Exploration of Subtle Representation of 'Sacred Theme' in Cormac McCarthy's Novels

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Abstract: The terminologies pertaining to sacredness and spirituality are intertwined with one another and the very word has been the source of revolution in a great variety of ways, as both religious and secularity has become a part and parcel of life. When associated with religion, the term is practically inextricable from "God" and the myriad concepts connected with a belief in a higher power that guides, directs, and rewards human beings for leading a life in accordance with religious principles. From a secular perspective, the term is aligned with the workings of the mind, the senses, and the perceived material and, in some cases, immaterial world. This paper aims to explore the sacred realms represented in Cormac McCarthy's novels.

Index Terms – **Sacredness, Cormac McCarthy,** *No Country for Old Men, Cities of the Plain*, *The Crossing.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sacredness and spirituality are the terminologies that are intertwined with one another and the very word has been the source of revolution in a great variety of ways, as both religious and secularity has become a part and parcel of life. For instance, the American transcendentalists used spirituality as a special mark of those superior intellects able to perceive a reality beyond the material world, a world of the "sacred" which is not necessarily dependent on the physical senses to interpret. Evangelical Christianity reserves the term to describe tender religious emotions, while, in contrast, the French have appropriated it as the name for the finer perceptions of life, which implies a firm link with the material evidence of reality around us. Various derivatives of the term include spiritual, spiritualism, spiritualist, spiritism, and the spirit, all words implying slightly more nuanced interpretations of the disconnect between the perceived reality of the physical world and a conceived reality of a realm beyond it—one that is not relative to, nor dependent on, the senses reacting in conjunction with the mind. However the exact meaning of 'Sacredness' has been considerably drifted from the religious perspective into something much more ubiquitous and condescending to the earthly relationships and love, over the years.

The paper intends to delve deeper into the various nuances and thematic styles that are beautifully handled by the author in emanating the sacred theme to the readers. This unique expression of McCarthy in exposing the divination/sacredness in his works via employing time and again in forms of 'augury,' 'cartomancy,' 'haruspicy,' 'voodoo,' 'oneiromancy' and 'sortition' as all such elements were brought into life in the forms of texts, that overtly or otherwise representation of sacredness by sacrifice and bloodshed. But mantic practices which aim at an understanding of the divine mind prove problematic in a universe that often appears godless—or worse.

II. 'SACREDNESS'- ELUCIDATED

A wider array of trajectory could be traced in the case of McCarthy's perspective on the subjects pertaining to the sacredness and its association with mysticism in his earliest works- *Suttree*, *The Orchard Keeper*, and *Outer Dark*- all deal, in decreasing degree, with witchcraft. Sarah Iles Johnston defines the sacredness as "a sort of failed magician" (Johnston 18), the distinction between the two forms being the matter of engagement: The witch claims control, whereas the diviner merely claims vision. In *Witches in Fact and Fantasy*, Lauran Paine argues: "the witch, although interested [in sacredness], was more concerned with affecting change" (Paine 140).

Characters like Mother She in *Suttree*, then, as well as the offstage hag who enlightens Uncle Ather in *The Orchard Keeper,* and even the "geechee nigger witch" mentioned early in *Outer Dark* (10)—all are incarnations of this empowered, world-changing mantic force. Although the role of sorcerer is either muted or lost in the parodic novels *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, it resurfaces with a vengeance in the character of Judge Holden, that supernatural charlatan who bends cosmic forces—as well as coins and tarot cards—to his own ends in *Blood Meridian*. However, the passive power of divination takes over in the elegiac *Border Trilogy*, as both Mexican mystics and the main characters helplessly watch the disintegration of their worlds, despite the prophetic vision afforded them in dreams.

