of Dante, of Milton.¹

McCarthy's art at its best finds a home among this revered company. And we Americans of the twenty-first century are lucky to have had McCarthy in our midst, working consummately with the vast and venerable inheritance of the English language.

Seldom noted, however, is the way in which “the experience of moral crisis” in McCarthy's fiction owes much to American literary naturalism. In *Ungessed Kinships: Naturalism and the Geography of Hope in Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye—professor of English at California State University, Bakersfield—persuasively argues that McCarthy's novels are indebted to nineteenth- and twentieth-century American naturalist authors like Stephen Crane, Jack London, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser. But the complexity of

¹ George Panichas, *Growing Wings to Overcome Gravity: Criticism and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 199.

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McCarthy's fiction is such that no single, totalizing literary-artistic category can account for it. Knowing this, Frye makes a thoughtful case for McCarthy's naturalist affinities. Naturalism, in its purest sense, "assumes a kind of pessimism with respect to human nature. A natural world governed by the Darwinian principle of natural selection is brutish and indifferent to human suffering. Human beings are determined by chemical forces and are often atavistic, monstrous, and cruel" (5). McCarthy's fictional cosmos contains the "atavistic, monstrous, and cruel" with terrifying clarity. But these realities, though inescapable and immovable, do not define the world in its variety and fullness.

Frye reminds us that naturalism "is a contested category" (5). Like most literary movements and genres, naturalism admits gradations and variations; it is elastic and dynamic, not rigid and static. We should not think of naturalist fiction as characterized solely by pessimism, materialism, and biological and social determinism. By the end of the 1950s, a new generation of critics posited naturalism's relation to other literary traditions (like American romance) and philosophical schools of thought. As Frye explains, these new critics—most notably Donald Pizer and Charles Child Walcutt—came to see naturalism as far more complicated and contradictory, sometimes sounding notes of optimism and affirming the individual. In spite of its presentation of nature as red in tooth and claw, "literary naturalism explores things distinctly human, such as brotherhood, altruistic commitment to the other, and even spiritual awareness" (7). Frye sees McCarthy's corpus as a major contribution to this brand of naturalism: "Beginning with *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) and continuing through *The Road* (2006), a firmly naturalistic vision works in dialectical interaction with a more humanistic and even romantic view of the human condition and the material universe" (9). Across seven chapters, Frye identifies and explicates the "romantic naturalism" in McCarthy's oeuvre.

Frye begins with the early Appalachian novels, whose settings evoke the elemental power and ineffable mystery of the natural world. The characters of *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) inhabit and traverse "a beautiful and ultimately unknowable landscape, embodied with mystery and the numinous, yet defined by the harsh indifference and unmitigated strength of the naturalist worldview" (22). The novel pits human technological advancement against the primordial forces of nature: "Even as the natural world recedes in the face of an advancing technological modernity, the physical laws that govern remain inexorable" (22). Arthur

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Ownby, the aged woodsman, has dedicated his life to maintaining the old ways of coexisting with nature; thus, the novel “reflects sympathy for the forces of reaction, but McCarthy’s tragic vision acknowledges the omnipotence of fate and the portentous reality of time and its ebb and flow” (22). Frye does a fine job illuminating the significance of the novel’s symbolic hawk and panther, but an even more profitable interpretation might have resulted had Frye commented on McCarthy’s apparent borrowings from two literary forbears who also worked in a naturalist idiom: Robinson Jeffers and Walter Van Tilburg Clark. One thinks specifically of Jeffers’s poem “Hurt Hawks” (1928) and Clark’s novel *The Track of the Cat* (1949)—and perhaps Clark’s stories “Hook” and “The Indian Well”—as having influenced the animal symbolism of *The Orchard Keeper*.

McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* (1968) is a continuation of the Gothic-romance novel into the twentieth century, but it is romance overlaid with the preoccupations of literary naturalism. Nature in the novel is alternately hostile and indifferent to human life and ambition. We are witness to a netherworld seemingly bereft of sacred possibility. The emptiness, the sheer silence, of the land itself creates a palpable sense of *absence* throughout the narrative. Characters are always listening, even being commanded to listen, though no one seems sure what it is he or she will hear, or if anything at all will be revealed. According to Frye, “*Outer Dark* is an allegory of sin enacted and punished, guilt obliquely expressed and partially but not adequately expiated. It is also a tale of retribution in a naturalist context, as the world itself, in all its power and indomitability, consigns one young man to a journey universal and without conclusion” (31).

