Salem State University
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On Time, History, and Metaphysics: The Thought of Cormac McCarthy and Walter Benjamin

A Thesis in English
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Cormac McCarthy is a novelist, but he is also a thinker who is deeply engaged with philosophy, with science, with theology, and, of course, with literature. As the great critic Steven Frye noted in his essay “History, Novels, and Ideas,” reading McCarthy “requires that one understand the philosophical conceptions he engages, which include but are not limited to the ancient Gnosticism of the first-century Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions, Platonism and Neo-Platonism, Nietzschean materialism, and existential Christianity” (5). In this, then, we might consider McCarthy as one of the last modernists, or even a late modernist.

McCarthy, then, is not unlike Walter Benjamin, the German critic and philosopher who committed suicide in 1940, amidst the horrors of the Holocaust. He too was fascinated with Jewish mysticism and theology, history, materialism, and he could not be pinned into one specific category—meaning that, to understand Benjamin, one must have at least a passing familiarity with all of these things. Both of them had and have a wide variety of interests, and they show in their work. This paper will explore the connections between the two writers. It will focus on the following McCarthy novels: *The Road, No Country for Old Men, and Blood Meridian*. And, for Benjamin, the following works of philosophy and criticism: *Illuminations*, *the Arcades Project*, and *Selected Writings*, paying particular attention to “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and “The Storyteller.”

Both of their lives, in many ways, are fragmented. No one has yet released a definitive biography of Cormac McCarthy—nor has he penned any memoirs—but, from the few interviews he has given and from the work scholars and McCarthy aficionados have done, we can piece together details. For instance, we know that he was born in Rhode Island, later moving with his family to Tennessee, which is where he grew up. According to McCarthy scholar Dianne Luce, he attended Knoxville Catholic High School, where he participated in the school newspaper,
“oratorical contests,” choir, and sports. He was passionate about drawing. But classmates, Luce writes, never expected him to become an internationally-known and highly-regarded author—in fact, McCarthy never won any writing awards in high school, having only developed a serious interest in the craft at age twenty-three (4).

McCarthy now has some ten novels and two plays, in addition to a few screenplays, to his name. He’s curious about semiotics and the philosophy of language and science—and he serves as a trustee at the Sante Fe Institute, as the organization’s website notes. He is, then, someone we might call a writer-thinker, for he is not merely interested in telling a story. Consider his remarks in a 2009 interview with the Wall Street Journal:

If you think about some of the things that are being talked about by thoughtful, intelligent scientists, you realize that in 100 years the human race won't even be recognizable. We may indeed be part machine and we may have computers implanted. It's more than theoretically possible to implant a chip in the brain that would contain all the information in all the libraries in the world. As people who have talked about this say, it's just a matter of figuring out the wiring. Now there's a problem you can take to bed with you at night (McCarthy).

The interviewer asked him this: “What kinds of things make you worry?” McCarthy, like Benjamin, is not asleep at the wheel. He is willing to read the times and consider the direction the human race is going.

But what do we know of Benjamin? There are many striking similarities to Cormac McCarthy, despite having grown up in different eras and countries and raised in different faiths. Both of them came from well-to-do families. And we also have a fragmentary knowledge of his earlier life, as Richard Wolin notes in Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption.
reminisces, collected in *Berlin Chronicle* and *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, “are far from being autobiographical in the traditional sense; they in no way pretend to yield a portrait of the artist as a young man” (Wolin, 2). Thus, “instead of a linear narrative, what emerges are isolated images—in essence, a series of snapshots-in-prose—which when juxtaposed to one another produce a montage-like effect” (2). We also learn that Benjamin harbored a distrust of intellectuals. Wolin writes that Benjamin speaks of their unclear vision, “which results from an innate tendency toward flight from reality; a tendency he claimed to have detected in himself at an extremely early age and which in his eyes manifested itself in his staunch refusal to form with others under any circumstance a united front—be it even with his own mother, whose wrath he would intentionally solicit by perpetually remaining a half step behind on walks” (3).

Benjamin also became interested in religion—like McCarthy, who uses religious terminology throughout his work¹—appropriating Jewish mysticism into his thought and work (Wolin, 37). Related to this is his distrust of scientism, which Wolin describes thusly: “In sum, it is Benjamin’s fear that the inordinate Enlightenment biases of Kant’s theory of knowledge conspire to produce a concept of experience that remains hostile to the scientistic prejudices of his age; and that the highly rationalized concept of experience which results from this epistemological standpoint dovetails only too well with a streamlined modern world in which the values of technical reason reign supreme” (34). Essentially, Benjamin believes the modern technological and scientific age is hostile to the human experience. And of course we see the same in McCarthy, with his concern over the implantation of microchips and, generally, with the quasi-utopian aims of the scientific and technical elite.

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¹ Two examples: consider the title of his novel ‘Child of God’ and also McCarthy scholar Allen Josephs’s essay “The Quest for God in *The Road,*” in which he argues the novel is an example of a kind of Christian existentialism.
But most of Benjamin’s writings exist in fragments. He died in 1940, in the midst of World War II.

Because both writers have much to say on the modern age, for this project we must also define modernity, which I will describe as the era which came into being at the end of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Enlightenment and still exists, albeit in a late stage, today. David Bentley Hart, the Eastern Orthodox theologian, provides a good starting point in his book *Atheist Delusions*. He asserts that “modernity’s highest ideal—its special understanding of personal autonomy—requires us to place our trust in an original absence underlying all of reality, a fertile void in which all things are possible, from which arises no impediment to our wills, and before which we may consequently choose to make ourselves what we choose” (21). To Hart, moderns view themselves as perfect consumers, and it means this: “the original nothingness of the will gives itself shape by the use it makes of the nothingness of the world—and thus we are free” (23). And he concedes that this is a “willfully extreme formulation,” for “life is rarely lived at the extremes” (23). Modernity, then, is the shattering of borders and bonds, resulting in the unaccountable individual, one who is pure will and nothing more.

But this also causes a kind of disorientation—especially among those who flourished within the limits of the previous age. We call this nostalgia, which, according to Svetlana Boym in her seminal *The Future of Nostalgia*, was once considered an illness. “Among the first victims,” Boym writes, “of the newly diagnosed disease were various displaced people of the seventeenth century, freedom-loving students from the Republic of Berne studying in in Basel, domestic help and servants working in France and Germany and Swiss soldiers fighting abroad” (3). Most tellingly, one of its earliest symptoms “was an ability to hear voices or see ghosts” (3). Boym suggests that “the spread of nostalgia had to do not only with dislocation in space but also
with the changing conception of time” (7). She says that nostalgia was “a historical emotion, and we would do well to pursue its historical rather than psychological genesis” (7). After all, modernity was a shattering; it transformed ways of thinking, rending hearts and mind in the process.

Thus there is a kind of nostalgia of the historical age that also develops, which is why Boym is so necessary for this project. When new ages come into being and old ones have passed, many people become shaken and look to the past and say, “It was better then.” They exist amidst “a dislocation in space” and “a changing conception of time” (7).

It is in this context—their exploration of modernity and what it means for the human person—that this project will argue that McCarthy and Benjamin intersect. That Benjamin is a modernist writer and McCarthy is a late modernist one is incidental to the project. The concern here is what they have to say about modernity itself.

Chapter 1: McCarthy, Benjamin, and Modernity

Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* is a novel about the late modern project, the ultimate aim of which is the individual’s complete emancipation from family and friends, from obligations and duties, from ties to the community and to place—the breaking, then, of borders. McCarthy offers an example of such an individual in Anton Chigurh, the novel’s antagonist. McCarthy contrasts him with Sheriff Bell, a sort of nostalgic but good-hearted man who is dismayed at the seismic changes taking place in the world around him. Between them is Llewellyn Moss, the main character who sets in motion the events of the book by picking up an abandoned briefcase filled with drug money. He has a choice: break free from all constraints, remain as he is, or become filled with despair and nostalgia, a la Sheriff Bell. The three are archetypes of the thought that exists within modern order—the age birthed by the
Enlightenment—and, by asking us to examine them, McCarthy is, in effect, asking us to take a look at the fragmented state of modernity.