But in the final two novels, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, McCarthy reverts to the most primitive forms of divination found in the Jaynesean model: sortilege and omen reading, respectively. The movement to pre-conscious man is completed in the final novel as one sees Ely, the dubious, Chaplinesque post-prophet shake the dust from his feet and shamble into

his brave new world of nihilism. In the spare diction and radioactive irony of these last novels, only the slightest suggestion of mystical power remains. Sacredness provides an apt starting point for a close reading of each of McCarthy's novels. Research into Babylonian, Greek, Roman and African soothsaying practices is illuminating in this connection; it will not be used, however, to slavishly construct a detailed and spurious congruence between the novels and such practices. The insights of such McCarthy scholars as Rich Wallach, Edwin T. Arnold, Dianne C. Luce, Stephen Frye, Matthew Guinn, Vereen Bell, Christopher Metress and others also bring his work into focus as they relate to exegesis of the "otherworldly" element of the texts. But the work of extra-literary scholars such as Julian Jaynes, Marie Louise von Franz, Walter Burkert and René Girard— philologists, Jungian psychologists, cultural anthropologists and religious historians whose works explore the origins of human violence and the spiritual impulse—will also shed light on McCarthy's evolving perspective.

III. SORTILEGE

As most of its critics have noted, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) is a radical departure from everything that precedes it in McCarthy's oeuvre. Gone are the lyrical passages of the *Border Trilogy*; gone are the curious, vatic pronouncements of the nameless narrator found in all his earlier novels. In place of the psychologically opaque antihero comes Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, a man whose every rumination, self-doubt and act of cowardice is catalogued for the benefit of an unidentified confessor. These passages are a clever twist on the first-person musings of detectives in classic crime novels, as Steven Frye observes: "The monologue deals with the intricacies and personal tension of a man attempting to understand the power of violence in a changing world, and it does so in deliberate homage to the hard---boiled novels of the noir genre, particularly in the hands of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Jonathan Latimer, and Erle Stanley Gardner" (Frye, *Understanding* 159).

In this sense, the novel may be seen as a logical continuation of the elegiac content of the *Border Trilogy*, written in a style so sparse as to make it initially unrecognizable as McCarthy's work. One of McCarthy's main concerns, however, quickly makes itself evident again: the concern with reading the divine will. The device employed in *No Country* is the ancient practice variously known as sortilege, sortition, or cleromancy—or perhaps the less ancient one known as numismatomancy, i.e. "coin divination." All the terms denote the casting of lots in an effort to determine a course of action, often based on the simple binary "yes" or "no" system in answer to questions about the future.

IV. ANTIQUITY OF DIVINATION

4.1. URIM AND THUMMIM

Julian Jaynes discusses the antiquity of the practice: "The earliest mention of throwing lots appears to be in legal tablets dating from the middle of the second millennium B. C., but it is only toward its end that the practice becomes widespread in important decisions" (Jaynes 241). Although the practice of sortilege took many forms, including "throwing marked sticks, stones, bones, or beans upon the ground, or picking one out of a group held in a bowl, or tossing such markers into the lap of a tunic until one fell out" (Jaynes 239), the "yes" or "no" result is in keeping with the more modern form of coin tossing—the form used in the novel.

Some of the oldest *Bible* books refer to the ancient Hebrew version of sortilege, involving the use of mysterious objects referred to as the Urim and Thummim, often translated as "lights and perfections" (Muss-Arnolt 193). The most helpful of the handful of biblical references to the Urim and Thummim can be found at "I Samuel 14:41": "Then Saul asked the Lord God of Israel, 'Why haven't you answered your servant today? If the wrongdoing is mine or my son Jonathan's, respond with Urim, but if the wrongdoing belongs to your people Israel, respond with Thummim. Jonathan and Saul were taken by lot, and the troops were cleared." Not only does this indicate that the two terms represented contrasting answers, it also shows that the diviner could "call" the meaning of the result before casting the lot, much as one might call heads or tails before a coin toss. Scholars have posited various theories about the nature of the objects used, most of which center around gems, meteorites, or colored stones: "The Urim and Thummim were two objects used in the lot—perhaps stones of different colours . . . one of which gave the affirmative, the other gave the negative, answer to a question put in the form already indicated" (Muss-Arnolt 195, quoting H. W. Smith).

It is important to note that only the high priest was qualified to cast lots with these objects, and that he kept them on his person: "The 'Urim and Thummim' were simply two stones put into the pocket attached to the high priest's ephod; on them were written some such words as 'yes' and 'no.' Whichever stone was taken out, the . . . word upon it was looked upon as the divine decision" (Muss---Arnolt 203, quoting Davies). There is general agreement that such tablets were not for private use, but were reserved for sacred persons and sacred functions: "In ancient times the priestly oracle of Urim and Thummim was a sacred lot" (Muss---Arnolt 201, quoting Robertson); "[t]heir presence is indicated obliquely by mention of the Ephod or a *High Priest* in a situation of community distress when divine guidance is imperative" (Hurowitz 265, emphasis added).