The final two Appalachian novels deepen McCarthy’s naturalist sensibility. *Child of God* (1973) confronts its readers with disquieting questions about human nature. The grotesque Lester Ballard—who in part recalls the protagonists of Frank Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* and *McTeague*—leads a life marked by incest, murder, necrophilia, and overall degeneration. And yet, Frye contends, Ballard “is a figure of sympathy, a victim of the inexorable currents of the modern world” (41). The novel’s title forces us to recognize a troubling kinship with Ballard, who is “a person like any other, darkly and horrifically revealing the potential latent within any human being walking the fallen earth” (48). Once again we notice the naturalistic mingling with the theological.

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In *Suttree* (1979), McCarthy shifts to an urban locale. Frye asserts that the “birth of the modern city was a central concern for American literary naturalists” at the *fin de siècle* (51). For the classic American naturalist writer, “The physical laws that bind the material world were not limited to the wilderness or rural nature. It was in the urban realm that the struggle for survival was most transparent and acute, and the naturalist novel found itself emerging on the teeming and troubled streets of these new American industrial spaces” (51–52). *Suttree*, set on the streets of Knoxville, Tennessee, in the 1950s, is a first-rate example of American urban naturalism. A stylistically baroque novel, arguably rivaling *Blood Meridian* as the author’s highest imaginative achievement, *Suttree* “displays McCarthy’s eye for sensory detail and his personal experience, memory, and meticulous research” (55). Like the earlier novels, but on a grander and more varied canvas, McCarthy’s “distinctive brand of romantic naturalism” comes into focus (59). The inhabitants of the rat-infested underworld of McAnally Flats are not without some sense of a mystery immanent in and transcendent of their material surroundings. Cornelius Suttree’s Knoxville is an urban space both mythic *and* mundane, sacred *and* profane. Even in the seeming wasteland of modern America, McCarthy suggests that “other realities may exist outside the confines of the body, and consciousness itself may be the untraceable and ubiquitous space where the spiritual and the material may meet” (61).

Critics have interpreted—as well as mis- and over-interpreted—*Blood Meridian* in umpteen ways. Frye wisely begins by situating McCarthy’s masterpiece historically and culturally. The national experience of the frontier, starting with the Puritans’ errand into the wilderness, has left its imprint on most of our literature (high and low). *Blood Meridian* draws nourishment from frontier lore and the Western genre; in this way, the novel is uniquely American. But *Blood Meridian*, as Frye demonstrates, is also a brilliant blend of literary forms extending from antiquity through the twentieth century: epic, tragedy, pastoral, biblical parable, the picaresque, the travel narrative, Gothic, and much else. The creative convergence of these forms and genres invests the work with a timeless gravitas, establishing the high seriousness involved in the novel’s main conflict: Judge Holden’s attempt to win the Kid’s soul by converting him to belief in “the ultimate divinity of war” (70).

The devilish figure of the Judge—one of literature’s greatest villains—embodies various naturalistic themes in a complex way: “The judge is by no means only the voice of an

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indifferent nature; instead, the extremes of his position suggest that at the heart of the natural world is blood and a cycle of death and decimation. The judge's naturalism is polyvalent and ambiguous. Nature is not merely unconcerned but is active and destructive" (71). Accordingly, the novel may be read, in its Dostoevskian dialectic between the Judge and the Kid, as a search for "meaning, purpose, and value in the material universe broadly construed" (71). While Frye examines many of the novel's most celebrated moments, he also lingers over some commonly ignored passages and scenes. For instance, in taking the time to explicate the Kid's encounter with a hermit who ponders the mystery and limitations of the human mind, Frye again reveals the spiritual import of McCarthy's romantic naturalism: "For the hermit, 'mystery' is central to any pursuit of wisdom. This same recognition informs a more complex and nuanced naturalistic perspective in McCarthy's vision, one that acknowledges that materiality must remain our primary frame of reference, even as we hope to glimpse realms that exist at the edge of knowing" (75).