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin discusses Paris, which he deems “the capital of the 19th century” (14). It is an expose of 1939, and it begins with a quote from Maxime du Camp, who said this of Paris, “History is like Janus; it has two faces. Whether it looks at the past or at the present, it sees the same things” (14). Benjamin notes that du Camp wants to express “a feeling of vertigo characteristic of the nineteenth century’s conception of history,” adding that “the characteristic residue of this conception is what has been called the ‘History of Civilization,’ which makes an inventory, point by point, of humanity’s life forms and creations” (14). But “this conception of history minimizes the fact that such riches owe not only their existence but also their transmission to a constant effort of society—an effort, moreover, by which these riches are strangely altered” (14). Benjamin’s purpose here, then, is to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representations of civilization, the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this ‘illumination’ not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias (14).

As phantasmagoria, as the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, is “a sequence of real or imaginary images like that seen in a dream.” The word sounds similar to phantasm, and, unsurprisingly, the definition says that the two likely share a root.

Indeed, modernity has an almost ghostlike presence, whether in the nineteenth century or later. It reminds us of what we have jettisoned, what we have forgotten. And it shows us where
we are headed. We can also note his use of the term “ideological transposition.” The modern age is an ideological one—it is, in fact, awash in ideology. But it is also important to pay attention to Benjamin’s description of “new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century” (Benjamin, 14). Modernity was and is truly a new way of life, a new way of thinking.

Could Chigurh, then, be viewed in such a context? A metaphorical phantasmagoric figure? There is enough evidence in *No Country for Old Men* to suggest that this is the case.

At the beginning of the novel, in a sort of prologue, Sheriff Bell recalls a time when he presided over the execution of someone who had killed a fourteen year old girl (3). The man is profoundly terrifying; he tells Bell that he’d wanted to kill someone “for about as long as he could remember” (3). And Bell, who had never seen such a person, wonders if he represents “some new kind” (3). “What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul?” he asks (3–4). He realizes, then, that “there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it and that’s where this is goin” (4) and that it is defined by “what you are willin to become” (4).

Bell, who perhaps has never noticed otherwise, here has recognized something different about the world in which he lives. He has seen new kind of person freed from any ties to community, to family and friends, to faith. This is a person accountable to only himself, which is why he is defined by what he is willing to be come. Bell has seen where things are going, and he does not like it.

Soon after, we are introduced to Anton Chigurh, the antagonist of the novel and the liberated modern individual par excellence, for choice, to him, is the highest ideal—indeed, it is his only ideal. He decides everything by coin toss. Carson Wells, a hit man, describes Chigurh as
a “peculiar man,” one who “has principles” that “transcend money or drugs or anything like that” (153). And Chigurh defines this ethic of choice to Carla Jean, Llewelyn’s wife. He says: “every moment in your life is a turning and everyone a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this” (259). He elaborates, noting:

You’re asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn’t allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps. In this case to small purpose. Most people don’t believe that there can be such a person. You can see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of. Do you understand? When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end (260).

He cannot, he says, imagine things differently, because “they are this way” (260). He describes dying as a dropping of a shroud. It reveals “the darkness” (259). But notice that Chigurh tells the clerk that “most people don’t believe that there can be such a person” and asks how it can be possible to “prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of” (260). Like Bell, the clerk has never truly encountered modernity and what it means. We might argue that modernity is an alienating force, one that tells human beings that there is no purpose to life, that they are alone in the world, and that they must drift aimlessly from place to place. In this, people can also take for granted the meaning of individual freedom. It can provide a lot of good, but there are also implications, and one of them is what Anton Chigurh represents. Truly, it is a two-sided coin.

Which is one of the reasons Chigurh carries one—it demonstrates the two-sided nature of the modern age. Thus he is attached to the coin, a sort of manifestation of both his relativism and that of modernity. But the irony here is that modernity, especially late modernity, has turned
choice into Choice—and so Chigurh, like many others, submits to Choice, as if it were a kind of fate.

Earlier, he presents the coin to a store clerk, whom he then asks about his coin toss winnings (55). The clerk, quite understandably, becomes visibly uncomfortable. Chigurh then tells him:

Anything can be an instrument... Small things. Things you wouldn't even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People don't pay attention. And then one day there's an accounting. And after that nothing is the same. Well, you say. It's just a coin. For instance. Nothing special there. What could that be an instrument of? You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment. How could that be? Well, it's just a coin. Yes. That's true. Is it (57)?

Chigurh recognizes that most people have been lulled by modernity into a stupor and so do not “pay attention.” They don’t notice the world around them (57). Most people, it seems, have been blown forward, a la Benjamin’s “Angel of History,” meaning they would like to say comfortable and content and fixed, but they cannot control history and progress. He reflects on a Klee painting titled “Angelus Novus” that depicts “an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating” (257). Benjamin says that his eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings
with such violence that the angel can no longer closet them. This storm irresistibly propel him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress (258).

There is a sense of melancholy here, too, because we can infer that this angel seeks to control time but cannot, which is why he is turned toward the past. He wants nothing to change—and, as mentioned, so it is with the rest of us.

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” parts X and XI, Benjamin offers similar reflections on modernity. In part XI, he writes that “the conformism which has been part and parcel of Social Democracy from the beginning attaches not only to its political tactics but to its economic views as well” (258). There was “nothing,” he writes, that “corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current” (258). Benjamin here refers to the growth of fascism before the outset of World War II. But fascism, like communism, as Hannah Arendt reminds us in The Origins of Totalitarianism, is a sort of extreme manifestation of the modern project. Indeed, before the onset of modernity, there was a desire, as monastics did, to “turn...away from the world and its affairs” (258). But that disappeared, because people became lost in the fog. Thus here, too, Benjamin recognizes that many in the modern age stumble zombielike through life. They don’t reflect. They just exist.

Benjamin also addresses this issue in “The Arcades Project.” He has this to say of exhibitions:

World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which to use its value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment
industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulation while enjoying his alienation from himself and others (7). We might take issue with his criticism of such spectacles as world exhibitions and with his broadside against the entertainment industry—both, after all, are generalizations. But the truth in his statement is that modernity brings about alienation and distraction. Again, consider the idea of choice. Modernity has much of it. We can go to the supermarket and see all sorts of cereals, breads, drinks—an overwhelming amount, even. We can select where we live; we are not expected to become shoemakers simply because our parents or grandparents were; in most cases, we do not have arranged marriages.

Like a coin, there are two sides to this way of living. A kind of radical choice feeds into radical individualism, which frees us from all bonds and obligations. Spouses can simply leave on a whim. We can head elsewhere and never speak to our families or friends again. But there are many people who do not even realize the potential, both good and bad, of modernity and individualism. Perhaps the perfect image of the modern person is the one who sits in front of the television, mindlessly clicking the channels and watching with glazed-over eyes, letting the hours tick by until, suddenly, the sky is pitch and it is time to go to bed. It is someone who, to paraphrase Benjamin, has been alienated from himself and from others.

Still, what happens, we must ask, when someone is able to free himself from the snares of the modern project? McCarthy presents such an individual in Llewelyn Moss. At the beginning of the novel, Moss discovers a briefcase amidst many dead and dying men. He “absolutely knew what was in the case and he was scared in a way that he didn’t even understand” (17). So he opens it. He finds in it many “hundred dollar banknotes” that “were in packets fastened with banktape stamped each with the denomination $10,000” (17-18). The narration tells us that Moss
“didn’t know what it added up to but he had a pretty good idea” (18). This line is filled with meaning. If we glance at it quickly, we assume that Moss is merely considering the amount of money contained within the briefcase, but this is not true, for these striking phrases immediately follow:

He sat there looking at it and then he closed the flap and sat with his head down. His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead. All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel (18).