4.2. TABLETS OF JUDGEMENT

Some mystery still surrounds the origin of the Urim and Thummim, with some scholars arguing for Babylonian origin while others imagine some source common to both the Hebrews and Babylonians, such as Akkad or Sumer. The Babylonians had the equivalent of the Urim and Thummim, called *Tablets of Destiny* or *Tablets of Judgment*: "The tablets of judgment are furthermore mentioned in the primitive mythology of the Babylonians. We read in a text discovered in Assurbanipal's library . . . [a] passage which mentions a tablet of judgment worn by the *high priest* and used for divination" (Carus 379, emphasis added).

Once again, use of the tablets was reserved for the high priest who acted in an official capacity as representative of the state. "The possession of the *Tablets of Destiny* . . . carried with it, according to Babylonian belief, the supremacy among the gods and absolute dominion over mankind" (Muss-Arnolt 207).

Such dominion naturally extended even to life and death. As Joshua 7 indicates, the result of a sacred lot could be a God-and-state-sanctioned execution. In that book, Israel has recently lost in battle, and Joshua learns the reason for Yahweh's disfavor: one of the people has taken gold as spoils of war, rather than devoting everything to destruction as required. The people are told to "consecrate themselves" in verse 13, and in verse 14 they are subjected to a sacred casting of lots—tribe by tribe, clan by

clan, family by family, and man by man—until the culprit is identified. The final verse of the chapter relates the result: "Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger" (Joshua 7:25 *New International Version*). The entire family is obliterated so that the sanctity of the community may remain intact.

At the beginning of *Cities of the Plain*, Billy Parham asks John Grady: "If everybody went crazy together nobody would notice, what do you think?" (11). Although the question is somewhat flippant, its significance in the trilogy is undeniable—the world "aint the same" and "it never will be" after the world wars (11). With no access to any absolute reality, there is no way to gauge the level of universal insanity.

Grady and Parham, having suffered their separate tragedies in the first two novels, come together to the rationality and relative permanence of Mac McGovern's ranch. But that ranch is about to be taken over by the army (264). Hanging above the two in scene after scene are the hieroglyphics of a vanished people, chiseled into the ancient rocks as though to remind us of the impermanence of everything below: "There were ancient pictographs among the rocks, engravings of animals and moons and men and lost hieroglyphics whose meaning no man would ever know" (49); "the petroglyphs carved there by other hunters a thousand years before" (87); "they passed under pictographs upon the rimland boulders that bore images of hunter and shaman and meetingfires and desert sheep all picked into the rock a thousand years and more" (165); "They crossed the gravel slide and rode under the old shamans and the ledgerless arcana inscribed upon those outsize tablets (171)." Although these are indecipherable, they are what remains of the aborigines: a written record. From the beginning of the trilogy, the Comanche have existed as ghosts passing through the land, dislocated in time but still somehow real. Now they are relegated to unreadable words, the shells of thoughts.

V. SACRIFICIAL PERSONA

Once again, Cole's dreams give him a glimpse of reality. He falls in love with Magdalena at first sight, but while he can have no waking access to the sordid world in which she exists, he is given a vision of that world: "He dreamt that night of things he'd heard and that were so although she'd never spoke of them . . . .[O]bscene carnival folk, painted whores with their breasts exposed, a fat woman in black leather with a whip, a pair of youths in ecclesiastical robes . . . a young girl in a white gauze dress who lay upon a palletboard like a sacrificial virgin" (103-4). The girl can be none other than Magdalena herself, whose youth and beauty are being sacrificed in the capitalistic carnival of a Mexican whorehouse. The dream scene bears a symbolic resemblance to the scene at the beginning of *The Crossing* in which Billy's she-wolf is sacrificed for the pleasure of a crowd in a circus. Interestingly, Cole's dream contains an image drawn directly from one of Billy's: he sees "a goat with gilded horns and hooves who wore a ruff of purple crepe" (103-4), the ironic word "who" rather than "which" giving some indication that we should view the goat as symbolizing a person. Billy has seen this selfsame goat in a dream in *The Crossing*: "He saw a goat with golden horns tethered in a field of mud" (*C* 326), but here the key is its tethering, which conjures the image of the wolf chained in the circus's fighting pit. The goat is a traditional object of biblical sacrifice, from Leviticus through the "sheep and goats" of Matthew 25, and so is an appropriate dream image for sacrificial victims like Magdalena and the wolf. The golden horns may represent capitalism's view of these victims as commodities. Billy cannot compete with the money the circus is making on the wolf's pit fight, any more than Cole can compete with the money Eduardo is making on Magdalena (although Cole does try, foolishly, to purchase the prostitute). Their fates are tragedies of capitalism. But more importantly, the fact that Billy and John Grady see the same golden-horned goat representing victims implies their dream access to the collective unconscious.