The later major works are also given careful attention. Frye skillfully covers the Border Trilogy—*All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)—detailing the ways in which the novels continue to develop McCarthy's romantic naturalism. America's Southwestern border provides a suggestive setting for McCarthy's investigations into the natural world and the nature of man. Within this "intermediary realm," John Grady Cole and Billy Parham embark on multiple journeys which "involve a universal quest for place and identity within a harsh and unforgiving land" (81). The collision between the ideal and the real, between the world as it is and as we wish it to be, gives a novel like *All the Pretty Horses* its tragic force. And yet, amid the bleak realities of things as they are, nature—internal and external, human and non-human—hums with mystery. As in the previous novels, "not all is comprehensible by the limited frame of understanding permitted by the human intellect" (103).

The naturalistic basis of *No Country for Old Men* (2005) is evident enough. Frye maintains that the novel "explores the historical presence and defining nature of violence in the natural world, as well as the role of human agency in mitigating a process of cause and effect that is frequently unconcerned with its consequences in destruction and suffering" (121). Frye rightly places Sheriff Ed Tom Bell at the moral center of the novel. Bell is only partially unreliable as a narrator. If his nostalgic longing for a past free of extreme violence is

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illusory—as the conversation with his Uncle Ellis would seem to bear out—his moral code and sense of decency, along with his gratitude for his marriage, function as a stay against human violence and nature’s indifference. In Frye’s words, “Bell’s apparent conservatism is predicated on a tension between his emerging recognition of a brutal and determined world and his skepticism of a completely amoral nature” (123). Bell’s dream of reuniting with his father by a fire in the cosmological darkness is perhaps McCarthy’s way of suggesting—if I may borrow words from Emily Dickinson—that this world is not the conclusion.

The postapocalyptic nightmare of *The Road* (2006) lends itself well to an exploration of naturalistic themes. Amid the ruins of civilization, “the species is reduced to its bestial essence and a man and a boy must seek redemption” (129). The likely culprit of this worldwide calamity, despite never being made explicit, is human evil (nuclear war or possibly environmental catastrophe). One of Frye’s most compelling points is that “the man and the boy must struggle with the same impulses that broadly applied may have led to their situation in the first place” (130). The man must deal with his own aggressive nature (he is willing to kill anyone or anything that threatens him or the boy). The child, symbolically father to the man, must try to deter the man’s worst impulses. We might think of the man, says Frye, “as nature itself made conscious, and his inner conflict might best be characterized as a struggle with Satan that is mythological and figurative but nevertheless practically manifest in the man’s darkest survival impulses” (130). The ash-covered landscape seems devoid of anything approximating the divine, but “the novel is full of the sacred and sacramental, which is expressed in the unvarnished use of religious language that may owe something to McCarthy’s Catholic upbringing” (133). Moreover, McCarthy’s recurrent image of fire bearing reinforces a sense of the sacred, even though “any concept of the transcendent is inextricably bound to the material world” (136). In this most extreme rendering of a cold and unfeeling universe, McCarthy’s romantic naturalism never abandons the human capacity for hope.

Although well written and cogently argued, Frye’s study has a major structural shortcoming. Why did Frye or the editors think it necessary to insert lengthy overviews of the critical literature in each chapter? One sees the benefit in summarizing the critical dialogue, but these overviews tend to come at the most inopportune moments, interrupting Frye’s own ideas and arguments. Most of these could have been reduced to a short paragraph

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or simply consigned to the end notes. There are times, one regrets to say, when the overviews give the impression of an attempt to pad out underdeveloped chapters (and this also applies to the needless summaries of each novel).

But this drawback does not lessen the fact that Frye has written an enlightening study of an American master. Avoiding the inane race-gender-sexuality obsession of contemporary literary and cultural criticism, Frye plumbs the depths of artistic genius. McCarthy's novels will never cease to fascinate us because they belong to that ancient and higher tradition of wisdom that poses the oldest and profoundest human questions: questions about the moral nature of man, fate and free will, God's presence or absence, the abundant mystery of the natural world, and the possibility of transcendence.

Oliver Spivey

Oliver Spivey holds a Ph.D. in English from Oklahoma State University. His abiding interests include American literature, British/Western canonical literature, traditional Anglo-American literary criticism, mid-twentieth-century film and cultural criticism, and classic cinema. He has published in The University Bookman, VoegelinView, Academic Questions, Areo Magazine, Literary Matters, and The New Oxford Review. He teaches literature, rhetoric, and great ideas at Sandhills Classical Christian School near Pinehurst, North Carolina, where he lives with his wife and two boys.