It continues:

He raised his head and looked out across the bajada. A light wind from the north. Cool. Sunny. One oclock in the afternoon. He looked at the man lying dead in the grass. His good crocodile boots that were filled with blood and turning black. The end of his life. Here in this place. The distant mountains to the south. The winds in the grass. The quiet (18).

Here Moss has entered into a kind of discernment. The moral line, now easier to cross due to the blurring nature of modernity, sits in front of him, and Moss must decide what to do. He recognizes this, which is why he isn’t entirely sure “what it added up to” but has “a pretty good idea (18). The dead man in front of him, with his “good crocodile boots that were filled with blood and turning black,” is an example of what could happen to him if he takes the money. Moss’s life could also end “here in this place” (18). But the philosophy of modernity—as represented by Anton Chigurh—is a seductive one. Moss cannot resist it and all that it offers—choice and nothing but, and in the process elevating himself above everything—and so he picks up the briefcase and walks away.
He’s spotted when he decides to return to the site (28). He takes off and doesn’t stop, spending the rest of the novel running away from the consequences of his choice—Anton Chigurh and the others who want the money. It creates in him a sense of dread; he worries that “at some point he” would “have to quit running on luck” (108). He knows that “he would probably never be safe again in his life” and wonders if it’s something with which you grow comfortable (109). But then this strikes him: what if you did? (109). Moss, by taking the money, jolted awake and saw then that life, through our choices, guides us in one direction or the other.

Benjamin, in perhaps the most famous part of “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” discusses the “Angel of History,” which is, as mentioned, a reflection on a Klee painting. There is always a sense of despair whenever any of us pass through time. Some embrace it, shunning any sense of rootedness, a la Chigurh, but others remain deeply troubled. They are like the angel depicted in the Klee painting—faces turned toward the past as they are blown forward into the future by a terrible storm called progress.

Consider now the case of Sherriff Ed Tom Bell. At the beginning he says modernity allows for the possibility of someone like Chigurh—a “new kind” of person (3). But we can assume that the convict whom he encountered on death row was merely the culmination of what he had seen throughout his career in law enforcement. After all, his narrations are mostly memories. Bell sees unlimited choice everywhere and so can recognize its implications. On one such occasion, he reminds a deputy that there is something “worse” than the sale of dope to school kids (194). It’s that “schoolkids buy it” (194). Bell is not naïve. He knows that the most important element of this transaction is human choice unbound by limits. And the people who embrace fully this ethic are the ones who, as he observes, “can’t be governed at all” (64). But
many don’t. They, like the school kids, make one poor choice, which leads to another, and
another, continuing ad infinitum.

Bell, as the directly anti-modern figure, is alarmed by such things, for he remembers
when people didn’t view themselves as gods and knew that life on this earth was not atomized
but was instead based on “community and…respect” (124). Also, it was one in which “the dead
have more claims on you than what you might want to admit or even what you might know about
and them claims can be very strong indeed” (124). He recognizes that he is growing increasingly
alone, for, as he notes, “when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket
people will just sort of smile and tell me I’m getting old” (198). He says that “anybody that cant
tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot bigger
of a problem than what I’ve got” (198). What Bell describes here is choice detached from any
sort of moral reflection. People who cannot tell the difference between rape and murder and
chewing gum are those who operate on the basest of desires. And they are those who are
disconnected from the past. Of course, these people are extreme examples—and they are
sociopaths, really—but modern life does encourage a reductionist and radical choice, one that
attempts to obscure and eliminate any difference between these acts. And it leaves a “pile of
debris” in its wake.

And now we must also consider the dream he describes at the end of the novel. At this
point, he has retired from law enforcement. He remembers his now-deceased father, about whom
he has had two dreams. He has scant details of the first one; the second one, he says, is much
clearer. He says:

…it was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the
mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was
snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothm. He just rode on past and had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up (309).

And, earlier, he describes a house:

When you went out the back door of that house there was a stone water trough in the weeds by the side of the house. A galvanized pipe come off the roof and the trough stayed pretty much full and I remember stopping there one time and squattin down and lookin at it and I got to thinkin about it. I dont know how long it had been there. A hundred years. Two hundred. You could see the chisel marks in the stone. It was hewed out of solid rock and it was about six foot long and maybe a foot and a half wide and about that deep. Just chiseled out of the rock. And I got to thinkin about the man that done that (307).

The dream, in a way, is the best example of Bell—the older, nostalgic man who is aware, who sees the modern project as a great unmooring—and his thoughts, for we notice immediately that he talks of “older times” and riding through a mountainous area while all things are covered in darkness (309). There is an almost metaphysical sense to the dream.

Benjamin, too, explored the metaphysical, especially in his earlier writings. Consider this passage from his essay “The Metaphysics of Youth:”
Daily we use unmeasured energies as if in our sleep. What we do and think is filled with the being of our fathers and ancestors. An uncomprehended symbolism enslaves us without ceremony.—Sometimes, on awakening, we recall a dream. In this way rare shafts of insight illuminate the ruins of our energies that time has passed by. We were accustomed to spirit [Geist] just as we are accustomed to the heartbeat that enables us to lift loads and digest our food (6).

Both McCarthy and Benjamin recognize that certain truths present themselves only within the metaphysical realm. For it is within thoughts and dreams and in prayer that we can begin to see the things to which we are normally blind. The penultimate sentence of the second paragraph in “The Metaphysics of Youth” is this: “Now we can see what we have unwittingly destroyed and created” (6). Bell believes he is adrift in a strange world that continues to get stranger. And here we can bring in Boym, who, as noted at the beginning of this project, said that nostalgics, when they were first diagnosed as being “ill,” saw ghosts (3). We might argue that Bell’s dream is ghostly. He is encountering the ghost of not only his father but also of the previous age, and it is giving him comfort. Bell, we might also say, has become dislocated, and so the dream—the fire—offers him a point of reference. It is the warmth of something that is no longer there.

**Chapter Two: The Ghost of History**

There are many theories as to what Cormac McCarthy wanted to express when he wrote *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*. Some, in one of the more prominent arguments, have posited that McCarthy used the novel to denounce a certain period in American history. Perhaps that is part of it, but it is more likely the case that McCarthy wished to use the novel to explore the philosophical and metaphysical implications of history, of myth, and of violence.
Steven Frye, in his essay “Blood Meridian and the Poetics of Violence,” makes such a suggestion. Blood Meridian, he writes, is frequently considered as a revisionist account of the American western myth, and although mythic violence itself becomes the “evidence” so to speak of another story, perhaps the true story, underlying the most pernicious popular myths of the Western and the archetypal American hero narrative. These readings begin to imply a moral vision that might seem otherwise absent, but they are only partially sufficient because they tend to focus attention on the novel’s social themes, without engaging the dense philosophical and religions portent forced on the reader in the figure of Judge Holden, the ex-priest Tobin, and the unnamed kid. Although McCarthy’s interest in violence may be in part political, it is a deeper sense ontological, as the Heraclitus reference suggests (109).

What Frye refers to here is an epigraphical quote from Heraclitus that McCarthy included in the first draft of his manuscript (109). It reads: War is the father of us all and our king. War discloses who is godlike and who is but a man, who is a slave and who is a free man (107). Thus a political reading would in fact limit the scope of Blood Meridian, because it would, as Frye observes, “be partially sufficient” (109). In that sense, McCarthy could have situated the novel in any environment or time, but he is a writer of place. So politics might have played a part in it, a small or even a larger one, but it was not the whole part, because he is not the kind of writer who would publish a heavily politicized novel.