VI. GHOST METAPHOR

Another element of Cole's dream that coincides with one of Billy's is the windswept desert in which the dead appear to exist: "He was alone in some bleak landscape where the wind blew without abatement and where the presence of those who had gone before still lingered in the darkness about" (104). This bears a striking resemblance to Billy's prophetic vision of his dead father: "[I]n the dream his father was afoot and lost in the desert . . . .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" (*C* 112).

McCarthy reminds us of the fleeting nature of the tangible world and the permanence of the intangible, reversing their primacy. He does this through use of ghosts as a metaphor. Whereas Billy has seen "the ghosts of wolves running in the whiteness" (*C* 31), and John Grady has seen "the ghosts of the Comanches" as a boy (205), now the ghosts are the living: Cole sees "[a] tall woman in a diaphanous gown pass[ing] through the salon like the ghost of a whore" (66), and later the senile Mr. Johnson wanders at night in "his long white unionsuit . . . like the ghost of some ancient waddy" (104). The blind man Cole asks to be padrino to Magdalena says of the doomed bride: "My belief is that she is at best a visitor. At best. She does not belong here. Among us" (81), a vatic pronouncement that seems to recognize her proper identity as ghost in the same way Cole's dream recognizes her as virgin sacrifice.

Among John Grady's final words to Magdalena is a pronouncement that may be the most direct statement of McCarthy's own views to be found in any of the novels: "After a while he said that he believed in God even if he was doubtful of men's claims to know God's mind" (206). McCarthy has reportedly said in conversation "that those who have not had a religious experience cannot comprehend it through second-hand accounts . . . [and] that he thinks the mystical experience is a direct apprehension of reality, unmediated by symbol" (Arnold, "Go to Sleep" 37-38, quoting Wallace). These two thoughts seem to encompass all of McCarthy's thinking throughout his first eight novels: belief in the esoteric vision versus the exoteric posturing of religions, bound as they are to the trappings of culture. Although his response when Oprah Winfrey asked if he had "worked the God thing out" was "it would depend upon what day you asked me" (Conlon). McCarthy certainly gives ample evidence of his belief in a reality lurking behind the distractions of the visible world—a reality accessible in stories.

VII. DREAM METAPHOR

In the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy has some final thoughts on themes he has examined throughout the *Border Trilogy*—themes such as the nature of reality, the nature of dreams, and the writer's role in bridging the gap between them. These

are central themes of Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Circular Ruins" as well. A number of textual details indicate that McCarthy, intentionally or not, modeled his old vagrant's dream story on this Borges piece.

Each of these fictions relates the experience of a nameless traveler who finds himself in an ancient pagan temple. McCarthy's old man begins telling the tale of his dream: "There was this man who was traveling through the mountains and he came to a place in the mountains where certain pilgrims used to gather in the long ago" (270). At the beginning of Borges's story, the protagonist drags his canoe ashore and enters a defunct place of worship: "This circle was a temple which had been devoured by ancient fires, profaned by the miasmal jungle, and whose god no longer received the homage of men" (Borges 57). The vagrant tells Billy that people used to be slaughtered upon a "table of rock" in his dream setting, "to appease the gods" (270)—pagan gods who are forgotten as well. Both stories set the stage here for a discussion of religions as at once shifting fictions, capable of dying and being forgotten as men are, and repositories of psychological power that leave a residual charge even in their ruins; both stories involve the all-important engagement of the transformative *omphalos* of the sacred place. And both stories will imply that in worship and in dreams, we step directly back into the waking world of the ancients.

This practice of dreaming in a temple was consciously employed by ancient priests and doctors in a rite called "incubation":

> In Greek medicine there was moreover from ancient times a widespread belief that a god could show himself or herself in a dream and prescribe a cure. Even Galen, a contemporary of Artemidorus, made some use of this practice . . . . The practice of incubation, spending the night in a god's, usually Asclepius's, temple in order to make the deity appear in a dream and prescribe cures to or even operate on the sick, flourished in Artemidorus' time. (Hansen 63)

Rochberg also discusses the antiquity of the practice, placing its origins thousands of years before Artemidorus and Galen, in ancient Sumer: "Evidence for the extreme antiquity of a belief in mantic dreams may be found in Sumerian texts in which dreams are interpreted as messages from the divine. A Sumerian dream incubation priest, ensi . . . is attested to in lexical texts. Outside the lexical tradition the term is found in a cylinder inscription of King Gudea of Lagash, who reigned circa 2200 B. C." (Rochberg 82). Although neither *Cities of the Plain* nor "The Circular Ruins" employs an "ensi" per se, a number of features of the pagan rite coincide with those of both stories: the sacred nature of the dreamer's vision, the dream's influence on "reality," even the implication of the dream's healing properties. And both authors clearly are familiar with incubation as an attempt to give life to some vision from the gods, even if they both have doubts about the identity of those gods.

The purpose of Borges's traveler soon becomes clear: "He wanted to dream a man; he wanted to dream him in minute entirety and impose him on reality" (Borges 58). Borges associates his sorcerer with demiurges of "Gnostic cosmogenies" who fashion a "red Adam who cannot stand" (Borges 58), an allusion to Genesis and the conscious work of a creator god. In *Cities of the Plain*, Billy is skeptical of this notion of creating actual human beings in the imagination, until the old vagrant guides him through the idea by way of some Socratic questioning:

> Have you not met people in dreams you never saw before?
> . . . . Sure.
> And who were they?
> I don't know. Dream people.
> You think you made them up. In your dream. I guess.
> Yeah.
> Could you do it waking? (271)

Billy, who is not a maker of fictions, has to concede that he could not. The implication is that the unconscious is a real place, and that its inhabitants can stake some claim on reality. Borges's magician's dreaming is initially a willful, controlled act of creation, whereas the dream of McCarthy's vagrant (and the dream of his dreamer) is beyond his control: "The proprietary claims of the dreamer upon the dreamt have their limits. I cannot rob the traveler of his own autonomy, lest he vanish altogether" (274). Borges's traveler, teaching his dream students in the burnt amphitheater, soon learns this same lesson—his phantoms act independently, at times, and are beyond his control to varying degrees. In his quest "to redeem one of them from his condition of empty illusion and interpolate him into the real world" (Borges 58), he recognizes that "he could expect something only from those who occasionally dared to oppose him" (Borges 58)—to assert their autonomy, that is. Those who are in agreement with their creator could be figments of his imagination, whereas those whose opinions diverge from his might be said to stand independent of him.

Borges's narrator relates the old wizard's reasoning on the subject: those characters who stood distinct from their dreamer "pre-existed to a slightly greater degree" than the others (Borges 59). This notion of "pre-existence" is related to what McCarthy suggests at the end of *Cities of the Plain*. Part of the author's job is to choose as characters those phantoms which prove themselves the most solid, the most connected to eternity. Convincing, "well-chosen" fictional characters promise to take their place in the world of the living. Some of them may even prove more convincing than some of our acquaintances.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In both stories, the sleepers recognize the cosmic dimension—the infinite quality of space and time—in their unconscious landscapes. *Cities of the Plain* represents this notion in the sceptre of the chieftain: "He carried 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). And Borges tells us regarding the pupils sitting in the sorcerer's amphitheater that "the faces of the farthest ones hung at a distance of many centuries and as high as the stars, but their features were completely precise" (Borges 58). Both characters have managed to transcend the mundane and step into the infinite world of myth, presumably by virtue of their presence in holy places. But McCarthy's symbolism goes one step further than that of Borges, at least initially: it strips the dreamer of his privileged status over the dreamt by stacking them together in infinite regression, like Russian

dolls. McCarthy, who has clearly assimilated Borges (and has been assimilated in advance), gives away the surprise ending of "The Circular Ruins" by way of this simple, unexplained image.

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