What kind of writer is he? We can begin to get a sense of what McCarthy is after by further examining Frye’s quote. As in No Country for Old Men, there are again three characters that represent or at least discuss the novel’s themes. And so we realize that McCarthy wants us to plumb the depths of the philosophical meaning of history and war and the human person’s place
in it all. James Dorson’s essay “Demystifying the Judge: Law and Mythical Violence in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian” can help us begin to elucidate the meaning and purpose of this strange and terrifying character, because Dorson, like Frye, wishes to resist “the temptations of both the historicist (violence is contextual) and the essentialist (violence is natural) readings of Blood Meridian” (107). Instead, he asks, “what does the irreducibility of the novel’s violence tell us about the history of Western civilization, the origin of its laws and institutions” (107)? It certainly tells us some uncomfortable truths. Consider the case of Judge Holden, who serves as a sort of villain. Like Chigurh, he is also a pseudo-philosopher who speculates endlessly on the purpose and aims of the individual who has been freed from any sort of bonds or obligations.

McCarthy describes Judge Holden infant-like, “but there is nothing innocent about the way he mangles and molests his victims,” as Dorson observes (107). He is someone who speaks in paradoxes, and “his duplicitous logic” is “always ready to turn back on itself, and his every message is delivered with a smile so eerie that we never know what is behind it” (108). Dorson notes that many critics and academics have compared the Judge to Moby Dick, Faust, Mephistopheles, and Milton’s Satan (108). “All of these readings are to a greater or lesser extent justified by the text itself,” he writes. “But what is most striking about this list is that no one has seen the judge for what a judge by definition represents: the law” (108).

The Judge, as Dorson reminds us, is a figure of violence. But “this…should not be taken as evidence against seeing him as a figure of the law” (108). And here Doroson brings in Benjamin and his “Critique of Violence,” noting that Benjamin “saw violence as inseparable from that of law and justice” (108). But we can address what Benjamin had to say about modernity and violence and history later, for now we must remained focused on McCarthy and what he is saying.
And what McCarthy is saying is that modernity is violence. That is why, as Dorson points out, the Judge is a figure of the law. And as David Bentley Hart reminds us, “it is rather difficult, placing everything in the scales, to vest a great deal of hope in modernity, however radiantly enchanting its promises, when one considers how many innocent lives have already been swallowed up in the flames of modern ‘progress’” (222).

For Bentley Hart, “the process of secularization itself—and not those elements of the “religious” grammars of the past that the secular order might have misappropriated for its purposes—that is the chief cause of the modern state’s curious talent for mass murder” (224). All of this, writes Bentley Hart, can be situated within the larger narrative of “triumph of the will” (224). And there is also this:

...The whole record of the modern attempt to erect a new and more rational human reality upon the ruins of the “age of faith” is thronged, from beginning to end, with lists of sacrificial victims — or, I suppose I should say, not lists but statistical registers, since so many of those victims must remain forever nameless. From the days of the Jacobin Club and the massacres in the Vendée to the great revolutionary socialisms, nationalist and internationalist, of the twentieth century, with their one hundred million or so murders, the will to lead modern humanity onward into a postreligious promised land of liberty, justice, and equality has always been accompanied by a willingness to kill without measure, for the sake of that distant dawn (227).

So how can we use all of this to further explore McCarthy’s thoughts on modernity, on history, on violence, and on philosophy, as well as his relationship to Benjamin?

Dorson, in ‘Demystifying the Judge’, writes that McCarthy “shows us that our present social order has not doused the metaphysical fires of earlier times, but is yet a remnant of it”
It "leaves us with the uneasy feeling that we are trapped within an endless cycle of fear and mythical violence" (116). And to return to Frye, "establishing the novel in deliberate and problematic relation to genre speaks directly to his awareness of the artifice of myth, its inherent excess, its transformative aesthetic properties, and the integral relationship of the artistic sphere to the question of human ethical consciousness" (110).

It is clear, then, that McCarthy is asking us to consider these questions, as he did with No Country for Old Men. He is reminding us that we cannot ignore history—keep it pushed away, sanitize it, forget it. There is also a philosophical dimension to history: facing it allows us to get a better sense of ourselves, and that is not a truism. History, after all, is not a mere collection of events. There is significance to things. McCarthy understands that things are connected, that the past, to quote Benjamin, is "the concern of history" (254). As Benjamin noted, "there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one" (254). And so it is with Blood Meridian.

Thus the most important dynamic in the novel is the one between the kid, the first character to whom we are introduced, and the Judge. It is why, on the first page, the narrator tells us of the kid that "all history present in that visage, the child the father of the man" (3). On the surface we assume that this is a description of how the kid is similar to his father, and that, to an extent, is likely true. But we should note also that the kid is nameless, and thus we can posit that he is meant to be a stand-in for us. He is an everyman, so to speak. Consider then these lines, which come after the kid decides to run away from home: "His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (4-5). Here the narrator—or McCarthy, we can safely assume—lets us
know the central argument of the novel. It is this: that, as mentioned, modernity is tame, or so we believe it to be. The west, which, since he lives there, McCarthy knows well, functions as a sort of laboratory for modernity. There are no institutions and attachments; all things are open and desolate and free. In the west, human beings can make themselves as they see wish, keeping or writing off their own histories in the process. It is the same with modernity. Modern human beings believe that they are ultimate masters or gods, and they have the right to shape the stuff of creation to their will (4-5). But there is also the presence of the metaphysical—that which pulls us into the abyss or toward the light—and it never goes away.

But there is also a legal component to modernity, as Dorson observed. And, as mentioned, modernity is violence. The Judge, then, as a legal figure, represents the most violent aspects of the modern order. But Dorson's error is viewing the Judge as specifically a figure of the American order. There is something, of course, to using the United States to make an argument about Blood Meridian, but it is not what many scholars imagine.

The United States, after all, is a polity founded under the auspices of the modern project. It would not exist without the modern project, and throughout all of its founding documents are the still-breathing ideas of such figures like Machiavelli, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes—some of the architects of modernity. So it is more appropriate, then, to focus on the modern order, which one can assume was McCarthy's intent. Dorson hints at this with his comment about Western Civilization, but he does not go far enough. McCarthy, through Blood Meridian, brings into examination the American order and how it offers a completion of modernity, in the sense of both the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment.

As the theologian Stanley Hauerwas observed in an essay titled “The end of American Protestantism,” America is “the exemplification of a constructive Protestant social imagination”
and “American Protestants do not have to believe in God because they believe in belief.” It is, overall, the “exemplification of the project of modernity.” He continues:

That project is the attempt to produce a people who believe that they should have no story except the story that they choose when they had no story. That is what Americans mean by "freedom." The institutions that constitute the disciplinary forms of that project are liberal democracy and capitalism. Thus the presumption that if you get to choose between a Sony or Panasonic television, you have had a “free choice.” The same presumption works for choosing a President. Once you have made your choice you have to learn to live with it. So there is a kind of resignation that freedom requires (Hauerwas).

We might thus argue that the Judge, like Chigurh, is the living embodiment of this project—the idea that all people are completely and utterly self-made, that they can choose who they are and what they will be. It is a life of constant self-definition, and Hauerwas is right to say that this is “what Americans mean by ‘freedom’.”

Note the Judge’s grandiose speeches—speeches that seem to take on the entire order of things. They are a challenge; they are not merely how the Old West conceives of itself. Consider these passages, some of the most famous in the novel:

Whatever exist…Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent (198).

The Judge continues:

These anonymous creatures…may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men’s knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is route out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth (198).
After some of the other characters ask him what suzerain means—he tells them that it is a kind of keeper, which leads them to wonder why he didn’t just say keeper (198)—the Judge then says:

Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgments (198).

Then he declares the ground his—noting that “everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life”—and says “in order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it to save by my dispensation” (199).

The Judge, as was Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*, acts as a sort of mouthpiece for the philosophy of the modern order. He is humanity freed from all sorts of constraints, and so his name takes on another dimension—not one of the legal order, but of the transcendent order. He is humanity as divine judge. All things that exist must have his consent, or else they are to be forbidden. And this also is the definition—the true one—of a suzerain. It is a type of feudal lord.

For the Judge, “the man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear” (199). He says that Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the threat of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate (199).

This is what David Bentley Hart means when he says that modernity can be situated within the larger narrative of the triumph of the will (224). It is why the Judge scoffs at even the “freedom of birds.” He’d rather “have them all in zoos” (199). This philosophy or ideology of modernity and its ties to the historical is the ghost with which we must all contend. We believe it is gone or
have forgotten about it altogether—for our lives have been dulled—but it is still there. And we might say it is something from which we have never recovered. As Boym points out in *The Future of Nostalgia*, nostalgia, when it was known as a disease, appeared “roughly at the historical moment when the conception of time and history were undergoing radical change” (8). It was a rupture, one we have long been trying to heal.

And that is why, in modernity, there is also a desire for war. As Bentley Hart observed, “every age, obviously, has known wars and rumors of wars, and cruelty, injustice, oppression, murderous zeal, and murderous indifference; and men will obviously kill for any cause or for none. But, for the sheer scale of its violences, the modern period is quite unsurpassed” (97). The Judge has many things to say about war, because he is infatuated with it. It is his “trade,” as he puts it (248). To him, “war is god” (249). Consider this passage:

> A man seeks his own destiny and no other, said the judge. Will or nill. Any man who could discover his own fate and elect therefore some opposite course could only come at last to that selfsame reckoning at the same appointed time, for each man's destiny is as large as the world he inhabits and contains within it all opposites as well. The desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone (343).

After that, the Judge says:

> I can tell you this. As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior’s right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dance false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be (343-344)?
According to him, the “true dancer” is this: “Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen the horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance” (344).

The Judge is the triumph of the will par excellence, and so, like Chigurh before him, he serves as a mouthpiece for the modern project. When you eliminate the transcendent and make the human person subject to nothing but him or herself, then you have something like the Glanton Gang, the roving band of marauders to which the kid and the Judge both belong. The Judge is a sort of metaphysical presence—he is there, but he is also, as mentioned, a representation of the modern project: at the end of the novel, for instance, he “says that he will never die” (335)—and so it is best to consider how those around him act. As mentioned, the setting functions as a sort of litmus test for the effects of modernity.

But even though in modernity the transcendent has been pushed out of the conversation and ties to friends and family and community are no longer honored, there still exists a desire for meaning and purpose. And it is achieved through war.

Walter Benjamin had much to say on this subject—violence and history and modernity. There is the now-famous quote from the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” which is this: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). But that is on history itself, whereas this discussion pertains to history and violence and its relation to the modern project. Consider again the quote from the beginning of Blood Meridian, the one positing whether hearts can be molded like clay or whether creation can be shaped to suit the will of humanity (4-5). Benjamin notes that there two prevailing schools on violence. In his “Critique of Violence,” he writes:
The exclusion of this more precise critical approach is perhaps the predominant feature of a main current of legal philosophy: natural law. It perceives in the use of violent means to just ends no greater problem than a man sees in his “right” to move his body in the direction of a desired goal. According to this view, (for which the terrorism in the French Revolution provided an ideological foundation) violence is a product of nature, as it were a raw material, the use of which is in no way problematical, unless force is misused for unjust ends (277-278).

He goes on and moves into a discussion of positive law—which refers to the state—noting:

...if the criterion established by positive law to assess the legality of violence can be analyzed with regard to its meaning, then the sphere of its application must be criticized with regard to its value. For this critique a standpoint outside positive legal philosophy but also outside natural law must be found. The extent to which it can only be furnished by a historico-philosophical view of law will emerge (279).

For Benjamin, “all violence as a means is either law-preserving or law-making” (287). Later, he comments that “power, more than the most extravagant gain in property, is what is guaranteed by all lawmaking violence” (295).

So what do we make of this? First, observe that his examples—the French Revolution; natural law, which is distinct from the classical conception of natural law; positivism—all stem from the modern understanding of order. But there is also his discussion of a “historico-philosophical view” of things, and it leads to his final point, which is this:

For only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiratory power of violence is not visible to men. Once again all the eternal forms are open to pure divine violence, which myth
bastardized with law. It may manifest itself in a true war exactly as in the divine judgment of the multitude on a criminal. But all mythical, lawmaking violence, which we may call executive, is pernicious. Pernicious, too, is the law-preserving, administrative violence that serves it. Divine violence, which is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution, may be called sovereign violence (300).

Note the words he uses: lawmaking, executive, administrative. They point to the modern state, which, in the absence of the transcendent and the metaphysical understanding of things, provides meaning. Violence, too, provides meaning. But there is also a sense of return. Elevating violence and war into something mythical happened in the ancient world—which is why, as Benjamin notes, it is important to take a historico-philosophical view of things. This conception of violence—of history, even—is, to quote Augustine, is ever ancient, ever new. The Judge, then, is the embodiment of the violence at the heart of human life, expressed most fully in the behavior of the modern state and in the criminal.

We should also note that Cormac McCarthy has expressed strikingly similar viewpoints—outside of his novels. In a 1992 interview with the New York Times, McCarthy, when asked about the violence in *Blood Meridian*, says:

There's no such thing as life without bloodshed...I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous (New York Times interview).
Violence and life are intertwined, despite attempts to deny otherwise. Interestingly enough, McCarthy here seems to criticize both incredible violence—we get a sense his opening comment is one of resignation—and the naïve belief that it can be eliminated.

So violence is something we cannot escape. Consider now what happens toward the end of *Blood Meridian*: the kid encounters the Judge in a saloon. The passage reads:

The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden bar latch home behind him (333).

We don’t know what happens to the kid; he is not mentioned again. But soon after is the ultimate passage of *Blood Meridian*, a strange one, and it reads:

And they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces. Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he’ll never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favorite, the judge. He wafts his hat and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps and he swings about and takes possession of one of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once. His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dance in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die (335).

Let us unpack these two passages. First, it is important to point out that this takes place years after the initial events of the novel, and so the kid is much older and hasn’t seen the Judge in
some time. But that he has spent a period away from the Judge suggests something. As mentioned earlier, the kid is a stand-in for us. And so no matter how hard we try, we cannot escape modernity. It will absorb us. It is seductive: the Judge is “a great favorite” of the people at the saloon (335). And consider the fact that the Judge is described as “huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant” (335). Also, “he never sleeps” and “he says that he will never die” (335). We can posit that this is because, as the physical embodiment of modernity, he is always new. He never ages and has no connection to the past or to the future. He is caught in an eternal present and exists in a state of eternal rebirth, which is why he looks like a great infant.

Something must also be said of aesthetics, and so now we must return to Benjamin’s “Arcades Project.” He observes that

the realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already noticed—by cunning (13).

Thus we can view the Judge, again, as representative of this modern epoch. He bears his own end within himself and precipitates in his own awakening (13). And, it goes without saying, that he is cunning. Note also that Benjamin describes this age as ruinous and comments on its destabilizing nature (13)—two characteristics of the Judge.

We can surmise that Benjamin and McCarthy have similar thoughts on modernity—that in it are the skeletons of the now-destroyed old order, that it is important to have a philosophical consideration of not only modernity but also of history. Let us close with Steven Frye, who says this of McCarthy and of Blood Meridian, a sentiment that could apply equally to Benjamin:
“Through art self-consciously and poetically rendered, history is never lost but heightened, and the beauty of a single flower never obscures the blood that moistens the soil from which it grows” (119).

Chapter 3: On Storytelling

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* is a trek through an ashen and post-apocalyptic wasteland with a father and son, its two main characters. There are dangers they must face: marauding bands, illness, lack of food, exhaustion. Theirs is a world utterly spent; it has no connection to the past and seems to have no future. Like the rest of McCarthy’s work, this is a reflection on human nature, for it asks the question: What does it mean to be good—or to try to be good—in a world that has forgotten the meaning of goodness?

Many people have written on this theme, so adding more to this discussion would be unnecessary. But there is an interesting aspect of *The Road*, and it is one that relates to Walter Benjamin: storytelling.

As Ashley Kunsa notes in “Maps of the World in Its Becoming: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road,” McCarthy, by divesting the post-apocalyptic landscape of those names that signify the now ruined world…frees both character and reader from the chains of the old language. Eliminating the old suggests the coming of the new and creates a space in which the new world can be imagined and called into being. The slate, of course, has not been entirely cleaned; the corpses of the old world, both literal and figurative, are everywhere. The world posed by McCarthy's novel exists at a decidedly proto-Edenic moment: it is still in the stages of becoming, with regard to both form and content (64).
She is right to say that the world is “still in the stages of becoming,” especially since the old world and the new world exist side by side. Much of the novel is the father telling his son about things that no longer exist, building his connection to the past. And so he is setting a narrative. He is telling his son a story.

What does Benjamin say of storytelling? In his essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” he notes:

- Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him, or rather, they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head or an animal’s body may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision. The distance and this angle of vision are prescribed for us by an experience which we may have almost every day. It teaches us that the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences (83).

Benjamin later observes that “experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn” (84). *The Road*, then, is a novel of storytelling. For Benjamin, storytelling in the modern age is a dying art, because people have become isolated and are, as he says, embarrassed when there is a chance to hear a story. They no longer desire deeper connections with others, for our ability to exchange experiences has disappeared (83).

But in *The Road*, there is no reason for such embarrassment, because the world has gone to dust. Storytelling must begin anew. And so the father, though he is of the past, is now, in a sense, the first storyteller. As McCarthy writes: “Then they set out along the blacktop in the
gunmental light, shuffling through the ash, each the other’s world entire” (6). The end of this sentence—“each the other’s world entire”—is something to which we must pay attention. On the surface, it is a description of the love that exists between parents and children. But on a deeper level it is the recognition that they are embody the symbiosis that exists between a new age and an old one. As Kunsa pointed out, the slate is clean, but not entirely. Nevertheless, the boy is the receptor for a new story, a new understanding of things. Then we might say that this is still parental-child love but on a grander scale.

In an earlier passage, McCarthy writes:

With the first gray light he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasnt sure. He hadnt kept a calendar for years. They were moving south. There’d be no surviving another winter here (4).

We note here that the world is barren and silent, and there is no way to tell what month it is or what time it is. This is the world now; it must be described and examined. It must be gathered up and told.

And as Benjamin observed, experience is, in essence, the beginning of storytelling (84). He writes:

And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers. Incidentally, among the last named there are two groups which, to be sure, overlap in many ways. And the figure of the storyteller gets is full corporeality only for the one who can picture them both. “When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about,” goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they
enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one ones to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman (84-85).

Benjamin goes on to say "if peasants and seamen were past members of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place" (85). In this case, the father is someone who has both gone on a trip and "has stayed at home, making an honest living, who knows the local tales and traditions" (85). He is a storyteller by proxy, but it is also part of his purpose, for he is a father and so must explain the world to his son.

The storytelling in *The Road* happens on multiple levels, all of which reflect the fact that this is a tale emerging from the shadows of a bygone age. It is in the prose, which is pared down and spare, as if the novel itself recognizes that the apocalyptic landscape calls for a new approach to language. Indeed, this style is a sort of departure for McCarthy, who previously wrote in a baroque and ornate way, especially in *Blood Meridian*. And there is also that which occurs between the father and the son. There are many examples from which we can choose. Perhaps one of the most famous is when he shares a Coca-Cola drink with his son. The passage reads:

What is it, Papa?

It's a treat. For you.

What is it?

Here. Sit down.
He slipped the boy’s knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.

The boy took the can. It’s bubbly, he said.

Go ahead.

He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it.

It’s really good, he said (23).

For this we must briefly leave Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” and instead turn to his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” for it will help us understand the purpose of the Coca-Cola in this passage. And art, after all, is yet another form of storytelling. We can consider Coca-Cola a kind of public art, a crude art. It tells us something about ourselves. Benjamin writes that:

An analysis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction must do justice to these relationships, for they lead us to an all-important insight: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility (224).

The Coke can is the “work of art designed for reproducibility” par excellence (224). We can compare it to Andy Warhol’s Campbell Soup can, in that it is a representation of how modernity has, in many aspects, blurred the line between the popular and the artistic. And so the Coke can, like the father, is a window into the culture that was. Consider also the fact that the boy does not know what the can is—and why should he? It is, as Kansa might put it, a corpse from a world
that he never knew. But then his father goes beyond merely naming the object and describes it. He is revealing its context, its history. And so it ceases to be a corpse, and it shifts in time. Let us return to Benjamin, who would likely find the presence of the Coke can disturbing, as it would demonstrate that the world had been utterly reduced to a singular commodity. He writes:

And even though the public presentability of a mass originality may have been just as great as that of a symphony, the latter originated at the moment when its public presentability promised to surpass that of the mass (225).

He continues:

With the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature. This is comparable to the situation of the work of art in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value, it was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic (225).

The Coke can’s “public presentability” once surpassed “that of the mass,” but then it returned to a kind of magical object, for it no longer has the same ubiquity in the post-apocalyptic landscape of *The Road*. But it is still an object with cult value, and we must not forget that the words *cult* and *culture* share the same root. The Coke, then, keeps its story—its story of the past, of the culture into which it was birthed—and the father uncovers it for his son, restoring a link to things that could have been gone forever, preventing a descent into a permanent state of wandering and amnesia, a sort of Hobbesian-like existence filled with brutality, brevity, and confusion.

Now we must explore the setting itself: the desolation, the emptiness. Marc Augé, the French anthropologist, has discussed the idea of the ‘non-place’, which he sets in opposition to ‘place,’ and which he defines thusly:
If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which themselves are not anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate into the earlier places: instead, these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory,' and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position (77-78).

He later notes that it is "a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (78). We should add, however, that Augé is talking about the world of modernity and of post-modernity, not of a post-apocalyptic wasteland. But still we must consider that the setting of The Road merits an intellectual comparison with Augé's idea of the non-place—especially since place is an important part of storytelling, and the proliferation of non-places have likely made such an act difficult and bewildering. Here is what we must ask of the novel: what if the entire world has become a non-place? What does it do to us?

We can presume that if, to borrow Augé's term, "supermodernity" has begun to wear away the ability to have relationships with places and with people, making living a kind of blur, then The Road is a world of total confusion. All stories have, for the most part, been forgotten. All traditions and narratives are suspect. Now let us return to Benjamin, who says in "The Storyteller:"

But if today "having counsel" is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek counsel
one would first have to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a man is receptive to counsel only to the extent that he allows his situation to speak.) Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a “symptom of decay,” let alone a “modern” symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing (86-87).

This is an important passage, and so it is worth quoting in full. So let’s unpack it. To have counsel means to have advice, and Benjamin says this is beginning to have an “old-fashioned ring” because we’ve become separated from each other. Also, we’ve lost the ability to talk about our lives: when something happens to us, we don’t know what to say. And so we’re shut up in ourselves. Benjamin recognizes that storytelling is fading in the modern age, but he rightly calls this “a process that has been going on for a long time,” because human nature never changes (86-86). All of the same good and bad things have been done throughout history. Beauty, too, always arises in what is vanishing. We should note too that he says history has removed the narrative from living speech, almost echoing Plato, in a way. But perhaps we can speculate that various times call for different forms of storytelling.

And so we begin to wonder whether the world of The Road—perhaps a commentary too on our relations with each other and with our places, to borrow from Augé—is really as bad as it appears on the surface. Both the best and the worst of human nature persist. Now we can
consider storytelling—really, as Benjamin put it, how we experience and make sense of the world—in this context.

It is no coincidence, then, that the father and the son encounter someone who calls himself Ely, after the Biblical figure Elijah. He engages the two of them in conversation:

How would you know if you were the last man on earth? he said.

I dont guess you would know it. You'd just be it.

Nobody would know it.

It wouldn't make any difference. When you die it's the same as if everybody else did too.

I guess God would know it. Is that it?

There is no God.

No?

There is no God and we are his prophets (169-170).

This conversation is striking because it is so strange and contradictory. What do we make of Ely's assertion that "there is no God and we are his prophets" (170)? At first glance we might take it as a Nietzschean claim, a la Thus Spoke Zarathustra. But that's likely not the case here. Instead, we can view it as another instance of the confusion that would take place in the post-storytelling age described in The Road. Ely, essentially, has offered two competing explanations for human existence, and he no longer has the capacity to explore either of them. He merely spouts them out and moves on. The next thing they talk about is food (170). Still, Ely returns to the topic once more, when he mentions what he thought when he first encountered the boy. He and the father have this exchange:

I've not seen a fire in a long time, that's all. I live like an animal. You don't want to know the things I've eaten. When I saw that boy I thought that I had died.
You thought he was an angel?

I didn't know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didn't know that would happen.

What if I said that he's a god?

The old man shook his head. I'm all past that now. Have been for years. Where men can't live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the lost god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone (172).

Again, we see the two competing explanations at work here. There is talk of gods and men and things beyond. We wonder: what does he mean when he says “things will be better when everybody’s gone” (172)? Does he believe that human beings are nothing more than blights and as such the earth will be better when there is no one left? That doesn’t seem to be the case—especially since he follows it up with “we'll all breathe easier” (173). As mentioned, Ely seems to be confused, for the ways in which people encounter and understand existence have been blurred or covered up.

Maintaining a sense of things that isn’t blurred seems to be a task of the father and his son. This is the other level on which the storytelling in the novel takes place. There are many instances in the novel where the father instructs his son to “carry the fire.” What does he mean? On the surface, again, he is drawing a line between him and his son and the somewhat monstrous people who roam the road. Like this, from page 129:

Because we're the good guys.

Yes.

And we’re carrying the fire.
And we’re carrying the fire. Yes.

Okay (129).

But we can also say that the father wants to pass on storytelling—culture and such—to his son, for he is the one who will bring it all forward. We can link “carrying the fire” with this exchange, which happens when the father begins to succumb to his sickness and injuries. He spends much of the novel coughing up blood.

They spent the day there, sitting among the boxes and crates. You have to talk to me, he said.

I’m talking.

Are you sure?

I’m talking now.

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true.

They don’t have to be true. They’re stories.

Yes. But in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people (267-268).

We can argue that this, in many ways, is the crux of the novel. The two of them are debating the nature of storytelling—whether stories must be absolutely true, whether they must accurately reflect life—and they have arrived at different conclusions. The boy rejects those he believes to
be fictional, but his father seems to suggest that stories don’t have to be true to be true. A
fictional story, after all, can still be true. They continue:

- You have stories inside that I don’t know about.
- You mean like dreams?
- Like dreams. Or just things that you think about.
- Yeah, but stories are supposed to be happy.
- They don’t have to be.
- You always tell happy stories.
- You don’t have any happy ones?
- They’re more like real life.
- But my stories are not.
- Your stories are not. No.

The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad (268)?

Is there a separation between fiction and reality? Is real life “pretty bad,” which is why we need
storytelling—to provide an escape?

Benjamin, in discussing the novel, observes that it is a significant medium, “not because it presents someone else’s fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger’s fate by
virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us to the warmth which we never draw from our
own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a
death he reads about” (101). For Benjamin, life is harsh, brutal, and we read to find warmth and
comfort.

But McCarthy seems to suggest the answer is both. The father tells his son stories to, as
mentioned, fulfill his parental responsibilities but also to, knowingly or not, preserve culture in a
world that has lost it. And the very act of storytelling in such an environment shows not all is lost. Consider the rest of the exchange, which goes like this:

What do you think?
Well, I think we’re still here. A lot of bad things have happened but we’re still here.
Yeah.
You don’t think that’s so great.
It’s okay (269).

Note the father’s terse understanding of things. Real life, to him, is both pretty bad and pretty good. After all, they’re still there.

But he won’t be for much longer—and that leads to this conversation between the father, who is now moments away from death, and the son:

I want to be with you.
You can’t.
Please.
You can’t. You have to carry the fire.
I don’t know how to.
Yes you do.
Is it real? The fire?
Yes it is.
Where is it? I don’t know where it is.
Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it (279).

Here we witness an example of the father and son shifting away from the parent-child dynamic and moving into necessity of “carrying the fire” to save humanity and its culture. But we must
ask if knowing that the father will die—as he says, “this has been a long time coming”—changes our perspective of the setting (278).

There appears to be an older storytelling trope at work here, and it is that of the monster. The word comes from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning to portent. The setting, then, is “monstrous,” because it foreshadows the father’s eventual death. Everything must appear doubly-frightening to the son, because he is growing up in a dust-covered world, one that will soon swallow his father whole. As Benjamin notes in “The Storyteller,”

> It has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying. Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one; think of the medieval pictures in which the deathbed has turned into a throne toward which the people press through the wide-open doors of the death house (93).

He continues, noting that “death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell,” for “he has borrowed his authority from death” (94).

This has become true again. The society of which Benjamin speaks no longer exists in *The Road*. Death is real and present. It is visceral. And it is everywhere. In a sort of mediation on death, the father’s wife says:

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No, I’m speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I can’t. I can’t (56).

She continues, resulting in an exchange between her and the father:

We used to talk about death, she said. We don’t any more. Why is that?
I don’t know.
It’s because it’s here. There’s nothing left to talk about.
I wouldn’t leave you.
I don’t care. It’s meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I’ve taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot.

Death is not a lover.
Oh yes he is (56-57).

But of course storytelling has not stopped. It has continued through the efforts of the father and the son, neither of whom has succumbed to nihilism. In fact, we can argue that storytelling has only been strengthened in this world. Death, after all, is here. But, pace the wife and mother, there are many, many things to talk about.

And this is the same of experience, which had faded in the world before this one—or, might we say, the one in which all of us live. Benjamin writes:

With these words, soul, eye, and hand are brought into connection. Interacting with one another, they determine a practice. We are no longer familiar with this practice. The role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies waste. (After all, storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is
expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work.) That old co-ordination of
the soul, the eye, and the hand which emerges in Valéry’s words is that of the artisan
which we encounter whenever the art of storytelling is at home (108).

Now let us return briefly to the interactions between the father and the son. Consider the fact that
this is a world without cellphones, without computers: there are no distractions to hinder or limit
or even eliminate genuine encounters between two people. It creates a space for what Martin
Buber calls the I and Thou. During one such scene, the father and his son are trying to get their
bearings:

Do you know where we are Papa? the boy said.
Sort of.
How sort of?
Well. I think we’re about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies.
As the crow flies?
Yes. It means going in a straight line.
Are we going to get there soon?
Not real soon. Pretty soon. We’re not going as the crow flies.
Because crows dont have to follow roads?
Yes.
They can go wherever they want.
Yes (157).

In a different world, the father might have become annoyed or exasperated with his son, because
he would have been consumed with distractions: what to eat later, his job, his cellphone, his
computer. He would have likely cut the questioning short. But the ironic thing is that there still
remains a “distraction,” if you want to put it that way, and it is survival. It is on his and his son’s minds constantly. Note, however, that McCarthy often uses the word “silence.” The post-apocalyptic environment described in the novel makes “a coordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand” possible (108). The conversation here is still a form of storytelling, for the father is painting a picture of crows and what they did, causing his son to utilize his imagination. Although they have no structural house to speak of—they are not going to return to a nice split-level or colonial at the end of the day—this shows that, truly, “the art of storytelling is at home” (108).

Now let us unpack the final paragraph of *The Road*. It is strange and poetic and vague, and it draws many different readings. Here it is, in its entirety:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (286-287).

We should note that this sounds like the beginning of a story—a myth, even, or a fairy-tale, for “once there were” is how many of these start. Perhaps what we are witnessing here is a rebirth: the efforts of the father to tell his son stories have proven successful not only for their relationship but also for the rest of the human race. As Benjamin writes, “a proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a
happening like ivy around a wall” (108). We might call this passage the ivy. And, as he says earlier in “The Storyteller:

A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. Thus Montaigne referred to this Egyptian king and asked himself why he mourned only when he caught sight of his servant...That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness. It resembles to seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day (90).

Something is germinating here again. McCarthy suggests in this passage that not all would be lost in a catastrophic event. Quite the contrary. Human beings would remain, and we would never stop telling stories.

Conclusion

So what do we make of these two writers—McCarthy, the convention-breaking novelist comfortable in multiple genres; Benjamin, the idiosyncratic Marxist with an affinity for metaphysical philosophy and mysticism? Both, of course, lived in different eras. On the surface, they couldn’t appear more different. But this paper hopefully disproved such a sentiment; as mentioned in the introduction, the writers have strikingly similar observations about the modern world and history, about storytelling, and about metaphysicals such as time.

In the introduction, we spoke of who they were, and in the subsequent chapters, we compared their work. Now let us attempt to explore how they arrived at their various conclusions. One similarity is certainly obvious: both write. The writer is someone who must act as an observer, sitting just outside of the culture in which he or she resides to appropriately
comment on it. As this paper has argued, both writers have many similar observations. Had they been fully and totally involved in the culture as it is, then they likely would have been unable to see things as they are.

McCarthy, even though he did not finish college, is, in the words of Frye, “rooted in the past, with references to histories, travel narratives, philosophers, and writers. In his work and in the various sources that inform them, Cormac McCarthy emerges as a consummate aesthetic alchemist, combing the material of human experience, identifiable history, and philosophy in works that will likely inspire readers and scholars for generations to come” (10).” It is this “aesthetic alchemy” that prevents a kind of parochialism. McCarthy, by reading all sorts of things, has a complete—or as complete as one can get—picture of the human condition and all of its problems and successes, especially those of the modern age.

Benjamin himself was a kind of “aesthetic alchemist.” As the writer Ian Penman noted in a piece for City Journal called “Fallen Angel: The tragic life and enduring influence of critic Walter Benjamin,” Benjamin was

…in short, a logjam of contradictions: part Jewish mystic, part Marxist firebrand; skeptical priest, polite libertine. A line that Jean Cocteau devised for Orson Welles could equally apply to Benjamin: “an active loafer, a wise madman, a solitude surrounded by humanity” (http://www.city-journal.org/2014/24_3_urb-walter-benjamin.html).

He continues, writing:

As well as doing literary criticism (and conducting a pitiless interrogation of the status and value of same), he also wrote about window displays, travel, children’s books, drugs, food, and films (http://www.city-journal.org/2014/24_3_urb-walter-benjamin.html).
And so, as we do with McCarthy, we see someone with a wide variety of interests—a polymath. Again, without such a wide-range of interests, he would not have been able to write such penetrating criticism of our modern way of life and of literature and the arts. Also, as the critic Leon Wieseltier writes in the introduction to Benjamin’s Illuminations, his writings are uncommonly rich with penetrating and prescient notions: the impoverishment of experience in modern life; the primacy of memory as a mode of consciousness; the aura of the work of art, and its eclipse in the age of mechanical (not to speak of electronic) reproduction; the hope for “profane illumination”; the eternal entanglement of barbarism with civilization; the critical utility of the messianic idea—all these notions are justly celebrated, as are his luminous examinations of Goethe and Baudelaire and Kafka and Kraus. Benjamin's work is evidence of the light that a religious sensibility may shine upon a secular existence. There are certainly very few critics who can match his power of suggestiveness: his ideas and intuitions have a way of lingering productively, even when you quarrel with them. In the application of philosophical concepts to cultural and social actualities, his decidedly unmystical friend Adorno was his only peer. Philosophical thinking retained its old role, for Benjamin: it was his best defense against despair. There is still no better one.

We can see all of this in McCarthy as well—the mixing of the secular and the religious, the “eternal entanglement of barbarism with civilization,” the power of his writing. Like Benjamin, McCarthy’s work has “a way of lingering productively.”

Here is the question we must now ask: did McCarthy read Benjamin? Of course it is hard to say. McCarthy, after all, is coy. He has not revealed much about himself. But there are snippets. In a 1992 New York Times profile called “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction”—
the interview mentioned earlier in this project—Richard Woodward writes, “McCarthy would rather talk about rattlesnakes, molecular computers, country music, Wittgenstein -- anything -- than himself or his books.” In the same profile, McCarthy cites Melville, Dostoyevsky, and Faulkner as “good writers”. Benjamin, of course, has read and written on Dostoyevsky.

Also, McCarthy scholar Nicholas Monk, in his introduction to *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossing*, observes that, on page 95 of McCarthy’s draft of Whales and Men, an unpublished screenplay, there is a notation that reads: “WITT: A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about’” (Monk, 2). He then adds: “There is a strong case for interpreting WITT as Wittgenstein” (Monk, 2).

But to posit whether McCarthy has read Benjamin, we must find out whether Benjamin has read Wittgenstein—for, McCarthy and Benjamin, we could be witness to a chain of thinking or of influence, one that would be interesting to explore. Stanley Cavell, in “Benjamin and Wittgenstein: Signals and Affinities,” observes, “a sense of affinity between Benjamin and Wittgenstein helped produce the signals in my subtitle, when, with the memory in my head of Benjamin’s frequently cited letter to Scholem (17 April 1931) in which he expresses a phantasm of his writing as a call or signal for rescue from the top of the crumbling mast of a sinking ship, I came upon a piece of his with the title “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” containing these sentences: “Almost every child’s gesture is command and signal,” and “it is the task of the director to rescue the children’s signals out of the dangerous magic realm of mere fantasy and to bring them to bear on the material” (236). Cavell uses this anecdote to begin a comparative study of the two thinkers, and he finds they have much in common: both, for instance, have a sense of despair, of melancholy in their work.
Now if there is an affinity between Benjamin and Wittgenstein—whom McCarthy has likely read—then can we say there is one between Benjamin and McCarthy? As we have discussed, McCarthy reads widely, and it is not out of the question to assume Wittgenstein might have led him to Benjamin. So, in that sense, we might argue that Benjamin and McCarthy follow a specific chain of writers and thinkers, which is why they have similar thoughts.

But perhaps that is not the case. After all, McCarthy does not say much about himself. So we must wonder, then, if it truly matters whether McCarthy read Benjamin, because any truly discerning writing and thinker, as we have discussed in this thesis, can move outside of the culture and press against it, show us where we have failed and what we have done wrong. They can remind us of what it means to be human, and they can point a way forward.
Work Cited


